

The Caterham 160 road test



Over the last two editions, we've reported from the offices of Caterham Technology and Innovation on their development work on the 160, Caterham's recently introduced, Suzuki-powered entry model. What we hadn't had the chance to do was report on actually driving the car. Caterham were kind enough to lend us their press 160 for a long weekend. Would it live up to everything we had been told?

We've all no doubt heard the "less is more" mantra in relation to Colin Chapman's designs, and most specifically to the Seven. However, it's sometimes hard to square that philosophy with the concept of "upgraditis" which often seems to fill our thoughts (and forums). I can only confess to having fully succumbed to this incurable disease over my years of Seven ownership – my comfortable leather-seated, heater, hood and windscreen-equipped chariot having been bit-by-bit pared back to become the more raw, extreme vehicle it is today. At the same time, I know I'm not the only one who has progressively moved towards more and more "track oriented" suspension setups, with stickier, wider tyres *de rigueur*. My car is certainly now faster than when I first took delivery, lighter too, but maybe something of its essence got lost during its slow, steady transformation?

I was pondering this as I looked down at the Caterham 160 which was waiting for me outside Caterham's Crawley showroom. Being handed the keys took me immediately back to that time all those years ago when Guy Munday first handed me the keys to my



Crossflow. At the time, to be honest, I didn't really know what I was going to do with the car, but heck, it sure was a fun place to be...

Returning from my reverie, it was time to take a proper look around the 160. The first thing that strikes you is its size - in comparison to other Sevens, it appears simply tiny. You could easily be mistaken for thinking that the Seven is now available in three chassis dimensions – SV, S3 and 160. In reality, it does of course share its chassis with other S3 cars, it's that its narrow rear wings and skinny wheels give it the appearance of being the "little brother" of the family.

Caterham have definitely specified this demonstrator car with a "retro" theme – certainly no "black pack" headlamps or "big red starter button" here. Instead, comfortable S Type leather seats, a fixed MOMO wheel, heater and weather gear combine to offer a decent touch of driver comfort. The paintwork (a non-metallic turquoise) known as "Heritage Blue", continues the retro theme. It's a colour I couldn't see working well on too many mainstream cars, but much as it's a term I rarely use, this 160 got described as "cute" more times than I care to remember, and I would have to agree. A single-branch exhaust exits on the passenger-



The 160 attracted a lot of attention from Club members at Stoneleigh

"You just get the feeling that this car is in a different weight league altogether."

side of the car, finished with a tiny polished silencer. I suspect that it may well be the same as the optional "peashooter" silencer offered on the Sigma Supersport cars. In that application, its pops and bangs make it almost comically loud – I wonder what it will be like with a mere 3 cylinder, 660cc engine to contend with?

Upon stepping into the car, there are only two obvious clues that this car is somewhat different to other Sevens. The first is the rather smart silver "Caterham 160" logo on the passenger-side dash. The second is the layout of the Suzuki gearbox, its reverse being located down below 5th rather than the more

usual "up and left" of the Ford 5 speed and Caterham 6 speed 'boxes we have become more accustomed to.

So, it's time to dig out the keys and start it up. Firstly though, there is time to admire the key itself, a snazzy new metal design in the shape of the Seven logo. I don't know if Caterham will be offering these as aftersales options, but if they do, I can see them being extremely popular! As you'd expect, the car starts without any fuss, and immediately sits at a very quiet idle.

In order to get to know the car better, I've mapped out a combination of A and B roads for my trip home. Even before you leave

the car park, however, the car conveys an impression of extreme lightness. Even when manoeuvring at low speed, you get the feeling that there is far less weight over the front wheels than a traditional Seven, which imparts a particularly sweet feel to the steering. The 160 is quoted as weighing in at 490kg – light of course, but not so dramatically different to other models; I don't know whether it's the weight distribution, the skinny tyres or the suspension setup, but behind the wheel, you just get the feeling that this car is in a different weight league altogether. The only car I can somewhat equate it to is one of James Whiting's Fireblade cars – the 160's performance is unlikely to be in the same league mind you, but we'll find out more about that soon...

In terms of official figures, the 660cc engine produces a peak power of 80bhp at 7,000 rpm. The rev limiter doesn't kick in until 7,700 rpm however, and 0-60 is claimed to be completed in 6.5 seconds. Top speed is claimed to be a somewhat low 100mph, indicating that the gear and diff ratios have been optimised to make the most of the limited power at "road" speeds.

As soon as a gap in the traffic appears, that short gearing is absolutely confirmed – press the pedal all the way to the floor, and instantly you're being kept busy zipping through the gears. When trying to "make progress", you realise that in this car, the throttle can be used more like an on/off switch – there's certainly little need to carefully modulate the power delivery here. This leaves you free to concentrate on your lines and what the car is doing through the bends.

On the move, that feeling of delicate handling persists, and it seems to be served up slightly differently to other Sevens I have driven. The lightweight steering feel is present through the range of speeds, and the nose tucks in beautifully in response to the tiniest of steering inputs. However, on the move, the steering feels even more "alive" than on Sevens with more substantial tyres and grip. I can



Smart new "Seven" key would definitely be on my Christmas list



After the years of Sigma and Duratec power, the exhaust has returned to the more traditional left-hand side

only assume that this is the 160's sidewalls flexing slightly, the car following the contours of the road even more faithfully than would larger-wheeled Sevens which can plough over such imperfections. It's engaging rather than alarming and just helps keep you even more closely tuned into to the art of driving.

If you are more aggressive with the car, the lack of grip from the skinny 14" Avon ZT5 tyres becomes apparent, but in a predictable and easily controllable way. Slightly late breaking for a corner which would be a complete "non-event" in a car shod with say CR500s, results in a chirrup of protest from the wheels, yet sufficient grip to complete the manoeuvre safely. Carry too much speed into the corner whilst still leaning on the brakes? The rear steps out of line, but can be easily caught up with a input of opposite lock. In many ways, the handing reminds me of that of my first car, an Escort MkII where the limits of car control could be safely explored at relatively low speeds. Above all, this is a car which feels like it will never let you get into real trouble; you are free to use all of the inputs - steering, throttle and brakes to their maximum extent in the full confidence that you will have ample warning of any corrective action needed. It has been a while since I have driven a live axle car, but I can report that the back end rides the bumps well (and that the rear quite enjoys being held sideways around roundabouts...)

The Suzuki box is a real surprise. Its throw is extremely short, easily a match for a Caterham 6 speed box. It's got a slightly different feel to it, but it really encourages you to keep the engine on the boil above its sweet spot of 5,500rpm or so. The noise from the engine is certainly different to that of the Rover and Ford units we are more used to, but it's certainly far from unpleasant. At low revs, the thrum from the 3 cylinders is pretty unobtrusive, but as the revs rise towards the red-line (where, to be honest, the engine is going to remain when you are pressing on a bit), the exhaust adds a deeper howl which provides the necessary "sportscar" credentials in my book. The turbocharger adds a little sparkle to the soundtrack also - a gentle "fizz" from the exhaust each time you lift off to change up a gear informs you of its presence. It's subtle, and certainly a far cry from the "wide boy" dump valves you sometimes come across, but I found it a nice reminder that all of the 660ccs were being used to their maximum to propel me down the road.

So is 80bhp sufficient? Once I had got used to keeping the engine spinning at the higher end of the rev range, I found myself making very good progress through the roads of Sussex. At road speeds, it's a genuinely quite quick little car, reminding you that it really doesn't take a great deal of power to accelerate a light car briskly. The engine spins up to about 7,500 with some urgency, but beyond this point, there is little point hanging on for final few hundred revs as the power drops away.



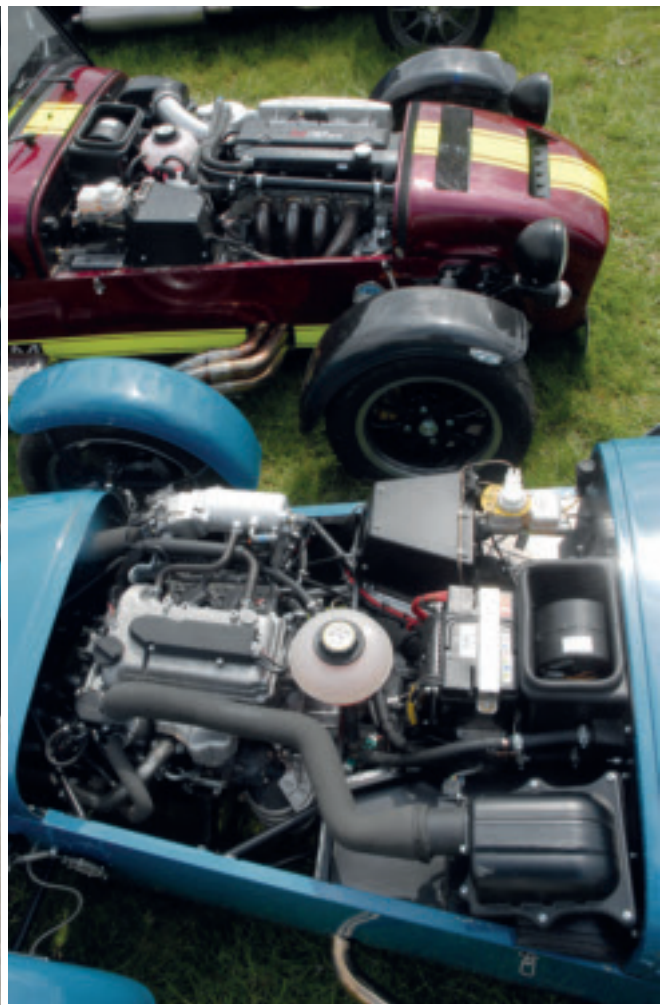
"If the rear steps out of line, it can be easily caught up with a input of opposite lock."

I was unable to test the acceleration times, but can report that (as you'd expect) the car feels quick rather than genuinely fast. Overtakes can certainly be effectively completed, although you just need a little more planning and careful gear selection than you would in a more amply powered model. As for top speed? I tested this a number of times on the private test rack I had available and can confirm that whether you are on the flat, going uphill or down, an aerodynamic wall is reliably reached at an indicated 102mph which the car simply will not breach...

Power delivery is nice and linear - CTI have done a great job of mapping the engine to remove any hint of turbo lag. In fact, other than that slight swoosh from the turbo when lifting off, you could easily mistake the power delivery for that of a larger capacity, naturally aspirated engine. The only time I felt that the turbo came slightly into play was the difficulty I found in matching quick blips of the throttle to downshifts. As I became more accustomed to the car, this became easier so perhaps it's merely a question of familiarity.

Other than for motorway cruising (surely not the natural playground of any Seven?), you do find yourself using maximum throttle and plenty of revs for the majority of time. Luckily, the engine note does not sound particularly tortured at this treatment, but I do have to hope that the engine and drivetrain will be up to this constant abuse. Mind you, knowing the reputation of the Japanese for building bullet-proof engineering, I suspect that this will not prove to be a problem in the long term.

So, the million Dollar question - would I want one? I've thought about this a lot, and my conclusion is a definite "yes", although for me, it would need to be as part of my dream "multiple-Caterham" garage. With the 160, I genuinely rediscovered the pleasures of road driving a Seven - the car engages the you in a way which I don't remember feeling since my first days behind the wheel of a Caterham, oh so many years ago. And if I owned a 160, I would have it spec'd out exactly as this one was - with comfort in mind, to be kept ready and waiting in the garage for any opportunity to enjoy. Is 80bhp sufficient? For road driving, yes it probably is - after all, its acceleration



Korma meets Vindaloo - the 160's diminutive engine next to one of the first customer Caterham 620Rs

would still eclipse that S1 Esprit I lusted after for all those years... One doubt nagging at the back of my mind might be the question of what upgrade path may be available for the 160, but then apart from the fact I am sure that Caterham is probably working on this as we speak, I would need to remind myself about what this car was supposed to represent in my "collection" – a back-to-basics, nimble road car designed to be enjoyed at speeds actually achievable on today's roads.

Inevitably, some people will compare the price of a new 160 with the performance available from a second hand car in a similar price bracket. Although the basic kit price of £14,995 may be headline grabbing, a "properly" spec'd out car, fully built, will probably be the wrong side of £20k. However, I do think that a comparison of that sort misses the point. The 160 was conceived as a replacement to the Classic in the Caterham range and the fact that it is now possible to get

on the Caterham ladder with a brand new car at this price point has surely to be applauded. The fact that this entry level car may very well be one of the most entertaining handling road cars in the whole range is surely icing on the cake...

Downsides? Of course, you have to adjust your approach to traditional Seven performance with the lower power output, and inevitably that will exclude this model from many people's wish lists. On a more detailed level, although I was surprised at just how nice the Suzuki gearbox was in operation, I found the spacing between third and fourth gears to be too wide; It seemed fine when going up through the gears, but when you wanted to drop down from fourth in anticipation of, say, an overtake, it was all too easy to send the revs soaring and have to drop back to fourth again. I am sure that this is a limitation of the ratios available from Suzuki, but this was one area which it would take me some time to become accustomed to.

Overall, however, I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the 160. This is a car which deserves to do extremely well in both the UK and export markets. I feel sure that it will introduce a whole new raft of people to the Seven experience. It was telling that although this press car was only a few months old, it had already covered some 13,000 miles. I certainly greatly enjoyed adding my 350 or so to its total. *LF*



Skinny 14" Avon ZT5 fit under narrow front and rear wings



Suzuki 5 speed box feels surprisingly nice given its humble origins