

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## Lotus Shocks the World at the Paris Show



No one expected this, *writes John Simister*. The Press had been fed a stream of hints that Lotus was planning something special and future-pointing for the Paris show, something beyond the supercharged and automatic-transmission Evora derivatives that we knew about already, but *five* new cars? Bob Lutz as high-profile consultant? A whole new layer of management including the former AMG engineering head, Wolf Zimmerman, as chief technical officer? Personnel late of Ferrari, Porsche, Aston Martin and who knows where else, all corralled into the new organisation?

Apart from anything else, where was all the money coming from? Coincidentally, one of the investment bankers invited to **Paris** by **Lotus** was in the same **Eurostar** carriage as a posse of journalists (including your reporter). The banker was seated next to one of us, and took the opportunity to feel the temperature of our likely reaction to the news to come. We were intrigued but a touch sceptical. **Lotus** has had many a rebirth, and the subsequent problems of quality, high-end credibility and that lingering smell of polyester resin have always percolated again to the surface. Why would it be different this time?





The information drip-feed, the Internet countdown, the rumours from the pre-show party at which a select few were told the story and sworn to temporary secrecy, all this had worked. The investment bankers were treated to a double-decker show stand, grander than **Lotus** had ever built before, and a dense throng of journalists, photographers and other companies' engineers and designers ready to witness the unveiling. Various celebrities posed with each successive new model, but they seemed superfluous as recently installed **Lotus boss Dany Bahar**, the former brain behind **Ferrari's** merchandising activities, announced each car.



At this stage they are all concept cars; their specifications are notices of intent, rather than measured fact. Designed under **Donato Coco**, formerly **Ferrari's** design chief, the cars do look disturbingly like different-size peas in a pod. There's nothing retro about them, though; their crisp edges and angles could take the original **Lotus Esprit** as an inspiration, but in reality that's just a coincidence. A **Ferrari 458** is a truer visual progenitor.



#### The first of the new Lotuses: the Esprit

These are the cars. The first will be the **Esprit** in two years' time, a two-seater, mid-engined machine with a supercharged 5.0-litre V8 producing 620bhp at 8200rpm. Its CO<sub>2</sub> output is intended to be a lowish 250g/km, provided the optional hybrid system is installed, and the gearbox is a double-clutch seven-speeder. Pricing will be around £110,000.

A year later, in 2013, a new **Elan** arrives. Like the **Elite**, it's a fixed-roof, mid-engined two-seater, although there will be a 2+2 version. Power for this one comes from a 4.0-litre supercharged V6 with 450bhp and – with hybrid addenda – 199g/km CO<sub>2</sub>. Clearly this **Elan** is a universe away from the spirit of either the original or the 1990s front-wheel drive version, as is the price, at a projected £75,000.



#### The new Lotus Elan

After that comes the **Elite**, due in 2014 and a front-engined, 2+2 coupé-cabriolet. Likely to cost around £120,000, it uses that same V8 engine as the **Esprit** but somehow emits significantly less CO2 – something which is becoming increasingly important for cars like these if they are to survive.



Lotus Elite (left) and four-door Eterne (right)

Then, in 2015, we'll see the final two newcomers. One is the **Eterne**, the only car not to resuscitate a past **Lotus E-name**, which is a four-door saloon designed to rival **Aston Martin's Rapide**. Powered again by that supercharged V8, it should cost about £130,000.



#### The new Lotus Eterne

The other is a new **Elise**, the most affordable car in the range at around £35,000 – which is not much more than the current car will probably cost by then. It comes with either a fixed or a removable roof, and is powered by a 2.0-litre, four-cylinder, turbocharged and mid-mounted engine, driving through the only manual gearbox in the entire new range. (A double-clutch gearbox is optional.) Power is 320bhp, and this new **Elise** is significantly larger than the current one. Heavier, too, at a predicted 1095kg.



#### The most affordable car in the range: the Elise

Which begs the question: is **Lotus** doing again what it tried to do in the 1970s – abandoning its core market in the chase for more glamour and higher profit margins? The current **Elise**, a design with roots going back 14 years, brought **Lotus** back from one of many brinks and has been the cause of previously undreamed-of production figures.

That the new range doesn't contain a genuinely compact, lightweight sports car is a big disappointment, and it means Lotus is throwing away a market position that it has had to itself for a long time. Given the pressures on the industry to create smaller, lighter, more frugal cars, and how Lotus has created such cars more effectively than any other carmaker, the new product plan is hard to understand.





The new Elise will be larger and heavier than the outgoing model

**Andreas Prillman**, the new chief commercial officer, explains: "It goes back a couple of years, when the shareholder [the holding company for **Proton** in **Malaysia**] decided to bring Lotus back to profitability. So there are five new cars, a new corporate entity, a new layer of top management. As for where the money came from, the current financial climate has helped us. Financing is low-cost today, if you can prove you have a sound project."

But why abandon the current **Elise's** market sector? "The new **Elise** follows the development of the market and the customers. The new generation of customers want more comfort. They have grown in size and they have grown up. But we did not compromise the driveability or the freshness. The new **Elise** will meet all current demands."



The Esprit (above) should be with us in two years' time

We shall see if he's right, but there's another possible hole in the plan as seen from the viewpoint of the petrolhead enthusiast. **Lotus** is aiming to compete in supercar-land but all the new cars have **Toyota-based** (or **Lexus-based**) engines rather than **Lotus's** own. That's not good for credibility.

"All the engines in the new cars will be to **Lotus** specification," **Prillman** replies. "The engine is the heart of the sports car, and our new partnership with **Toyota** means that instead of getting engines which we then tune, we get engines custom-built for Lotus. The software is the interesting part."

The irony here is that **Lotus's** engineering consultancy does a lot of engine design work for other clients. **Lotus** is perfectly capable of building its own engines, but the economics don't stack up. And the sad fact is that to many of today's buyers, it might not matter as much as we'd like it to.



Elite (left) and Elan (right)

The other key point about the new cars is that they will have largely-aluminium bodywork, with composites confined to smaller areas. The structures will be developments of the existing bonded-and-extruded aluminium system pioneered in the **Elise** and refined for the Evora (the latter will continue in the new range, incidentally, occupying a position between the **Elise** and the **Elan**). Aluminium bodywork, and just look at those tight shutlines. For **Lotus**, this is real year-zero stuff.

Maybe the ambitious plan will work. Certainly some serious reputations depend on it. If it does, **Lotus** will have a wider range of sports cars and supercars than any other carmaker, despite the gap at the bottom, and there's little doubt that they will be stunning to drive because **Lotuses** always are. There is to be branding and merchandising to match, much of it playing heavily on **Lotus's** history of maverick innovation and race success.

There's a new customer magazine, beautifully and edgily designed. Among its writers, photographers and creators, I recognised just one British name. It's produced in **Switzerland** and has an office in **New York**. The first issue celebrates British icons: people, mostly. I'm worried.

Text: [John Simister](#)

Photos: Lotus

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