

THE LOTUS SEVEN CELEBRATED ITS 50TH BIRTHDAY IN 2007. NOT BAD FOR A CAR, THE DESIGN OF WHICH FROM START TO PUBLIC DEBUT TOOK JUST A FEW SHORT MONTHS. THAT'S IMPRESSIVE ON ITS OWN BUT WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE SEVEN AND ITS HORDE OF DIRECTLY INSPIRED RIVALS THAT HAS CREATED NOT ONLY AN INSTANT HIT BUT ALSO ITS ENDURING AND UNFLAGGING APPEAL? IT'S A QUESTION MANY ERUDITE AUTOMOTIVE BRAINS HAVE TRIED TO ANSWER WITH VARYING DEGREES OF SUCCESS, BUT WHICH HAVE FAILED TO NAIL IT DOWN BUT THAT DOESN'T STOP IAN HYNE FROM HAVING A GO.

THE SECRET OF MY SUCCESS



The Caterham Seven remains the king of the heap, a) because it's still the best as acknowledged by its name being used as a generic term for the breed as a whole and b) because it's been around more than twice as long as its closest rival.

It's an amazing achievement, especially viewed from an age in which automotive technology and ability progresses at an ever greater rate that leaves cars of just a few years ago floundering in its wake while the Seven just absorbs the improvements and continues to lead the performance field. So let's get to the nitty gritty.

To my mind, there are three ways to look at the Seven and Seven-inspired cars and they are looks, performance and driver appeal, the latter two not always going hand in hand.

In respect of looks, the Seven represents the bare minimum of what you need to create a machine capable of self propulsion. But like a minimalist house in which acres of white paint, bare aluminium and glass project a style that will always look good in any surroundings, so the Seven has absorbed small changes over the years that have maintained its contemporary looks. Vinyl bench seats, hub-caps and spindly crossplies have given way to carbon-fibre buckets, alloys and fat radials, Minimal instrumentation and wood-rim 15" wheels have given way to digital displays and 9" suederim Momos such that the car has remained totally up to date whilst at the same time remaining true to the original design. Any other car from a past age remains very much a child of its times.

And while its looks have remained up to date, so too has its performance, which as well as power and speed, also includes handling and roadholding such that a car doesn't need to be the most powerful or the quickest in a straight line in order to take the top prize. The Seven's father in the form of the Lotus Mk0 weighed just 432 kgs and, with its Ford 1,172 cc side-valve engine achieved 90 mph and led Autocar to enthuse, "There can be few, if any, cars which are quicker through sharp S-bends". And throughout the Seven's non-stop evolution, that's always been the case as the car's constant development has always taken full advantage of advances in engine design and power output while an equally passionate approach to maintaining minimal

I'm over fifty but I don't look or feel anything like I would have done when I was one even if I can't remember how that was. What's more, I'm now on life's downward slope that leads to who knows where and though the prospect has its own unique frisson of excitement, the one thing I know for certain is that it won't be anything like as much fun as the first fifty. Not so with the Caterham, nee Lotus Seven, for which the road ahead looks set to heap success upon success as the Seven brand takes its appeal to ever more drivers the world over.

Take any other fifties car you care to recall and update it with whatever technological advances you care to fit and it will still be a fifties car with little customer attraction in the

21st century and yet the Seven, despite no single component of the modern car being interchangeable with those of the original, nevertheless retains every ounce of its original design parameters, character, purpose and appeal.

You could even take any universally acclaimed classic from a past era and though it will retain its devotees among the classic car fraternity, it'll still be well down the league of ability compared to even everyday modern cars, let alone purpose designed modern sports cars. Again, not so with the Seven which has consistently maintained its status as a benchmark for performance, handling and roadholding against anything today's technology can dish up.