

Grin and bare it

Praise be, Lotus's designers have preserved the naked aggression of the show car that spawned what you

see here: a kit-off, track-star Elise you'll have to be quick to catch and quicker to own



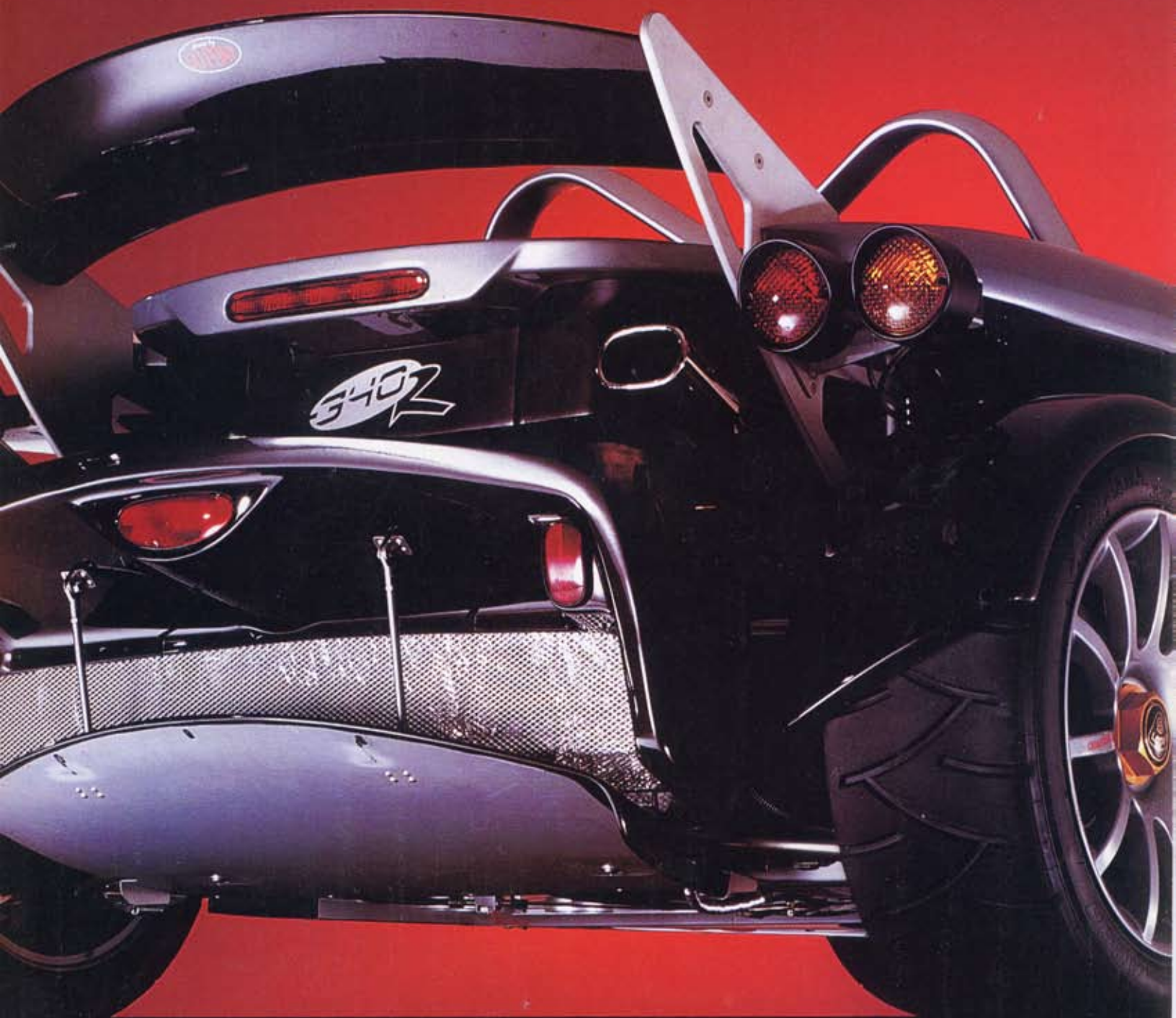
Story by Paul Horrell. Photography by Tim Kent

RUSSELL CARR, CHIEF OF DESIGN AT LOTUS, STILL SUCKS HIS teeth nervously at the memory. A year ago at the Birmingham Show, Lotus pulled the wraps off the 340R concept. 'It was nerve-wracking. Every designer has a car like this in their sketchbook. At college you all did a "next Beetle", a "next 911", and a "next Seven": an open-wheeled sports car. So I was looking at other designers' reactions. And they were good. Renowned faces took time to look at it. I was surprised, because all designers are in the business because they think they know best.' And what did Julian Thomson (Carr's predecessor as Lotus design chief and the Elise's designer) think of it? Carr allows himself a bigger smile and points out that Thomson has a fine talent for withering criticism and the backhanded compliment. 'He said: "I didn't think you'd make it that good."'

Within weeks, this enchantingly barmy concept car had been cleared for production. In essence it's an Elise chassis with more power, less weight, more track-biased suspension settings and no weather protection or heater. It didn't look like a car that would please our friends Mr Type-Approval and his evil sidekick Dr Homologation. Yet, in a stunningly rapid nine months, here it is. And it's legal.

Though it looks pretty darned rare-groove, there's a definite market for the 340R, as proven by the fact that, on the sight just of the show car, 170 people coughed up deposits. That's half the limited run sold sight unseen (340 is both the number to be made and the power-to-weight ratio of the 'track pack' version). It stems from the fact that many Elise buyers have been hopping their cars up for track action: not necessarily racing, just enjoying themselves at track days. The 340R should suit that use even better. That or the empty-road thrash early on a summer Sunday morning. The average optioned-up price of an Elise as it leaves a dealer is about £29,000, and then people do all sorts of aftermarket stuff to further elevate that figure, so the 340R, at £35,000, isn't substantially a more expensive Elise. Just a more extreme Elise.





A LONG, LONG TIME AGO, THIS – OR SOMETHING RATHER LIKE this – is what the Elise was due to have been like. Right at the start, Lotus people were envisaging the Elise in this vein. The 'step-in car' they called it, on account of the absence of opening doors. But almost as soon as they'd thought of the idea, they dropped it. They knew that it was just too impractical to sell in the kind of numbers that would justify the development of the all-new car. So they redefined the concept, and out it popped as the Elise: with roof, doors and all that sensible stuff. It was the right decision. The Elise is a runaway success, selling at four times the rate originally planned.

But now the chassis development and tooling have been justified, the Elise envelope can be stretched. Once the 340 have been sold, there'll be no more, Lotus assures us. Which doesn't mean that more Elise variations aren't on the way.

'IT'S FOR THE GUY WHO DOES LOTS OF TRACK DAYS AND IT WILL make a nice job of it around a track.' So says Lotus development engineer and test driver Dave Minter. I've spent several days with him in the past, driving prototypes of the Elise and Esprit Sport 300. When he tells you a production car will have a certain characteristic, he's not given to exaggerating. So it's worth listening when he describes the differences between the standard Elise and the 340R.

'It has a lot more dry grip, and it's especially quick to stabilise on the way into a corner. You turn in and it's ready. So it's great through S-bends. A lot of that is down to the tyres.' They are standard Elise size, but specially developed by Yokohama. 'You can't just take any old tyre and stick it on a car like this and expect it to work,' says Minter. The tyres are road-legal, but he admits they aren't too much fun in a downpour. 'Wet grip isn't actually too bad, but they don't like standing water.' Which is probably not too much of an issue in a car with no roof. Minter also says the car is given to tramlining on white lines. The suspension wishbones and uprights are standard Elise, but the springs and dampers aren't, so it's altogether firmer, more agile. And the springs are on adjustable platforms so you can get the set-up just-so. The brakes are bigger, too, and the wheels are ultra-light magnesium jobs.

Out back, the engine is a non-VVC Rover K-series with a vivid 177bhp – pretty much up at 100bhp per litre. It is



closely related to the 190bhp device found in the Sport Elise and Caterham Superlight R, but Minter says that although that engine is road legal from the point of view of getting through an MoT, it's not actually legal to sell in a fully manufactured car. This toned-down version emits less, but it will still warp you to 60mph in 4.3 seconds if you're quick with the close-ratio gearbox. But if circuit-noise regulations allow it, the optional 340R track pack by-passes the catalyst, re-chips the engine and restores the full-ticket 190bhp.

That track pack also gets you a quick-release steering wheel, five-point harness, racing brake pads and hoses and a Stack rev-counter with lap-timing facilities. The red mist descends. And for the track, you can also take off the noise-suppressing rear-engine shroud. That cuts weight, and lets you admire the hard-working motor as it ticks and cools after your gee-whizz laps.

IT CAN BE SLAPSTICK JUST GETTING INTO THIS CAR, AND climbing out is no better. But you soon acquire a knack. Sit on the side, then swing your legs over. Stepping on the seat is part of it, but it's not so much upholstered as skinned in a sort of shiny blue Lycra, so it won't come to harm. In front are a pair of dials hanging off a bow-shaped alloy beam that arcs across from somewhere way ahead of the passenger. The handbrake and switchgear are lovingly





machined aluminium items, rather than the plastic bits'n'bobs that serve the Elise. A starter button sits at the top of the central row, and below are buttons for side, head and fog lamps and the electrically heated screen.

If that's not enough trick bits for you, look sideways. At knee level are frosted perspex panels. As you drive, they give a novel impression of the scenery rushing past, without letting too much wind in – originally the idea was to leave this part open and have bodywork only where strictly needed, but it was just too draughty. 'Graphically, we liked the idea of open space to see the driver, and for the driver to see the surroundings,' Carr explains. The translucency also means the car changes its look from the outside depending on your taste in legwear.

Since the concept car, there have been changes to the nose and tail, but surprisingly slight ones. Well, they'd taken all those people's money, explains Carr, so they couldn't deliver a car that was toned down.

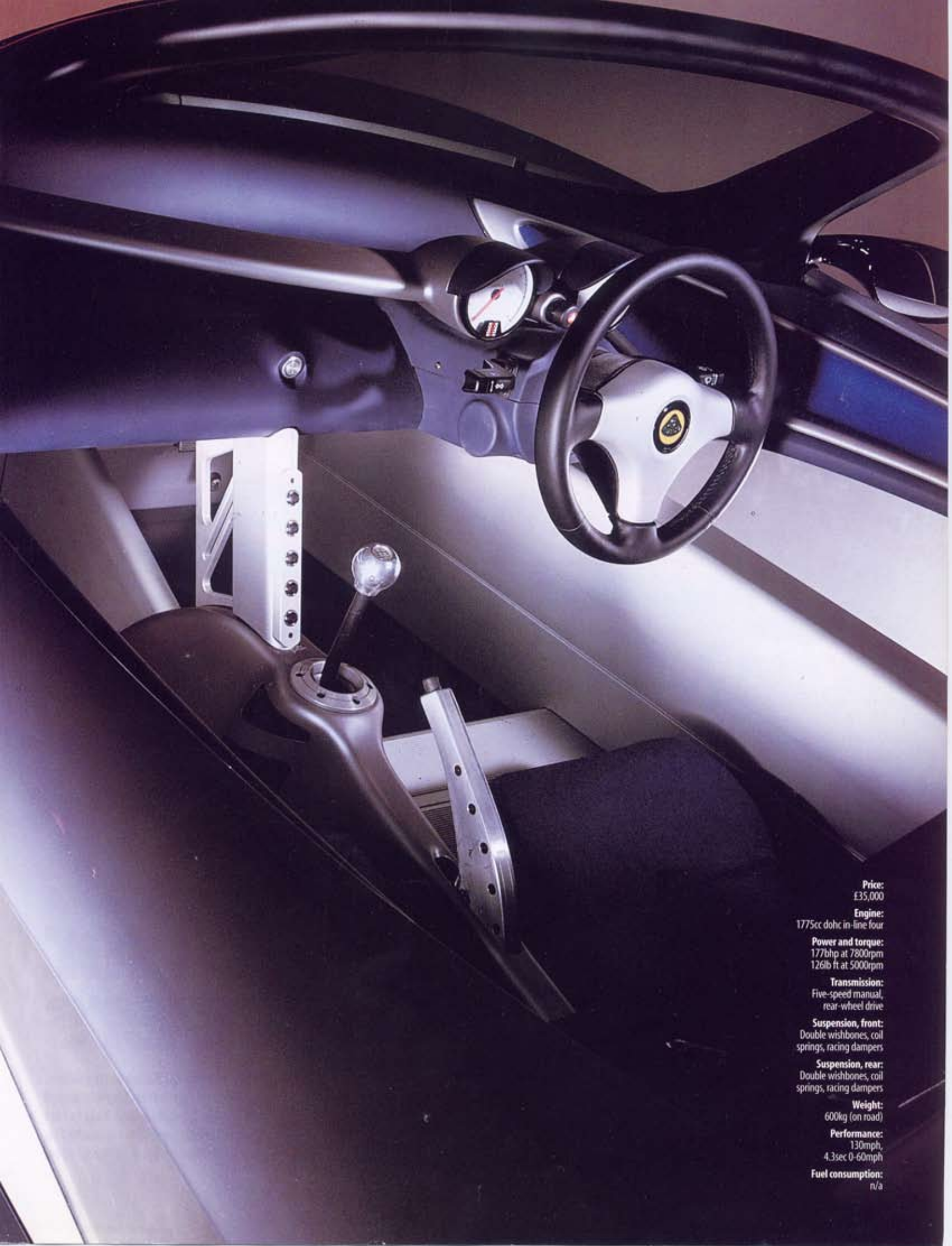
The nose is wider now, with the main beam lights in the low grille. Ellipsoid units set into the main bodywork take care of dip beam. A composite, crash-absorbing box lies within the nose. There's a little access panel behind the gaping radiator air outlets, which lets you top up the battery and brake fluid. But no luggage space. Ahead of the front wheels, the double-deck wing serves two purposes: it looks like a racing car's, and it meets a legal need to protect pedestrians from the wheels. Two optical illusions serve to boost the apparent size of the centre-lock

wheels: spokes that run right over the rims, and black carbon mudguards mounted to the suspension so they snuggle right down to the tyre tread.

There's a proper windscreen, you'll have noticed, rather than aeroscreens or a Renault Spiderish airfoil. Lotus debated whether to go that route, but this choice was surely sensible in the end. You feel a right plonker driving a car on the road – especially one that makes you feel this conspicuous – with a crash helmet on, and it's not as though you're deprived of the essential sensations of driving by not having a hurricane in your face. The glass itself is basically an Elise's, but cut down from the top.

At the back, a steep wing has been added since the show car, and there's a diffuser beneath the engine because downforce took clear priority over top speed. The car has been to a wind tunnel, so it's not just guesstimation. Visually, the 340R is furiously busy and technical. The rear lights sit on brackets, with steel-braided wiring hanging in the air, while the suspension and silencer are clear to see and the engine is only shrouded if you choose to let it be.

You can form your own judgement about the way the 340R looks. For the way it drives, we'll all have to wait a few more weeks. The first of the pre-ordered cars are built in November for December delivery. Since that's after the London Motor Show, where another horde of interested people will get a proper look, it's likely they'll all be sold by then. Order now, or it's another unreachable cult object in the making.



Price:
£35,000

Engine:
1775cc dohc in-line four

Power and torque:
177bhp at 7800rpm
126lb ft at 5000rpm

Transmission:
Five-speed manual,
rear-wheel drive

Suspension, front:
Double wishbones, coil
springs, racing dampers

Suspension, rear:
Double wishbones, coil
springs, racing dampers

Weight:
600kg (on road)

Performance:
130mph,
4.3sec 0-60mph

Fuel consumption:
n/a