

# GRAND TOURING CAR

by Chris Barber

**N**EARLY 500 miles in seven hours on twelve gallons of petrol. Not bad? That's what my Elite did in Germany one Sunday last summer, on a round trip between Hamburg and Essen.

But first things first. It is just over a year since I took delivery of the Elite, prototype number nine, and in this time I have done over 17,000 miles in it. Actually, as the band made two long tours in America during this time, I have only used the car for about eight months, during the course of which it has done everything from pottering to the shops to cruising at high speeds for hours on end on Continental motor roads. I have also done a couple of races with it.

## QUITE STANDARD

The car was quite standard when I bought it, and after running it on the road for nearly a month I entered it for the 1958 Brands Hatch Boxing Day meeting, where I enjoyed myself without doing anything spectacular. On 9 February, when there were about 5000 miles on the clock, we left for the United States, and I arranged to have a 3.7 to 1 crown wheel and pinion fitted instead of the standard 4.5 to 1 rear end, with a view to Continental use later in the Spring. I also had a twin carburettor manifold fitted at the same time, which

made quite a difference to the performance.

While I was away Lotus fitted a new type of rear suspension mounting in place of the original "bonky" one, and now the car is much quieter over bumps than the Aceca which I used to own or my Aston. It also has a lot of other advantages.

## FIRST CHANCE

Anyway, the first real chance to try the Elite with its "Motorway" axle ratio came during a tour we made in May. We had arranged a series of concerts in Germany, but it just so happened that our schedule allowed us to go via Monaco at the time of the Grand Prix. On the way south I decided to buy two new tyres, as the original ones were beginning to look a little worn, and obtained two Pirellis in Lyon at about £4 each. Later, in Germany, I felt I should make up the set, but found that the same tyres cost £7 there. Moral—buy the lot in France next time.

On Whit Sunday we were in Hamburg and Louis Armstrong was in Essen, 245 miles away, so I thought I would pop across and see him. All but about 30 miles of the route consisted of autobahn, but there was quite a lot of traffic about, especially on the outskirts of Hamburg, and we ran into two torrential rain-

storms, which seem to occur frequently in the Ruhr, and which brought most of the other traffic on the road to a standstill.

On the Autobahn the Elite seemed happiest at about 95 mph, and cruised at this speed indefinitely, or until a Mercedes 220 hogging the outside lane refused to move over. As the Elite would do 100 in third with the 3.7 axle, the drill in such cases was to change down and nip past on the inside. Generally, however, slower traffic kept well out of the way, and we were able to maintain a more or less constant speed. Door to door the 490-mile round trip took just seven hours, and fuel consumption worked out at 41 mpg—thanks partly to the high axle ratio, and partly to the fact that I did not at any time exceed 105 mph.

Later in the tour I had the carburetters tuned by the BMC dealers in Dusseldorf, who claimed to specialise in twin SUs but succeeded only in overweakening the mixture, and then cracked the manifold by tightening it down too hard; they got away with it by covering the top of the crack with cold solder and dirt.

## COIL TROUBLE

Soon after this I had trouble with the coil, and when the engine finally petered out I had the Elite towed to the nearest garage by a British Army jeep. After a long search the garage proprietor found an old and very second hand Lucas coil—standard, not sports type—which he fitted for a total charge of 30 shillings and which has worked perfectly ever since.

I had been round the Nurburgring with both the Aston and the Aceca, so I naturally wanted to try the Elite there, although I felt that the 3.7 axle might prove a disadvantage. I was also rather doubtful about the cracked inlet manifold, but managed to get round in 13 minutes, compared with 13.50 in the Aston and nearly 16 minutes in the Aceca, which also lost all its steering grease in only two laps.

By the time we reached home we had covered 4,500 miles in three weeks at an overall 38½ mpg of continental petrol. In France the engine pinked noticeably most of the time, but with little apparent effect on performance. Back in England I had an over-riding switch for the fan fitted, and now switch it on in traffic and off on the open road. I also removed the headlining, which had come unstuck in the heat at Monaco, and had the interior flock sprayed, as on current production models. This, to my mind is a very attractive and practical finish.

Having entered the car for the Aston Martin Owners' Club Silverstone meeting

Chris Barber and his Elite at Silverstone, one of the two occasions on which the car was raced.



in July I decided to have a Stage Two camshaft fitted, although as it turned out I would have done much better to have kept the engine in Stage One tune for this circuit, particularly with the 3.7 axle and standard—i.e. wide ratio—gears. In addition I had fuel feed trouble on right hand corners due to having the carburettor float chamber mounted on the bulkhead. After the race the Stage One camshaft was replaced, and next season I hope to try out my theory that the car as it now stands is more suitable for the Silverstone Club circuit than it would be in more highly tuned form.

## AERODYNAMICS

Throughout the past year I have used the Elite for travelling to most of my engagements in this country, and normally return home each night from up to 120 miles away. On one such trip the Elite really excelled itself by doing Great Yarmouth to Northwood, via Norwich, A11 and A505, in just two hours. In August I tried a little experiment in aerodynamics, namely to put the side window in while travelling at 80 mph. The experiment failed, as the window was sucked out and broken.

After our second trip to America, during which I drove thousands of miles in a Chevrolet Brookwood estate car with power assisted steering, I thought that the Elite steering felt a little heavy, but the illusion soon disappeared. Just before Christmas the mileage recorder moved round to 17,000, so I feel in a better position than most people to assess the car's performance and general behaviour after fairly hard use.

First of all, I think the combination of 3.7 axle and wide ratio gears is ideal for all-round use, for although it reduces initial acceleration a little, it is so nice to be able to go up to 100 in third and then settle back to cruising at this speed with only 4500 rpm on the tachometer. In addition, first and second gears are so low that I don't often get beaten away from the lights, and as it is possible to reach over 60 in second, not much is lost on the change up into third. I have never tried to find the car's maximum speed, but it reaches 115 mph easily, with a lot of revs in hand; the theoretical maximum is over 140 mph, although it would never reach this in Stage One tune.

## MARVELLOUS BRAKES

The brakes are marvellous, and have never given me a moment's worry, and the hand-brake holds the car adequately on hills although I don't think it would bring it to rest from a high speed. The steering, despite what I felt on my return from America, is beautifully light and precise, and the roadholding is such that it is only necessary to point the car into a corner and it goes round. I have got away with braking hard in the middle of a corner, and all sorts of other indiscretions which one wouldn't normally attempt with the majority of cars. I am still running on Dunlop R5s, which were

fitted for Silverstone in July, and although these are a little bit "twitchy" in the wet they have never given me any real cause for concern; they are wonderful in the dry, of course.

As far as its general construction is concerned, the Elite has given no trouble whatsoever. The prototype doors have never fitted very well—due, I think, to flexing of the hinge mountings—but I am told that this problem has now been overcome. The doors shut reasonably well, but tend to rattle on bumpy roads, probably because there is not enough rubber to hold them firmly in place. They are quite waterproof, however, although there is sometimes a slight leak from the bulkhead where the cables pass through. Except for this the Elite is considerably more waterproof than both the Aceca and the Aston, which are also both dearer and slower.

## UPHOLSTERY

I like the seats, but find the upholstery a little firm on really long journeys; the shape is good, but they do not provide as much lateral support as the seats on the pre-war Lagonda which I once owned. I have had seat belts fitted, largely so that Ottilie can go to sleep on long runs without fear of being woken up by sudden contact with the windscreen.

Even on long tours I find that the Elite will take all our luggage, although there isn't really space to play a trombone in it. It is surprising what can be tucked away on the shelf behind the seats without blocking the rear window.

## WORST EXPERIENCE

The car is normally maintained by Ernest Prior, of Upbrook Mews, Paddington, who has looked after it very well. I still have some trouble with the side petrol tank, which leaks slightly, but this is another feature which has been changed on production cars, which have a metal tank at the rear. Actually, my worst experience with the tank was when the drain plug perished and fell out in Hamburg on a second visit there. Fortunately this occurrence has not been repeated.

The Elite has a range of well over 300 miles between refuelling stops, but I usually call at garages more often as oil consumption is about 100 miles per pint, and the oil surges away from the pump during acceleration when the level becomes low. I gather that Coventry Climax now fit better oil control rings on 1220 cc engines, so this is another problem which has been overcome on later models.

Despite these reservations, most of which I was warned to expect when buying a prototype car, I am still delighted with my Elite, and the way it has behaved in a wide variety of conditions. For all round performance it is the best car I have owned to date, and I don't think I can sum it up better than by saying that I enjoy every journey I make in it.