

Nightmare come true

By reputation the Lotus 30 is the most lethal race car ever made. Tony Dron raced Brian Cocks' example on the Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit and survived. Photography by Tim Wren

EOLIN CHAPMAN had big plans for the 1964 Lotus 30. If it seems a little odd today in its design concept, with a big V8 motor fitted amidships in a chassis that was effectively a Lotus Elan backbone turned round to go the other way, you have to cast your mind back 20 years or more to understand it.

The highly successful road-going Elan had been going well for a couple of years, its fabricated steel backbone chassis proving easy to make, light, rigid and reliable. Meanwhile across the Atlantic Lotus had a very big and important deal going with the Ford Motor Company to race at Indianapolis. The logical extension of that deal would have been a Ford-powered Lotus race programme in the Can-Am series for big sports-racing cars.

In the back of his mind Chapman was also considering the production of a road car based on the Can-Am racer, according to Andrew Ferguson of Lotus. Put all these elements together and the concept of the Lotus 30 makes sense. Where did things go wrong?

Lotus and Jim Clark had made a sensational debut at Indy in 1963, only just being beaten by Parnelli Jones. The great Lotus victory at Indy did not come until 1965, and in 1964 things looked very bleak indeed after a disastrous tyre choice at the Brickyard. The famous affair of the summons to Detroit, at which Chapman and Ferguson faced a kind of boardroom inquisition over the poor showing at Indy, followed. Before the meeting, Chapman had had to find Andrew Ferguson, finally tracking him down at a party at about 3am. Full of confidence, he had said: 'Bring that file on the 30.' The discussions did not go too well, as we know, and they never got around to putting in a pitch for a deal on the 30 or even talking about the car at all. 'After that', says Ferguson, 'the Type 30 took a big dive.' Quite how Lotus achieved everything they did in the mid-Sixties is a mystery to me. The sheer work of building up a world-famous sports car factory and competing successfully in so many branches of motor racing was incredible. There had to be some element that did not come out on top and that was the Lotus 30.

Chapman designed the car and it was built in time for Jim Clark to

make its debut at the Aintree 200 meeting in late April, 1964. That great sports-racing expert, the late Bruce McLaren, won the race from Clark, and Jack Sears was third in an AC Cobra roadster. The following month Clark did manage a win in the 30 in the Guards Trophy race at Mallory Park, when Roy Pierpoint was second in the perhaps more fearsome Attila.

Clark never liked the 30, saying he didn't feel safe when driving it. When asked to drive it, he always gave his best but not without little quips like: 'Not that again'. Considering that the spot welds on the main backbone of the chassis were always coming apart, necessitating re-welding after each driving session, Jim Clark's patience was truly saintly.

Fashionable revival

Those spot welds failed because of incorrect temperatures used in the welding of the first works car, but as far as I can tell the production cars were not affected in the same way. The 30 was intended as a production racer, and Lotus Components took it very seriously, investing in expensive sheet metal bending machines and special welding equipment to build the chassis. As many as 23 of the Series 1 and 10 of the slightly improved Series 2 model were made in all. Nobody ever managed to get one going properly and they were little loved at the time.

Today, however, the infamous 30 is enjoying something of a fashionable revival in historic racing circles, partly because of its evil reputation. 'I raced a Lotus 30 and lived' seems to be a good line. Certainly, when I told people that I was going to race Brian Cocks' car I was looked at in awe and wonder.

We know of two that are currently being rebuilt, plus Peter Denty's similar Lotus 40. Lotus themselves are giving all the help they can, as ever, but they are not releasing original drawings as they once did because of the proliferation of pirated copies of early Lotus models around these days. One can see their point, and it is unlikely that the new policy will hinder the restoration of genuine old cars in any significant way.

Brian Cocks, of course, is the chief executive of the Historic Sports Car Club and as such it is most appropriate that he should

be seen to be racing such a challenging car as the 30, but he offered me the car to drive at the HSCC's International Weekend on the Brands Hatch GP circuit as his official duties took his every spare minute. I got in four laps at Silverstone in the car a couple of weeks before the Brands meeting. Knowing that a car set up for Brands feels awful at Silverstone I was not too dismayed if you see what I mean. The biggest worry was trying to find the right gear, though the linkage was improved somewhat for Brands Hatch. Brian warned me that the car feels really dangerous until the brakes are warmed up, adding that decent tyres are not available and care is needed at all times on the hard old rubber that has to be used. It was a bit like a hangman warning me not to slip on the steps.

With positive thinking I made sure we were at the front of the queue for the 15-minute practice session and I set off on the first lap determined to master the machine and ignore all preconceived notions. After some warming of the brakes I used them a bit harder on the fast approach to Hawthorns Corner. The feeling as the car weaved all over the track was one of being shaken by a large wild animal. 'User friendly' is not a saying that springs to mind when one drives this car, even when the brakes have been warmed up and are working reasonably well. It felt unsafe because one could never be quite sure what it was going to do — quite unlike a typical Lotus. The driving position doesn't help. Although I was well down inside the car and not really uncomfortable the low body sides prevented that illusion of safety which I am accustomed to.

Seconds after taking all this in, a bright orange flash indicated that Tony Goodwin was coming through the field in his little Merlyn Mk 6A on his way to pole. At that moment I realised I was in real trouble: Steve Hitchins also passed me in his Lotus 23, and I ended up third on the grid, a hopeless 3.1sec down on Tony Goodwin's time. 'Maybe, using the five-litre V8's power I shall be able to make a good start and get in front in the race', I thought to myself. Even the anti-roll bars were non-adjustable so the little tweaks I wanted to try were not on. None of them in any case would make

up three seconds, so it was just a matter of having to try hard and have a go.

When the lights went to green the car got off to a super start, approaching Paddock exactly level with the Goodwin Merlyn. Finding second is not easy however and though I managed it all right, the time taken changed the picture rather and I was about fourth equal into Paddock behind Goodwin, Hitchins and Tony Thompson's Elan 26R. I was surprised to find that the big car made little impression on the others on the long straight but managed to take third place by passing Tony Thompson on the exit from Stirlings.

Evil mental chuckle

There then followed a very interesting dice with Steve Hitchins' Lotus 23, a dice that did not go according to expectations in any way. Following Steve through what I still call South Bank, because I can never remember the new names for corners, the 30 was right on the 23's tail and I gave an evil mental chuckle thinking about how I would blast past him on the straight. Steve clearly had the same idea and was watching his mirrors closely as he lined up in the normal way for Hawthorns, but the fact was that the big V8-powered car was no faster than the 1600cc Twin Cam along the longest straight at Brands.

As this was Steve's first race on the GP circuit I managed to exploit this by moving up alongside on the exit from Hawthorns on the next lap, finally moving into second place overall as we went into Westfield. Tony Goodwin was well away in the lead and out of sight by this time. Steve followed me for another lap and finally picked me off with relative ease braking for Clearways. That was that, for despite the presence of many backmarkers whom we were lapping, some of whom produced a few exciting moments for us, I found there was no further opportunity to offer a serious challenge to Steve and had to settle for third quite close behind him. Brian had the car checked on a rolling road soon after the race and found it was well down on power with the ignition timing retarded 14 degrees from its correct position.

The race was fun, and satisfying as I don't think I could have made that car do any better, but at least I



Nightmare come true

know now why the Lotus 30 has such a terrible reputation. The car is nervous when pointed into a corner, and this manoeuvre invariably must be carried out with exaggerated precision. It is also necessary to brake disappointingly early to maintain the optimum exit speed from a corner. If a driver tries to push the car to its limit, like he would with any normal well-sorted race car, the 30 is sure to repay him unkindly. He will spin off regularly.

Late in the corners, with the power being fed in firmly, the car adopts a neutral to slightly oversteering attitude that is normally quite predictable, but the early part of the corners remained a very different matter for me, and once the car went very sideways at South Bank, needing full opposite lock and virtually no power to prevent it from turning round. Quite why it did that I still don't know. It was so far gone that I was thinking of banging the brake pedal hard with my left foot while opening the throttle with my right simultaneously, a desperate measure that has got me out of a spin in such dire straits in the past, but it came back under control on its own in the end.

Far be it from me to have a go at the designer of this car. The driver's function, and that is my training and discipline, is to report to his engineer on what the car is doing and contribute to its improvement in that way so that it can win races. While the driver may have some ideas of his own, it should be the engineer/designer who really knows what's going on, and who can interpret the subjective reports of the driver. Let it be said, therefore, that it would be absurd for me to correct Colin Chapman. Had it been necessary he would have sorted this car, a process that requires time and money, but as we have seen the money was not forthcoming for the 30: it remains thus an unsorted motor car.

As a driver I would like to go through some simple tests in the workshop. I'll bet the camber change in the suspension's normal working movement is horrific. But before getting to that I would like to do some torsional rigidity tests on the chassis itself. With the chassis stiff enough the suspension could be sorted to make the wheels point the right way, or near enough, at all times. Then the car would no longer be a Lotus 30, and it would lose its *macho* status.

In its early days this car was heavily modified by the very professional team which bought it: it was also heavily modified by its drivers, who quite understandably took the quick way of stopping from time to time, but that's another matter.

Chassis number 30-S2-04 dates back to an original purchase by JCB for Group 7 racing in 1964, and it was driven by Peter Sadler and Trevor Taylor in the top sports car races that year and in '65. Over those two years the car was altered so much as to be almost unrecognisable. Peter Sadler crashed it at Oulton Park in '64, while it was crashed and burnt with Trevor Taylor at the wheel in the '65 Martini Silverstone meeting. Each time it was updated and improved with the latest works mods and the capable JCB team's own ideas.

The flowing lines of the original car have been lost in the process but that is no bad thing: maybe it looked all right but that bodywork produced horrendous lift at the front, I am told. It was also difficult to get at the chassis in a hurry. JCB's men made their own improvements and then Peter Sadler, a glutton for punishment it seems, bought the car himself and the bodywork as we see it today is as he left it. It's an endearing feature of all keen race drivers that they feel they can overcome all odds. After that the car was shifted from dealer to dealer, probably as an unwanted condition to many otherwise super deals. In the process it lost its original engine and gearbox but in 1980 Brian Cocks reckoned that

his Lotus 23B no longer offered a sufficiently frightening challenge to his driving skills and he was drawn to the great beast.

Captive nuts?

By 1982 he had it well enough sorted out to beat the best 23s in historic racing but it has proved unreliable over the years. He has spent some more money on ironing out the unreliability but is presently up against the aforementioned tyre problem. He knows that if he could lay his hands on some competitive tyres for the 30 it would be worth completely rebuilding the car. In time that is probably what will happen: he has already got the right 4727cc engine and Hewland LG600 gearbox so all the vital parts are there except proper tyres.

A rebuild on a car like this is not to be tackled lightly as the 30 was not an easy car to build when it was new. One mechanic I spoke to who used to build them at Lotus Components described the car as 'an absolute rat bag — nothing fitted. None of the wishbones cleared the chassis and it was covered in captive nuts — and we even had to cut them up to get them in.'

The appeal of running such a car today is of course its very difficulty. It's a hard job for the mechanics, I have no doubt, and take it from me it's a challenge to any driver. If you ever see Brian Cocks racing it, may your heart go out to him. If he ever asks me to race it again I would do so with enthusiasm, but I am mad. For the time being I am relieved to be able to cancel the funeral arrangements.

Since 1964 numerous modifications to the original car have changed the flowing lines of the Lotus 30's bodywork. Peter Sadler, one of the drivers for the JCB team which initially bought the car back in 1964, purchased it from JCB and the bodywork today is as he left it



