



Lowflying June 2009
for Lotus and Caterham Seven enthusiasts
Lotus Seven Club



With a variety of other interesting cars in his, and his family's, past Jean-Frederic Dupont came in from the cold and bought his first Seven. After a long search he found just what he wanted – a Vauxhall HPC – in England. Getting the car home was something of a test of his enthusiasm; he passed, with (low) flying colours.

Buyer collects

I HAD BEEN fascinated since my childhood by classics cars—especially British ones and as soon as I had obtained my driving licence, I found and bought an Austin Mini. Such was the appeal of the Mini that about ten different ones were to come and go over time in our household... The very first one I drove, a Austin Mini Clubman 1000—the one with that particular 'face', is still at home and will, hopefully, never be sold!

After the Mini period, I felt I needed a car without roof, to better feel the road, the sky, the smells of nature... As my father had owned some interesting cars, such as a BMW 3.0 CS, Jaguar Mk2 and a Peugeot 304 convertible, I wanted to find something between those models, but without all the electrical and rust problems that seemed to be attendant upon Mini ownership.

That dream became reality in 1996, when BMW launched the Z3; but I need to wait eight long years before actually buying my Z3M Roadster with a 321 bhp motor.

I've driven it for four enjoyable years now, putting 65,000 kms on the clock; I had no plans to sell it, but now I've experienced the Seven, I'm not sure... But if it did go, I'd be keen to find a Z3 coupé: more 'original' and better looking, I think, and a better contrast to the Seven!

But after just a few years with the Z3M, I again felt the 'need' to try another type of car—lighter and more minimalist, for more driving sensations and pleasure.

With such good memories of the Minis, I began to think about the Seven—small, light, agile and British. As I'd become used to the rather powerful BMW, I felt I had to have a similarly powerful Seven! I began to look at the Caterham HPC, but these are rather hard to find in France, and generally of a type not guaranteeing a quick and cheap registration



The story behind last month's front cover...

process. The most practical way to approach this would be to find a factory-built example, but about 80% of the production was sold in CKD or kit form.

After many long months of searching, I finally found a really promising one (in England) in mid-January. I immediately sent an email to the seller, who confirmed it was a fully factory-built car, in very good condition. I arranged a bank transfer straight away to assure the seller of my interest. Others, too, had been looking keenly at this Seven and I can't thank the previous owner enough for keeping the car just for me, in spite of other interesting propositions. I think my evident passion for the car must have been very important in his eyes!

After three weeks of exchanging messages with owner, bank, insurance and so forth, booking a plane ticket and finding a hotel to stay in (eventually choosing Coulsdon Manor, near London, as I'd be driving the car home from the North West of England), the time had come, at the end of January, to go and realize my dream!

A couple of days before departure, I had a very bad night—no sleep—perhaps it was the excitement? But eventually tiredness overcame me and I could get some rest before the adventure began...

Saturday. The last day for preparations: getting to the Bureau de Change for some cash; checking and verifying, again and again, all the paperwork, documents and the bits and pieces needed for the trip.

Sunday. The big day: I arose at 6am and headed into the dark and cold to catch plane from Roissy-Charles de Gaulle, which would set down just after lunch at the Liverpool John Lennon Airport, where the Seven-owner and his wife came to look for me and drive me to their home in Manchester; what service!

I was grateful for a warming cup of tea (since the cold outside was severe—it's perhaps as well I didn't know what awaited for me that evening...) as the Seven was presented to me.

My overriding initial impression? She's a fifteen-year-old car (from around 1993), 13,000 miles into her life and she's pretty as new! No rust on the chassis, the paintwork looked just as new, no stone-chips on the nose or the rear wings (which one must normally expect on a Seven, I'm sure), driving perfectly, the engine bay spotless...

There was an impressive portfolio of documents for the car: lots of maintenance records, tickets, letters and accounts of a passionately tended vehicle. I offered some presents in return: French red wine, champagne and some typical French treats, such as confited duck.

We said our goodbyes as though we were old friends of twenty years or more! Our eyes where a little moist, but bright and cheery; buying a Seven is not like buying a standard car, and owners are not 'standard' either. >

Buyer collects

Right: Caterham's Graham Nearn and Pater Lord of Vauxhall Parts present the fully-assembled, low-volume type approved injected VX-engined HPC, in 1993, in front of a selection of the engine supplier's other offerings including, on the left, the super-saloon of its day—the Lotus Carlton. Standing behind are other Caterham Cars principles Jez Coates, David Wakefield and Andy

Noble. The original Vauxhall-powered car, when it appeared, took on the HPC name previously applied to the 1,700cc Cosworth BDR version. Peter Lord, previously a Supersprint owner, demonstrated his belief in the new car and bought the first injection HPC to be supplied as a fully-assembled car—the very car that Jean-Frederic came to England to buy.



I settled myself behind the steering wheel, adjusting the seat, the harness, the mirror, setting the GPS and headed south for the 380km drive to my overnight stop. The weather was still ok then, with a cold wind getting up, but things would change.

I'd set off at about 4pm, so my first drive began in the cold and dark. I'd planned to get to Coulsdon (20km south of London) by 8pm (*That was ambitious... Ed.*), but the journey was delayed by huge snowfalls and I finally arrived at the hotel at 3am!

The first 300 kilometres or so passed without problem, but then snow began to fall, speed dropped more and more and visibility worsened, the road became more slippery and safe distances had to increase—even the slightest braking was so easily transformed into a skid. The Seven was obviously not equipped with the winter or snow tyres seen in some parts of Europe but with 205/16s—and these were conditions more suited to a 4x4. I prayed a lot and thought many times that I'd be very lucky to get back to France without doing some damage to this fine car. During one of my enforced stops along the way, I logged-on to a French internet forum for Caterhams and gave some news and pictures of this adventure via GSM. That contact helped to keep my spirits up.

The last twenty kilometres took nearly three hours... There was one final hill to climb before parking in front of the hotel, but with so much snow on the ground by now the Seven would have none of it: in spite of helpful people who tried again and again to push the car, I only managed another 100 metres in forty minutes!

Eventually, I was forced to leave the car by the pavement, but protected a little by another car that was, like me, blocked in by snow.

But the hotel was comfortable and provided

me we a good night's rest despite my lying awake, thinking a lot about the Seven, out there alone in the dark and the snow...

Monday. As soon as the the alarm clock woke me I rushed out, before shower or breakfast, to check that the car was alive and well!

I remained snowed-in, trapped in the hotel. I passed the time impatiently, watching breaking news on the tv, scanning newspapers and the portfolio of documents for the Seven, and the nice book *From conception to CSR*.

The snowfall continued, snow everywhere, major routes blocked. At the end of the afternoon, the tv announced a high of risk of freezing rain and icy roads during the night. I decided to see if I could get the Seven to a more suitable and safer place. With so much snow there was nowhere clear and safe along the roadside. I found a better spot, off the road in a small field; it was about 2km away, but at least there was now no risk of it being hit by another car sliding on the still un-cleared road. I trudged back to the hotel and put my shoes, socks and trousers on radiator to dry them out again.

Tuesday. I was greeted by the sun in a blue sky and no fresh snow. After another check on the Seven and the roads – which didn't look too bad by this time—I decided I should make a move while the going was good; a dash back to the hotel, pay the bill, hastily assemble the luggage and go!

I stopped off in the Caterham—at the showroom—to buy a polo-shirt and get some other goodies, leaflets and so on. I then moved on to the factory at Dartford where I bought some spares and, importantly, obtained the precious certificate of factory-build, which would be needed later.

At 3 o'clock, I finally joined the ferry for the

channel-crossing and headed for Amiens for an over-night stop at the home of friends.

Wednesday: Although I'd had a long and tiring day, I was up and off early again because my friends were heading off to work. It was very cold, around minus 4°C, but it was a good drive on the secondary country roads near Paris to meet up for a meal with another friend, who was delighted to see my new car!

After this rather crazy trip, I finally brought the Seven to rest at home after two-and-half frantic days and 800kms of snow, icy roads, sea crossing... I was told that I'd seen the worst snowfall in England for 18 years—and I pick that time to buy a Seven with 165bhp! I must be crazy too. But it's a fantastic car, and I don't think any other could make me so wonderfully crazy as this...

In conclusion. I now have the important process of ratification in France to deal with, (called RTI—*reception à titre isolé*); I need some more paperwork, there are some tests to pass and so forth... More time and money to be spent, but in France we said "When in love, don't count your money". I'm delighted with the Seven— it's a real dream to see, to own, to drive... and to dream of at night!

I must thank Colin Chapman for originally creating the Seven; and Graham Nearn for continuing the legend, from before I was born, as I'm 32 years old. Thanks also go to Demetrius B., who passed on to me a lovely and well cared-for car; to all the Caterham staff for their help, patience and information and to the other French owners, such as Erwan, Yvan, Jean, MC, Florent, Vincent and 'X-Flow', who helped me to realise the dream.

With best regards, and Seven Passion, from France. I hope to meet some more British owners at the next *Le Mans Classic* in 2010. ■



This was a fairly ambitious first drive for a new owner, even by the adventurous standards of the Seven enthusiasts. But after a night snowed-up in the home counties, clear skies greeted Jean-Frederic for the final leg of his trip back to France—and he was still smiling when he arrived home. He's clearly made of the right stuff...