

Last month, James Whiting discussed his early motoring and engineering inspirations and his increasing involvement with Sevens – via drag racing and an extraordinary Austin A40. This time, we hear of his experiences with circuit racing and the establishment of his own business working on special projects for Caterham and developing and caring for other owners' Sevens. James was talking to Michael Calvert.

EXCLUSIVELY SEVENS

No excuses deemed necessary for a reprise of this glorious shot of James's Martini-liveried and twin cam powered Seven. The famous Martini Racing colours appeared in a less well known green-background version on the works Lotus Grand Prix cars of 1979 (see also *Lowflying*, April 2011).



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James continued to drag race for a couple of years, but over time, came to the realisation that much of the potential of a great handling car like a Seven was being wasted by simply going in a straight line. Instead, he first took the car sprinting, and then tried his hand at circuit racing in the BARC Modified Sports Cars series.

James takes up the story again: "Soon after we began in club racing, we started doing really quite well, and began to get noticed. With the prominent gold Caterham Cars logos down each side of the car from the drag racing sponsorship deal, people began assuming that I was running an official factory-backed car. This actually caused Caterham some consternation; so, to prevent misunderstanding, Caterham asked us remove their logo. For a while, our beautiful gold leaf was covered by various stickers, but that didn't look too good so, in 1980, I decided to follow the changing fashion, stripped the car right back and repainted it in the Martini racing colours.

1980 was also the year when the RAC's ban on Caterhams in production car racing was finally dropped – reputedly helped by Graham Nearn contacting his local MP (later Chancellor and Foreign Secretary) Sir Geoffrey Howe, with the argument that this British car was ineligible for a British series, while other foreign cars were being allowed in.

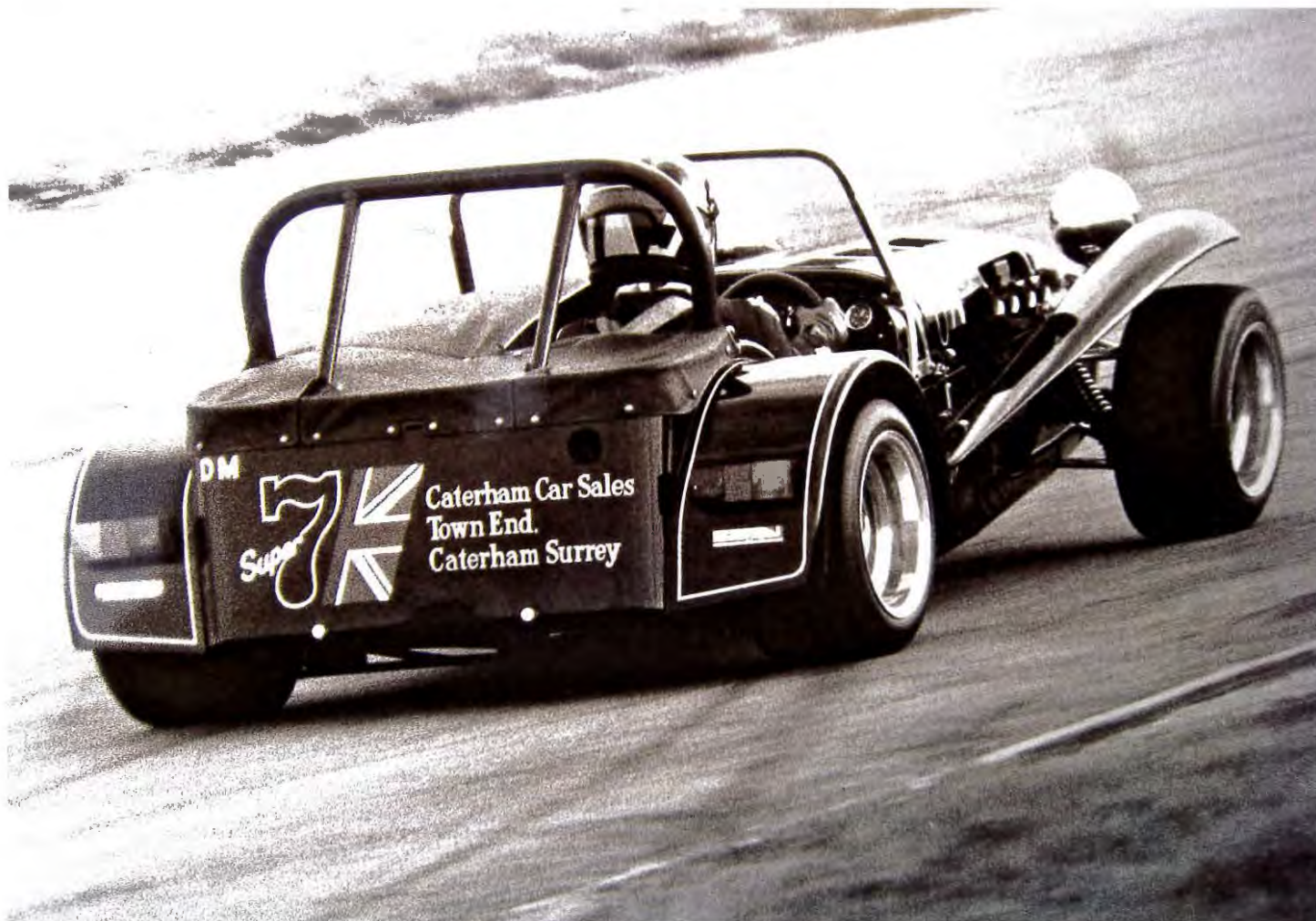
Despite the outright ban being lifted, tight restrictions remained in place and Sevens were limited to a basic (and unmodified) 84bhp 1600 Xflow engine, needing to run with a full windscreen and without a hood – and in Class A. So these entry-level specification cars were competing against v8 Morgans, TR7s, TVRs and the like with up to 3.5 litre engines.

James was part of Caterham's driver line up including Reg Price, Clive Roberts and David Wakefield to enter the first official factory car that year, but it proved hopelessly outclassed. "They were so strict with our engine, while other cars competing were nowhere near 'standard'. I remember coming down the straight at Silverstone, and a 1275cc Midget just drove straight past me; and that was a Class C car... Although the Seven was a genuine factory-backed entry, the deal was still 'you bend it, you mend it'. We had a lot of fun, each of us taking turns to do different rounds but under the regulations at the time we were hopelessly disadvantaged." Caterham were not troubled too much with the results, as the last thing they needed was to go and 'clean up' on their return. Softly softly catchee monkey!"

Going it alone

James started working for himself from the mid-seventies, initially offering general mechanical services on various Lotuses – mainly Elans, Europas and the like. Over time, however, Lotus and Caterham Seven owners started knocking on the door, and their number swelled as the years went by. By the late 1970s, not only was James working on Sevens for his own customers, but Caterham began to employ his services as a sub-contractor when they were overloaded, or when they had special projects that needed attention.

"Sometimes, Caterham needed extra hands at the service department, so I would go down and assist as necessary. Most memorable however was when they tasked me with helping prepare a number of 'special' cars.



Above: sprinting at Goodwood 1979.

The car is wearing ex-Formula 1 front tyres all round, salvaged from Bernie Ecclestone's International Racing Tyre Services in Uxbridge. At the time, F1 teams were permitted super-sticky qualifying rubber and unused tyres amongst the rubber returned after a race weekend were available to purchase cheaply if you had the right contacts!

James reports that although grip levels were extraordinary, the stiff sidewalls (designed to cope with an F1 car's high downforce) left them devoid of 'feel' when pushed to the limit.

Anyone interested in why all the tyres, used and unused, were returned to the UK after a race, could do worse than read the assertions made in Terry Lovell's excellent autobiography of Ecclestone – *Bernie's Game*.

Typically, Caterham would build the basic chassis themselves, but then task me with finishing them to a particular specification.

I would design and complete special paint jobs for example, as well as interior trim options. One of the cars I did for them was destined for a motor fair and Jane Nearn (wife of Caterham Cars founder, Graham) had the idea that the paint colour should match her new jumper, so it ended up cerise pink, with an aquamarine interior.

I also designed and painted the very first de Dion car's special bonnet stripes – and a de Dion logo – so everyone would know that it had something different under the skin (*see Lowflying, September 2011, for a brief account of the original de Dion demonstrator – and its subsequent life – now in the hands of Lotus Seven Club member Geoff Mulheron. Ed.*)

Another project was the finish for the special edition 'Silver Jubilee' cars, launched in 1981. Graham Nearn said that he liked the stripes on my Martini car and asked me to do something similar for the Jubilee edition.

We agreed on a similar livery but in silver, with two-tone metallic grey stripes. I painted

all of the Jubilee cars as well as specifying the grey chassis finish, the satin black interior engine bay panels, and silver/grey trim colours; I had a local guy engrave the commemorative bonnet and dash badges." The blue infill on those changed to black when Colin Chapman died (and the last, No.8 was painted green for a motor show).

Another particularly memorable project, which James was asked to undertake for Caterham, was the restoration of Graham Nearn's 1969 Lotus Seven Twin Cam ss (registration NRN 7). This was Lotus' original 1969 Earl's Court Motor Show car and the very first to be fitted with a Lotus Twin Cam engine (*see overleaf*).

It is understood that Caterham got the car from Lotus as part of the manufacturing rights deal, along with a pile of Formula Fords, the s4 body moulds and other Seven parts. At a time when available cars to sell from Caterham were in short supply, it got sold. However, Caterham took it back in part-exchange a few years later when the owner saw that the Series 3 had been reintroduced and wanted to trade it in for a new model. ➤

This Lotus Press Office picture shows the first ever Lotus Seven Twin Cam SS, on display at the Earl's Court Motor Show. The car was completely restored by James, as Graham Nearn's own NRN 7. It also served, by chance, as James and Ruth's wedding car. See text.



James (trying not to burn his trousers?) on his wedding day, with the freshly-restored and resplendent first-ever Lotus Seven Twin Cam SS, provided on personal loan from Graham Nearn.



I jokingly added 'a white one would be particularly appropriate'. He said 'no problem' and went off to look around the car park to see what he could come up with.

Graham came back, looked at the just restored Seven that was still on my trailer and said 'well, as you've just brought that one back, why don't you use that?' He sent a Caterham junior down to the Post Office to get road tax for it, gave it an MOT test and I took it away again. So, for our wedding car, my new wife Ruth (wedding dress and all) and I went off from the church to our reception in the very first of the thirteen Twin Cam Sevens that Lotus built. That car is now on display in the Heritage Motor Centre Motor Museum in Gaydon.

Over time, the number of customers with Sevens increased to the point that, in 1985, the decision to focus purely in these models was taken. The *Exclusively Seven* tag line, which still hangs in James's workshop, was born.

Back at Caterham, it sat at the back of the paint shed under a corrugated roof and, over time, got buried in old seats, tyres and carpets. James was asked by Graham Nearn to undertake a full restoration of this historic car, so he took it away for a complete strip-down and rebuild to 'as new' condition.

James picks up the story: "It was a really interesting car on which Lotus were experimenting with different ideas – for example, instead of aluminium panels, it is clad in steel; the windscreen frame is made from brass. Anyway, I was doing the restoration in 1985 and I really needed to get the project finished on time because I was about to get married and wanted it done before then. I finished it just a few days before the wedding and trailered it back to Caterham. Graham was delighted with the result and we got chatting about the fact that I was about to get married. I thought I'd be cheeky and ask Graham if he had a road car I could borrow for a few days for the wedding as I only had my race car at the time.



Alternative power

In the next instalment, we conclude this feature by looking at the development of James's Ford Zetec conversion and bike-engined Sevens.