

Lowflying

May 2015

for Caterham and Lotus Seven enthusiasts



Lotus Seven Club



THIS MONTH: GRAHAM MACDONALD EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW • CATERHAM OPEN DAY • WISH YOU WERE HERE • COURTS CAMARADE
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Wish you were here

Michael Calvert enjoys a VIP trackday experience and reports that hiring a track car can make a lot of sense.

Trackdays are fantastic – that’s something that pretty much every petrolhead will agree with. There can be a range of issues to consider however; not everyone is lucky enough to have a car properly prepared for track use, and many owners don’t want to put their cherished vehicles through the rigours of lapping a circuit. It can also be something of a solitary pastime – friends and family may be able to come along to watch or even to enjoy a passenger ride, but wouldn’t it be great to be able to share the track driving experience with colleagues and work acquaintances? Wouldn’t it also be fantastic to be able to choose between a range of different vehicles and to be able to drive a genuine race car?

BOSS Racing certainly seems to think so, and have expended their business to include a track day car hire and hospitality service. This new venture, launched earlier this year, builds on their experience of supporting drivers at race events, only here tailored towards the trackday market.

I was invited to join them at an event on the Brands Hatch Indy circuit, and from the moment that my booking instructions arrived, my excitement levels began to rise. My drives for the day were to be one of BOSS Racing’s Caterham C400 race cars, and a Radical SR3 – both quite significant departures from the Crossflow Seven which I normally get to enjoy.

Pulling into the paddock, I wasn’t entirely sure what to expect. I had been told to make my way to garage 30, which was down at the end of the pitlane, but in the typical mêlée of cars getting ready for a trackday, I wondered if I would have any problems finding my hosts. I needn’t have worried; BOSS Racing’s huge race transporter, out of which the two race cars had already been unloaded, made locating our pit garage for the day rather easy. The cars, in their matching white and dayglow orange race liveries, sat waiting in the sunshine, the team having already prepped them ready for my arrival. I was beginning to feel like a pampered racing driver already...

Michelle Watson, BOSS’ Client Engagement Manager offered me a most welcome cup of coffee and a hot cross bun as I got to meet other members of the BOSS team who had turned out for the occasion. Company owner Rob Singleton introduced me to Colin Watson who is working to develop the trackday hire business, along with Ben Bonello who is responsible for marketing. Business pleasantries aside, it was immediately clear that all were keen car enthusiasts and racers

who wanted to make sure that the day went smoothly and that I had a great time.

I was shown around the Caterham which would be mine for the day - “93”. This C400 race car is powered by a 220bhp Duratec engine and competes regularly (and very successfully) in the Classic Sports Car Club Mag 7 Series. As you might expect from a race car, it is fitted with a moulded bag seat and a full cage. Unlike some race cars you see however, it is beautifully presented and looked fantastic in the early morning sunshine. One aspect of driving which I had not considered prior to arriving however was that it was equipped with a sequential six speed Quaife gearbox. Never having tried a sequential gearbox before, this was going to be quite an introduction.

My thoughts were interrupted by a call over the tannoy to remind all participants that cars needed to be noise tested before being allowed on track. It was here that I began to appreciate that today was going to be somewhat different to the normal trackday where you are on your own. “Don’t worry, we’ll look after that for you” came the immediate response from ‘my team’.

Having been shown the best way to enter the car through the roll cage, I settled into the driver’s seat for a quick briefing. The car felt in many ways familiar – definitely a Caterham like the one at home in my garage, yet this one was clearly a highly developed racer. The sparse dash was dominated by the Stack cluster, whose LCD display indicated a large N for neutral. “You’ve never driven a sequential gearbox before? Don’t worry, it’s easy. The only problem is that once you have tried one, you’ll never want to go back to an H pattern box again.” I was informed that although this car wasn’t fitted with flat shift, I would be able to change up through the gears using the merest lift of the throttle. Already somewhat overwhelmed at being entrusted with someone else’s race car, my response was that I thought I was hard-wired to fully depressing the clutch when changing gear, and that I couldn’t see myself getting out of that habit too quickly.

In-car briefing complete, it was time for the circuit briefing from the chief marshal. The typical (yet vital) rules about flags, driving etiquette and overtaking having been dispensed, a murmur of concern rippled around the room at the announcement that because Brands was playing host to Touring Car racing at the weekend, today’s format would be different to normal, and the track would be run anti-clockwise. Yes, the Brands staff had quite correctly anticipated that many of the somewhat bleary-eyed participants



would take a few seconds to twig that today’s date was indeed April 1st...

By the time I returned from the briefing, the car had successfully passed the static noise test, although the team did express some concerns that the rigid drive-by trackday noise limits in force that day might be somewhat restrictive for this full-on race car. There was only one way to find out however.

With the pitlane open, it was time to start thinking about venturing out on track. I’ve been lucky to have been entrusted with a few other Caterhams over the years, but I still feel a sense of trepidation at driving someone else’s car, particularly one as highly developed as this. Sitting stationary, I tried pulling and pushing the sequential gearlever to select different cogs, but with little success. “Don’t worry, as soon as you get moving, the gears will slot in easily” I was told. With no desire to make a fool of myself by doing something silly like stalling as I pulled away, I had to trust them. First gear engaged with a “clunk” and I gingerly rode the clutch and headed towards the pitlane exit. Visor down and off we go. Pull back for second,



Never having tried a sequential gearbox before, this was going to be quite an introduction.

short-shift into third and down Paddock Hill we go.... Fourth, fifth – the tight right-hander of Druids is approaching fast, so it's two stabs forwards on the gearstick to drop to third. "Hmm, this is fun".

The Duratec engine pulls beautifully, and (as predicted), I'm getting used to the gearbox already, I'm nowhere near up to speed yet though; I do feel somewhat conspicuous in a fully-liveried racecar which is circulating well off the pace, but it's still a great place to be. As the tyres come up to temperature and I begin to fall into a rhythm, my speed begins to pick up. On the first couple of laps, I was being careful not to hold anyone up, and had been gladly waving other cars by. Now I am keeping up with them, and soon, as I begin to get the feel for this fantastic race machine, I become the one who is being waved by lap after lap. The gearbox is indeed a revelation and, without even realising it, I soon find myself swapping

up through the cogs along the straight with barely a lift, before being heavy on the brakes at Paddock Hill and swapping down through the box with a quick flick of the wrist. "Hmm, today's drive could indeed lead to some expensive upgrades once I'm back home..."

I pull back into the pits for a break. As I sip a coffee, the car is topped up with fuel, has its tyre pressures adjusted and its wheel nuts checked. Back out on track and things are really starting to flow. I'm particularly enjoying getting the power on early on the way out of Clarke Curve in third and back onto the start/finish straight, when a black flag is waved in my direction. My guilty conscience kicks in immediately – have I done something wrong? I'm pretty sure I've been overtaking courteously and although I think it unlikely, I check my mirrors to confirm that no, there's definitely no one tucked up behind me that I haven't let past either. Back in the pits, a

marshal politely informs me that, just as the team had feared, the car is just tripping one of the drive-by noise meters, (although it's more than his job's worth to tell me which one).

On your typical trackday, this would have been "game over" for the day, but luckily the BOSS team had foreseen this eventuality and had a special backup exhaust system available to fit. It would take them twenty minutes or so to get it ready though, so we agreed that I should continue lapping in the meantime, but changing gears a little earlier to keep the exhaust noise down a bit. I soon found that the wide torque band of the Duratec engine meant that this was no real hardship at all; in fact, I could exit the corners a whole gear higher than I had been doing previously without it having any meaningful effect on my speed.

Come my next break, and it was time for the team to swap exhaust systems for their "quieter" version, with a larger silencer and

the exhaust exit arranged so that it points underneath the back of the car. It's at times like this that having your own mechanic with a lorry full of parts and tools really pays off. When I express my gratitude for the rapid work however, the team seems almost surprised – maybe it's easy for them to forget that this sort of service, which so many racers come to depend on from their teams, is pretty much unknown in trackday circles.

Back out on circuit, I make a point of going back to using full revs for a lap or two and am pleased to confirm that the exhaust swap has indeed done the trick. Although I know that I am still nowhere near to exploiting the full potential of this car, at least I no longer feel a fraud lapping in this full race machine. The car is set up beautifully – it turns in sharply, is wonderfully predictable in its handling and puts the power down cleanly on the corner exit despite the 220bhp being put through its road legal rubber.

Back in the pits later that morning however, the Radical is beaoning; it's an SR3 with a Hayabusa-derived 1300cc engine. Finished in the same white and orange company livery as the Caterham I have been driving, it looks just fantastic and I know that the team can feel my eyes being drawn towards its lines. I can't begin to describe the luxury of having a choice of trackday machines lined up to drive, but suffice it to say that when Ben catches my eye and says *"fancy of go in the Radical next then?"* I can't say no. It's a car I've always had a hankering to try, even if once again, butterflies start returning to my stomach at the prospect. I have read tales of how they can catch out the unwary and really need to be driven hard to create downforce before they begin to perform. Fact or fiction?

My hosts are keen to reassure, however. *"Just take your time to get the tyres up to temperature over four or five laps before you begin to push on"* comes the first advice. *"You'll probably worry at first that the brakes aren't working properly, but once you get some heat into them they'll come into their own. Don't count on changing down gears to give you much engine braking either – it's only got 1,300cc and it won't slow you down much. The front end will also feel really light after driving a Caterham too. The rack's really quick, so it can feel a bit wandery, but don't worry, it's just that there's such little weight over the front wheels. Oh, and one other really important thing – if you spin and go round more than 90°, please make sure you get the clutch pedal down, otherwise you'll shear off the starter motor/reverse gear. It's an expensive repair, and it's not one that we can complete at the track"*. Gulp.

The radical is sitting in the pit garage on a set of slick racing tyres, and I am offered the choice of going out on these, or of swapping them for grooved road tyres. Decisions, decisions... Much as the experience of driving on slicks appeals, I decide to take the "easy" option and ask for the road tyres, figuring that



Feeling like a racer, Michael gets up to speed in one of BOSS' C400 race cars.

they'll be more forgiving and quicker to warm up. Once again, the team swings into "race support mode" – a QuickJack is whipped out of the lorry, the central wheelnuts are loosened and the wheels are swapped over in a matter of minutes. I climb in, and marvel at the view over the bonnet. You realise just how much wider a Radical is than a Seven, and I find it somewhat disconcerting that I can't quite see where the front wheels are, something we just take for granted in a Caterham. I'm well out of my depth when it comes to the controls too – despite the array of switches having logos adjacent to them, I'm going to need a briefing again here. This car runs with a sequential 'box too, although because this one is motorbike-derived, this time you need to push forward for first, then back to work through the six available speeds. The view down the bonnet rather helps fuel my dream that I'm at the wheel of a mini-Le Mans car, and the start-up procedure feels properly racy too – select neutral, then switch on the fan and the fuel pump before thumbing the start button.

I think that the team senses that I'm a little tense behind the wheel. *"Don't worry, just go out and enjoy it"* I am told (and not for the first time today). I for one don't know how they can hand their beloved cars over to a relative stranger so freely. *"You will need to use all the revs in this car though – unlike the Duratec, here you'll find the power at the top end"*.

I start to turn the wheel ready to pull out into the pit lane. Crikey, they weren't wrong

about light steering, even when the car is still stationary. With a touch of the accelerator pedal, the revs flare – and I stall. Not good...

Engine fired up again, and I manage to get the car moving towards the pit lane exit without too much kangarooing. I replay the advice I've been given, trying in particular to focus on getting the tyres warm, on not expecting much from the cold brakes and on not counting on engine braking. *"Gears to go, brakes to slow"*, I repeat to myself over and over again.

Then I'm off; the engine snarls behind my head as I pull out onto the track. As I'd promised myself I would, I start off pathetically slowly, the drivers of quite mundane vehicles doing a double-take as I wave them past me on the straights. After the solidity of a Caterham, the steering is indeed disconcertingly light and at first it feels like the front tyres cannot be gripping the road at all. However, as I begin to pick up the pace, it's clear that in fact there is an immense amount of grip available, it's just that you have to readjust your expectations as to the feedback being provided. As the laps pass, I begin to trouble the shift lights on the dash, and to exploit just some of the potential which is clearly available in this car. It takes a little time, but soon the overtaken became the overtaker as the Radical began to flatter this very average driver's skills. This being a trackday, no timing was allowed, but I suspect that by the end of the day, my



The Radical may have lower torque, but it makes up for it with revs, aerodynamics and downforce

Radical lap times were similar to those I was achieving in the Caterham. Having said that, I felt oh so very aware that I was nowhere near even beginning to scratch the surface of the performance that this car had on offer – aerodynamics and downforce provide a whole new set of variables to play with, an area of which I had no previous experience.

After a fantastic morning, I was glad of the lunch break to take stock of everything that I had seen and done. Driving the Radical had been an amazing experience and one that will live with me for a very long time. It was actually much easier to drive at “reasonable” pace than I had expected it to be, particularly once you had got used to the fact that all the controls needed just the most delicate of touches. The Caterham C400, however, was a gentle beast – a car which felt as comfortable to drive as any Caterham does, and yet which had been set up and developed to perform at the highest level on track. It was, after all, a multiple race winner, so any limiting factor could only be the driver. The good news was that I still had a whole afternoon of track time ahead of me to try to extract as much as I could from the cars at my disposal.

I won't give a blow-by-blow account of the afternoon, during which I continued to enjoy both cars greatly. I spent the first part of the session getting more used to driving the Radical, mindful of the fact that this may very well be the only opportunity that I would have to enjoy such specialised machinery on track. Later in

the day, however, I found myself gravitating back towards the Caterham, to be reminded of just what a capable, enjoyable and dependable track car a Seven is, particularly one as well set up as this. Throughout the afternoon, interested passers-by visited the garage, attracted by the liveried race cars, support vehicles and staff, further increasing my feeling of being a pampered race driver for the day.

As you will no doubt have picked up by now, I had a thoroughly enjoyable day, and based on my experience, the BOSS trackday hire service is one which I would thoroughly recommend. They are able to provide a range of services tailored towards either corporates or individuals and they aim to provide a day that will be remembered for a very long time. The market for corporate events is a crowded one, but the opportunity to drive real race cars, supported by an experienced race team on major circuits in the UK or even overseas is surely a unique proposition. To me at least, as corporate events go, this would be in an entirely different league to the more typical golf awaydays and the like which are the staple favourites for many firms. As an individual employing BOSS' services and driving their cars, I can personally attest to the fact that their involvement takes trackday driving to a whole new level. Yes, the cost per person is inevitably higher than if a car is shared between several drivers on a corporate event, but the prices are far from unreasonable, the cars are perfectly prepared, and anyway, most people kid themselves about the real cost of track

driving their own cars... Above all, there's that little bit in most of us which makes us feel like a frustrated race driver – my trackday experience with BOSS Racing came the closest that I'm ever likely to get to being a genuine racer supported by a team.

The trackday hire business is a new venture for BOSS, but it's one which they are well placed to succeed in based on their extensive race experience. Cars which they currently have available to hire, in ascending range of performance, include a 1.6L K Series Caterham, a pair of C400 racers and the Radical SR3. The higher performance cars would be restricted to drivers who have already demonstrated some track experience, although the BOSS team is able to provide driving tuition and advice to help drivers to progress. Prices start from £295 for an evening's hire of the K Series Caterham, which includes the first tank of fuel, an onsite race mechanic, helmet loan, insurance, video footage of the session and light refreshments. You need to add to this the cost of the trackday itself as well as extra fuel beyond the first tank, and BOSS are keen to help customize the day in any way practicable to meet your needs. Base prices are for events at Brands Hatch (the circuit most local to the team's base in Longfield, Kent) but BOSS are happy to travel to pretty much any circuit in the UK or overseas that may take your fancy. It strikes me that you could easily arrange a corporate event driving a race car around a fantastic track like Spa for less than it would cost to arrange to play golf on a good quality course. I know which one I would prefer if I had the choice... *LF*

Who are BOSS Racing?

BOSS Racing may not be a name which is familiar to all, but the company was founded over 40 years ago by Dave Singleton, and within a short time was producing race engines which won back-to-back championships. In 2008, Dave's son Robert, who had previously worked for Caterham Cars in their engine shop and service department joined forces with his father, and naturally started specialising in engineering services for Caterhams. Since taking the company over, Robert has expanded the business into a range of areas including a full service and maintenance workshop, 4 wheel alignment and flat floor setups, chassis repairs, kit builds and upgrades to race and road cars. BOSS also provides race car set up and support for racers in a number of series, ranging from Caterhams to TVRs, as well as full engine shop facilities. The track day hire business is a new development for this year, which aims to provide trackday experiences for both corporates and individuals, driving BOSS' race cars at circuits in the UK and overseas, with full hospitality and engineering support.