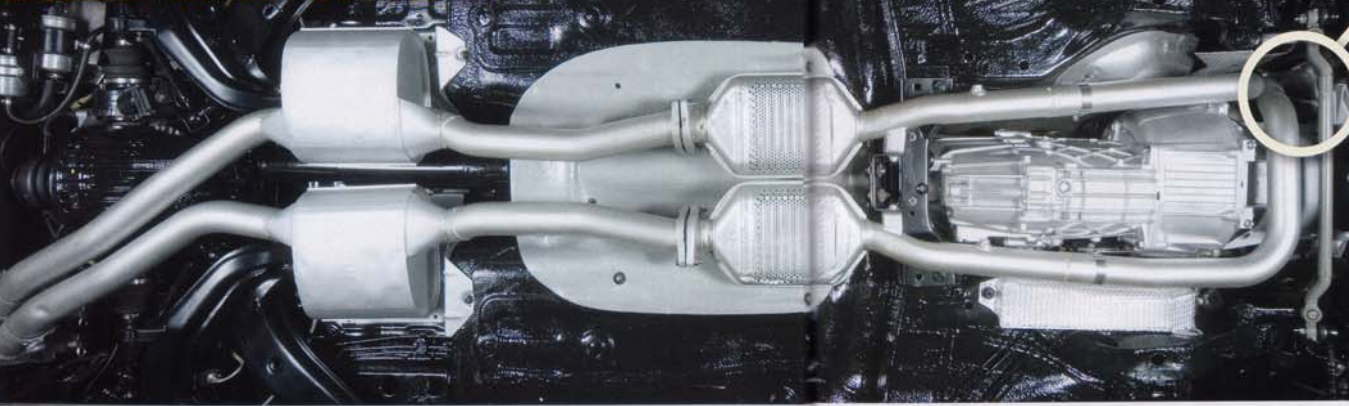




**"It's absolutely faultless, right down to the chromed nuts and bolts and flawless paint job"**

The best engine ever installed in a Vauxhall? 377 bhp says it is.



Unfathomably clean underside puts new cars to shame.

highlight reliability issues. It also had 90 trips up to the Arctic Circle, which was the perfect testing ground for its unique Goodyear winter tyres (now sadly unavailable).

That was all in preparation for the most shocking performance a saloon has ever been able to boast, all from a 3-litre 24V Carlton base (heavily modified, of course). For a start, the 950 GSis — which were transformed at Lotus headquarters in Hethel — were stripped down to the shells, and the engines and gearboxes returned to the Russelheim production line in Germany. Then, out came the hacksaw and chunks were cut out to accommodate the drivetrain and

wheels, most notably at the rear where the box-shaped arches were simply slashed away and then covered with arch extensions. Inside, too, there was a need to cut away the standard Carlton metal: the Chevrolet Corvette ZR1 six-speed gearbox needed more room, so the transmission tunnel and floorpan required modification.

The engine bay would also never look the same again. While the roots of its 3.6-litre lay with the 3-litre GSi lump, the Lotus Carlton engines were hand-built by a small team of engineers and each was assembled by just one man. The differences over a standard unit were striking and

extensive: a reinforced block received new MAHLE pistons, con rods, induction system and throttle bodies, and of course the oil and cooling systems were upgraded. Oh, and there's the small matter of an extra 615cc thanks to a lengthened stroke, mated up to two Garrett T25 turbos.

It took other manufacturers years to catch up with the 377 bhp result, but the torque from the powerplant was even more astonishing. There were strong rumours that the Lotus lump produced more torque at idle than the standard unit did at full chat. At just 2000 rpm, there's 300 lb/ft coursing through its veins, rising to a maximum 419 lb/ft at 4200 rpm.

To call it an awful lot is an understatement, and when you consider that at 100 mph the gearing had it ticking over at just 2200 rpm in sixth and 3400 rpm in fifth, you can't help but realise that the Lotus Carlton is just about as responsive as a saloon can be.

It's also still pretty much as quick as a four-door gets, although top speed was not the main philosophy behind its development. Vauxhall maintained that the guiding principle of the car was to produce a model that retained the Vauxhall look but had supercar handling, responsiveness and acceleration — the 177 mph top speed was a by-product. The Luton

spokesmen were far happier to quote the 0-60 mph and back time of 8.5 seconds, and tell you that a 5.2 second thrash would see you hit 60 mph from standing.

These are all reasons why every car nut with a quarter of functioning brain capacity has at one time, or for all time, wanted one — and Dave Franczak is lucky enough to have actually fulfilled that ambition. But the 30-year-old resource manager (and son of Henryk Franczak, of V-Tuning fame) didn't just want any old one; he wanted an absolute minter and the only way of getting that was to restore one himself. "I bought it in April 2003 after searching

for six months to find one that was suitable," he remembers. "This was the eighth one I saw. I didn't even go to look at the really high-milers; there are a lot of very tired and scruffy Lotus Carltons out there."

That said, even this example would cause Dave three years of work and a few appalling nightmares along the way, but he set out with a clear idea of where to start. "I was looking for one with a good interior, hard-to-get bits like the bodykit in good nick and the right bits on the engine," he explains. "I knew I could refurbish parts but not get replacement bits, so I needed a genuine, honest car. I also wanted a late build number as well, because

the later ones have got all the revised parts on them."

As a result, he initially wasn't too fussed about how it drove as the plan was to fully rebuild it. "I drove it around for five months, then the pivot pin snapped on the clutch bell housing," Dave recalls. "It's a common failure on the Lotus Carlton as the clutch is activated by a pivot system, so all the force is concentrated on a single pin — and there's a lot of force for it to handle."

It was the catalyst for the restoration project, which would mean the car wouldn't be drivable again for another two years. "I wanted to put stronger timing chains on and

change the head gasket, so I thought I'd take the engine out because it's easier to work on," he says. "Once the engine was out it was easier to get the body done, rather than put the engine back in and start all over again. As a result, I stripped it and trailered it up to a Bentley restoration bodyshop in Luton."

"They were absolutely amazing and had to fabricate what panels they couldn't buy, then prep it and repaint it all," he continues. "The finish is awesome — like glass — and it's a shame they're not around anymore." As with so many Carlton parts, the paint is unique to the car and all of them came in Imperial Green, 🟩