

Two Men Had a Similar Dream.

Barry Davison

After an unexpected telephone call a few years ago, I headed north and bought an unusual Lotus Elan “on sight.” It came from the estate of an enthusiastic and obsessive gentleman who had a dream and a dozen or so years previously had, like me, fallen in love with the original Shapecraft Elans and lusted after one. Our gentleman started a restoration around the remains of two broken S4 Elans and had commissioned a new body from the original builders of the Shapecrafts. As there had only been about 20 or so built in period they had not retained any drawings, simply building them by hand to order and no two were exactly the same.

So Clive Smart (Mr.Shapecraft) had come down from Northampton to Ricketts Racing and measured up Malcolm’s very original ex-Don Hands “Lightwork Racing” white and blue Shapecraft Elan, (the one that SPARK models copied for their pretty 1/43 diecast model). Shapecraft then built the body for our gentleman and, as was to be expected, the work was carried out to an exemplary standard. However, our eccentric seems to have been very “hands-on”, adding a number of sometimes inspired, sometimes just plain batty, detail changes. The eye-catching and crowning glory is a very neat ducktail which I really do like and was one of the things that had caught my eye in the first place, setting it apart from the period originals.

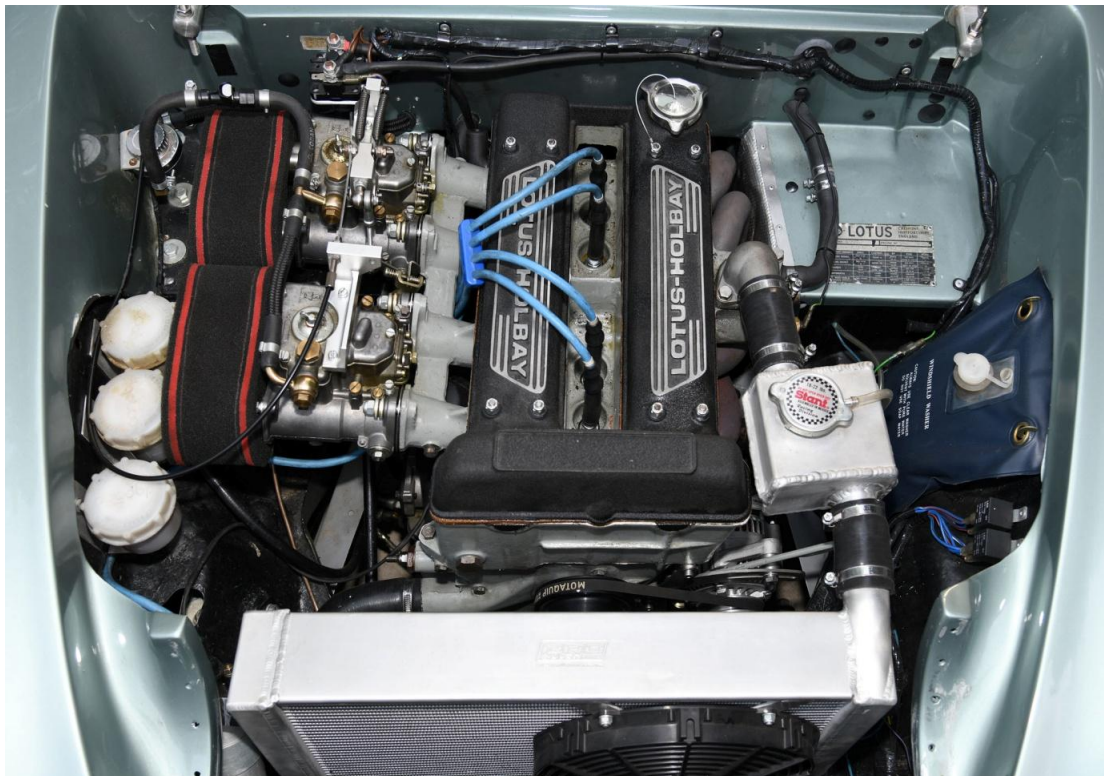
When I bought it, the car was running and looked OK, but our gentleman had barely driven it more than a few dozen miles on the road, and I soon found out why. Close inspection revealed that many elements had been over-specified for the intended purpose, (touring, which is what both he and I had in mind). He had installed as many full-race components as he could buy, and some of these required resolution for sensible road use. These included a magnesium cased dog box, illegal for FIA racing anyway while being excruciatingly noisy and requiring 100% concentration to change gear cleanly. An undriveable full-race engine (a late big-valve) had been put together by a Porsche race team and it was all top-end, and very lumpy under 6000 revs. The steering was awful, and the pedal box had been set-up for a ballerina wearing size 3 pointes. Although the bodywork detailing was exceptional with its semi-flush glazing, some of the cosmetics needed modification. Especially discordant to my eye was the fitment of a pair of large, ugly, airflow exits sourced from a Ford Mustang which had been integrated into the three-quarter pillars of the bodyshell and were completely incongruous, spoiling the flowing lines of the coachwork. Sadly, the car was not pleasant to drive in this form.

Wading through the huge box-files that I inherited, I saw that the gentleman had used literally dozens of different people on his project. The invoices read like a “Lotus Who’s Who”, and some of the notes suggest to me that he may have fallen out with a few of them. So, here I was with a “Grand Design”, one man’s dream in fact, but a somewhat whimsical and random project, without cohesive form or proper management. This was a car which I would never have thought of doing myself until I saw it, and then it was Love at First Sight. I could see the potential, and it quickly became this man’s dream too, although I realised that I would have a lot of work to do in order to perfect it to my satisfaction. But I knew that in the end it would be worthwhile, so I popped it in the back of the garage and forgot about it for a while until I had finished the 1929 Brooklands Morgan I was working on. At that time, I had acquired, and was also well into resurrecting, the wreck of an October ’65 S2 Elan of my own, (Chassis #26/4992). This was originally going to be a full race 26R GTS, which in all honesty I didn't really need but which had seemed like a good idea when I started. The chassis had all the right 26R bits and I was about to think about the bodywork when the season ended. Then a Chinaman ate a bat somewhere on the other side of the World, Covid started, and everything changed. Panic reigned as many folk became concerned about their jobs, their businesses and personal finances, and a number of pseudo-26R GTS race cars suddenly appeared for sale, mostly for far less money than the build costs would be, so I decided that this might be a good time for a planning review. At this point I had got over my mild case of post-purchase remorse and come to the conclusion that the Shapecraft was actually a little bit of a mongrel as it was, and that even with some tidying-up it was still not really what I wanted if I was going to keep it ... and that was the plan, I did want to keep it. So an obvious, if aggressive, solution suggested itself, in that the Shapecraft bodywork would be more appropriate adorning the S2 chassis 4992.



“Dream Team : Chassis by Lotus, coach work by Shapecraft, twin-cam by Holbay”

Thus began the process of brainstorming with Mike Loughlin at Ricketts Racing, the top Elan preparer who builds and looks after our race cars, and Chris at Finishline, who was the chap who did the Costin nose bodywork corrections and who had re-created the original paint on the Buxton Elite for me so brilliantly. We looked into doing some necessary alterations to the Shapecraft body to correct the transgressions, and at the same time to tidy it up to make it work with 4992. With a lot of hard graft and ultimately a re-paint, the corrections were made and the body was seamlessly (if a little expensively) united with 4992. I was happy to retain the attractive colour my previous owner had specified, an Aston Martin-ish pale metallic green which I like very much. It is a subtle shade and it took Chris a lot of head-scratching to match it exactly but, as always, the Finishline team came up trumps. I could not see myself racing this car, so in terms of specification it is best described as a semi-competition fast tourer, suitable for zooming about the place, but it's also going to be strong enough for the Gastro-type Continental rallies or possibly even some friendly hill climbs on a sunny day. The magnesium dog-gearbox was rebuilt with a new and more useable close ratio synchro set; the engine is now a more correct twin cam and built to "Holbay" fast road spec with just a modest compression hike and some driveable stage 2 cams. During the essential day's rolling road optimisation, we made some interesting changes, fitting smaller chokes to the Webers taking them down from 36mm to 32mm for better flow and yet still achieved 139hp/110 ft lbs., which is more than satisfactory for road use.



The car has a very strong three-quarter safety cage fitted which still allows me easy entry and exit, and a full list of other safety features – with a long-range dry-break safety tank and full fire suppression. Agnese and Mark at Jacob Engineering hand-made me a beautiful, correct, 26R steering wheel, costing less than the small fortune I got on eBay for the later S4 dished “Chapman Signature” item which came with it. Because the car now has a nice low stance and is evocative of a baby coach-built Aston Martin with its pretty rear-end, I exercised my option to be a little eccentric myself and now all of the interior trim is finished-off in tan leather in the style of Zagato. It's not quite a Rolls Royce, but it is certainly more luxurious than your common or garden Elan. (I have ordered the crystal chandeliers, but I am saving installation until invited to Goodwood Concours).

Having the 26R chassis with proper suspension, lightweight wheels, excellent damping and Mike Loughlin's painstaking set-up, it is now just delightful to drive and I have found that it is everything that I had hoped for, certainly the nicest Elan of any that I have owned, and with the sensible engine tune it now has good torque and is very responsive. To my eye it is also quite beautiful, yet still delightfully “Elan”.

Crucially, my wife Copper feels very safe and comfortable and loves driving in it, so I have succeeded and it is now definitely a car which I will keep for myself. I hope that the previous owner looks down on the car and approves, and I am very grateful for his inspiration and to his family for allowing me to be able to complete this very satisfying project to the highest standard.

Conclusion:

A couple of years ago I was taken by my brother-in-law, who is a model railway enthusiast, to an exhibition at the BMM. There, tucked away in a distant corner, remote from the gargantuan layouts operated by teams of gents of a certain age, I discovered a truly exceptional example of the modeller's art. This bijou layout represented a long-forgotten shunting yard in an obscure town that I had never even heard of. Every single element was perfectly represented and a couple of very ordinary, but all the more beautiful for it, little engines were toiling away sorting out a collection of equally grubby goods trucks and coal wagons. Compared to the bigger layouts with their brash scenery and buildings, their flashy trains and seemingly pointless activity just going round and around, this little moment in time the builder had captured was a complete delight. It was evocative of the railways that I remember as a young lad, and I stood and absorbed the loving care and detail that the owner had lavished. There was even a perfectly to scale black cat asleep half under a tarpaulin in one of the wagons. I was captivated. After a while I noticed a small printed sign, held in place on the front edge of the layout with a proper solid-brass drawing pin with a knurled edge.

It read:

RULES.

- 1) THIS IS MY LAYOUT.
- 2) IT REPRESENTS THE SHUNTING YARD AT NETHER POTTINGFORD AS IT WAS IN THE SPRING OF 1936.
- 3) ANY COMMENTS ABOUT DETAIL, ORIGINALITY, OR CORRECTNESS OF OPERATION PLEASE REFER TO RULE 1.

Here was a man I could relate to, and although I am not one of those who slap sheets of info all over the windscreen when parked, I plan to have a very similar and equally discreet little sign myself.

The vacant place at the back of the garage is now occupied by an S4 project in a million pieces for which I currently have little enthusiasm, but which I have not yet passed on because who knows We don't have a car for '70s Roadsports Yet ! Watch this space.



*The former Dick Steed/Dave Kelsey Lotus Mk VIII on display at the last Kop Hillclimb.
(Photo by Barry Davison)*