

## LIVIN' IN 7 HEAVEN?

*Phil Bradshaw*

My Leitch Supersprint will be 10 years old in December 2002. Given that it currently has over 98,500 miles on the clock, the race is on to see if it will clock up 100,000 miles before it turns 10. It is without doubt the most used, abused and neglected Seven/Replica in the country. And best of all, it is doing exactly what I built it for (and Colin Chapman designed the seven for): every day use as a sports car. So, I think this makes me qualified to talk about my experiences so far of Livin' in 7 heaven.

To start at the beginning. In December 1992 I completed my Leitch Supersprint Lotus 7 replica, certified and registered it, and began driving it daily. Since that time I have amassed a great many miles (speedo is imperial) and experiences, the balance of which are favourable enough to prevent me from selling the car.

In that time I have been rear ended at traffic lights, backed into at a T-junction, had a headlight kicked in, had a raw egg thrown into it when it was parked with the roof down, and it has been urinated in. It has never broken down and left me stranded, however a broken panhard rod mount slowed me down until the next town once...

It has lived outside for the majority of its life, excluding rebuilds. It has been off the road three times, initially for two weeks when I modified it to accept a heater and do a couple of minor jobs, secondly for three weeks for a new enclosed pedal box and some other mods (both in '93), and finally for six months in 1994 for the 20 valve upgrade, panel beating and a full rebuild. I built the car initially to be used daily, and it remained my only vehicle until about 3 months ago.

I am contemplating pulling it apart again to give it a well earned birthday, but my bottom line adage applies: it will not go any faster clean and polished than it will dull and covered in cowsh\*t (love our country roads). In an article some time ago I related the replacement of the 16 valve injected Toyota 4A-GE motor with a 20 valve 4A-GE. I am convinced I could have swapped the motor in a weekend if I had decided not to upgrade.



*Kit delivered Sep 92*

Perhaps best of all is that I get around 70,000km on a set of Dunlop Daytonas (185/70 13), as I run classic Dunlop mags, and are limited to this tyre size. I run a 4.44 diff in it, and still get around 34.5mpg/12.4 km/l. This equates to 390km on 32 litres of petrol. Try that in a Caterham HPC with 175 hp and carbies...and a 3.9 diff. And I have never driven it economically. The strange thing is, I get basically the same economy regardless of whether I drive around town or on the open road. The average cruising speed seems to make little difference either. By the way, Toyota's 20 Valve produces 165 horse(120 kW) at 7,800 rpm. Now you know why I keep the diff so short. Most of the time I drive around town in 5th gear, even when down to just on 50 kph.

Torque does not drop off until about 7600...I think it will do 120mph, I've had it to 113 and it was still picking up. Caterham reckon a HPC 185 hp will do 126 with cycle guards. In full road trim it does a standing 1/8 mile in 9.5 seconds, however I believe it can go quicker, but I am unwilling to dump the clutch at 7000 rpm. Fine if you are a journalist and it isn't your car!

I guess what really appealed to me was the original concept of the seven, being a car that could be used every day but still raced competitively. This was probably the biggest reason why I bought a seven. Although I have always been a car nut, the story really begins in 1988 when I went to the Auckland Motor Expo. That was the year Alpine had a Lamborghini Countach on display, and I can recall hearing what I thought was a helicopter

flying over the Expo centre, until I realised it was a Pink Floyd track on a mega buck Alpine Audio system that was in the next building...

On another of the stands was this fledgling company called Fraser Cars, who had this wonderful looking car called a Fraser Clubman. I was really taken by it, but alas I was too much of a dreamer with an active imagination and no money.

I bought the 'Lotus File' and read all about Sevens, and in 1989 went to UK for a year with work, where I was fortunate to be able to watch the progress of a guy building up a 1700cc Caterham. It was beautiful, but really heartbreaking to see it crashed a month after completion, in a race. Still, a phone call to Caterham and a new spaceframe forward of the foot wells was delivered, with other relevant bits, and the car was repaired.

I contemplated buying one, but money and time were too tight to construct one in the UK, and I was concerned at the cost of getting it home. So, I dreamed some more, and bought a few magazines with Lotus/Caterham articles.

I returned to NZ in early 1990 and decided it was time to buy a decent car, but the Navy was planning to put me on a ship for the next three years, and time in NZ looked pretty minimal. I ended up with a Ford Escort which I figured I could run around in when I was in NZ, whilst saving for something decent.



*20v ready to go in - 1994*

Unfortunately the ship's programme changed markedly, with the result that I spent most of 1990 in Auckland, where the Escort turned into a money pit. 40,000 kilometres and three engines later I was really tired of the whole thing. The engines died as a result of a burnt valve, blown head

gasket, and an oil leak leading to total oil failure. Now you know why I have an oil pressure cut out, and an aversion to Ford push rods. It wasn't like I was thrashing the thing, either.

I picked up the latest brochure from Fraser Cars, and in 1991 spent a lot of time at sea, including an August visit to Bluff. I paid a call on Leitch Industries, went for a ride in a 1700 pushrod Leitch, and was definitely sold on a seven. If you have ever been for a full on ride in a seven with some respectable horsepower, you will be well aware of the silly grin you cannot get rid of! No roof or side curtains at speed in Southland in winter leave an impression also!

I then did a careful analysis of Fraser vs Leitch, and ended up buying a Leitch because it was slightly cheaper and had some subtle changes I liked. The Leitch I went for a ride in had apparently cost \$18,000 on the road, and a careful guesstimate showed that it would cost me about the same for the spec of car I wanted. I paid my deposit in December 1991, saved very hard, sold the Escort, bought a Valiant Ranger hack for \$150, and started collecting components.

I managed to liberate front hubs, rear axle and some other Ford bits very cheaply from a couple of cars friends were wrecking, and scored big time on the motor, gearbox etc when I bought a written off 1983 AE 86 Levin, but that story has already been told.

I was aiming for April 1992 kit delivery, but got sent to Australia for three and a half months with work instead, so the kit finally arrived 1 September 1992. I ended up with a month's leave owing from work, so spent that time working solid on the car, as it was always my intention to build the car rapidly and use it.

Soon I had a bet with a friend that the car would be on the road in three months. A case of beer was on the line, so the pressure was on.

After the first month the car was a rolling chassis, and the engine had been fired up by the 10 October. I went back to sea for three weeks, but by 25 November the wheel alignment had been done, and the car was registered 2 December 1992. I won the bet by three days...

Still waiting on the beer...

I built the car as a road car, and although I have

participated in club events and practice days on track, it is the road where it spends most of its time. I cannot offer sage advice on setting one up for racing or how to drive it best on a circuit, because I am not experienced enough, am unlikely to ever be, and really can't be bothered!

However, I believe I own the most used modern Seven in the country, so I think I can speak with a bit of authority about living with one. Don't ask me to say if a Leitch or Fraser is better. Its up to you; kind of like whether you buy a Falcon or a Commodore. One outsells the other, but both are damn fine vehicles. And they are most definitely not the identical.

In fact, if my car was written off tomorrow, I would have to carefully assess both cars again. They are similar but not the same, each with different merits.

On the road the car cost me \$22,561.75. So much for the quesstimate. That included registration, certification and calibrated speedo/rev counter. Its initial specification was Toyota 1587cc 4AGE Twin Cam EFI motor @118 horsepower, Cortina front uprights, 4.44 Escort diff with Toyota AE86 Disc brakes, Datsun 120Y brake master cylinder, rostyle wheels, 185/70x13 Dunlop Daytonas, full wet weather gear, full toneau cover, Leather bucket seats, full carpet and polished aluminium body. Fully comprehensive insurance cost \$850 for \$32k cover (the cost of a built up kit to slightly lesser specification).

May 1993 I took the car off the road for two weeks to custom build a heater and replace a diff pinion seal. I already had bought the heater parts when I built the car, so it only cost \$68 to finish the work off.

October 1993 the car was off road for a month when I modified the scuttle and pedal box to improve water tightness (the scuttle on the Leitch removes to allow access to the wiring harness), up-rated to a 180B master cylinder (the 120Y one, despite being rebuilt during the build, had never been quite right), replaced the diff spider gears, which had always been noisy, and fit 3 Dunlop mag wheels (it had taken two years to track down this many in good condition!). Cost was \$733.33

Queen's Birthday 1994 the car was taken off the road for a major rebuild. It had covered 23,000 miles and had been rear ended, which caused

cosmetic but no structural damage. Also I had damaged the motor racing at Taupo. Over the next 6 months the car ended up with a Toyota 4AGE 20 Valve Motor @165 horsepower, which I wrote about a wee while ago, the remainder of the Dunlop alloys, which have all been restored and powder coated. The Dunlop alloys were original fitment on the series III Twin Cam SS Lotus 7. My mags were made in 1969/70. An oil cooler was fitted, along with new fibreglass all around, gearbox freshen up, change to stainless steel fasteners and a number of detail improvements. Cost \$7746.24

I have driven the car 98,500 miles since completion in December 1992, and use the car every day. For all but 2 years the car has lived outside, with the exception of garaging for rebuilds and modifications, and I consider it to be the most reliable car I have ever owned. True, I have taken it off the road three times for rebuilds, but they were aimed more at refining/improving the car than repairing it, the exception being panel beating that took three weeks. Mind you, anyone can get run into by a loser.

Even when I damaged the motor it still drove perfectly OK, and had I not decided to upgrade the 16 valve 4AGE, it would only have been a weekend job to do a straight swap with a similar motor.

As for adventures, the car has been driven over two inches of snow on the desert road, through flooding deep enough to leak into the car through the transmission tunnel in Nelson, across a 35 km stretch of gravel between Hanmer and Kaikoura three weeks after the 20 valve re-build (so much for the new gelcoat) , and up a 4WD dirt track to the Clyde dam lookout. It's been on two South island trips, one as far as Bluff and right around the island over three weeks, the other down to Oamaru over two weeks. And that was touring with a passenger, sleeping bags and a tent.

I regularly drive all over the North Island, and have driven Wellington to Auckland in one hit on a number of occasions. Whoever said trips over two hours are impossible has no sense of adventure!

No, I'm afraid I'm a one eyed NZ seven supporter, and a firm believer in EFI, but I guess you already know that. As I have always maintained, the important thing about owning/building a sportscar is doing what you want to do and can afford. But



*Bay Park 1993*



*1995 Street Drags at Wanganui*

in order to do that you must first be honest with yourself and what you want to build the car for.

The Leitch does not have a pet name, but for some reason people refer to it as 'The Pink Thing'. It was last polished properly in 1994; and looks spectacular when done. It is pink because I wanted a visible colour (but it still got run into) and because I couldn't see the point of going to the effort of building one to have it the same colour as everyone else (even if they do look stunning in BRG etc).

At times I get a bit despondent at the state the car is in – the only personalised plate I ever considered for it was 'USED 7', but I did not build it for looking at. It has been a faithful friend, and I will never sell it. One day it will get the makeover it deserves, and then it will be relegated to sunny Sunday outings.

But not yet. So yeah, I am livin' in 7 heaven – and plan to keep doing so.

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