



We can get a bit anally retentive here at *Top Gear*, but this month we've excelled ourselves. With the launch of the Exige, we got to asking what is the best Elise variant ever, including the Vauxhalls. After roping in 19 cars and an ex-F1 driver, we had our answer

Photography by Nathan Morgan



# ELISE OF LIFE



## JULIAN BAILEY: FROM F1 TO JCBs

Our hand for today – or tomorrow, peddler, boarder or whatever other ‘amazing’ phrases are used in the profiles these days – is British racing driver Julian Bailey.

You name it, he’s raced it. Formula Ford (Festival of Brands champion), Formula 3, Formula 3000 (first British driver to win in this formula) Formula One (for Tyrrell in 1988 and Lotus in 1991) and BTCC (the Toyota, where he famously put his own team-mate, Will Hoy, onto his roof). More recently, there’s been some serious GT racing (for Nissan, Lister and MG) and in 1999, Bailey was BRDC British GT Champion, followed by FIA GT Champion in 2000. Must be doing something right behind the wheel, then...

It was this wealth of experience and his Lotus F1 connection that brought him to the Top Gear test track to help settle the ultimate pub argument: which is the best Lotus Elise?

To be fair, with nearly all of these cars belonging to owners, Julian was a little reluctant to completely write every last drop of performance from them. So the lap times are representative, but not by any means as fast as the cars will go before falling off.

These days, the race helmet gathers dust. In its place is a hard hat and most pair of steel toe-capped boots while the wheels of choice is a JCB. Because Bailey’s now running a property development company, building houses and, hopefully, making a tidy little sum in the process. Does he miss the racing? “No, not particularly. I’ve been there, done that.” Fair enough.

Now then, get to work, Julian...



# 19

LAPTIME: 1:29.4

### Vauxhall VX220 Turbo Sprint

Technically, it doesn't count, as it's a development model for the imminent VX220

Engine 2100cc 12v in-line 4-cyl, 200bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 7.2 seconds, max speed 134mph Weight 1050kg Price £200,000 est

#### BAILEY SAYS:

"Takes a lot of getting used to. Turbos tail-slides out of every corner. Sounds nice, but then everyone knows you're lifting!"



# 14

LAPTIME: 1:34.9

### Vauxhall VX220

A Lotus, but not as we know it. Unique body, engine, suspension, but plusher and heavier

Engine 2100cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 140bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 8.1 seconds, max speed 133mph Weight 1750kg Price £60,500 est

#### BAILEY SAYS:

"The lap time's surprising. It's stable in the corners but doesn't feel that fast. Why an earth put here buttons on the thumb-rests?"



# 09

LAPTIME: 1:37.8

### Lotus Elise Sport 135 [Series 1]

Only 50 Sport 135s were made. Widely praised at the time, but rather pricey

Engine 1700cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 120bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 3.0 seconds, max speed 127mph Weight 760kg Price £60,000 est

#### BAILEY SAYS:

"The close ratio gearbox lets you make the most of the engine's peaky power and feels balanced on the throttle. A lot of fun!"



# 18

LAPTIME: 1:40.4

### Lotus Elise 1.8 [Series 1]

In 1996 the Julian Thompson-designed Elise arrived. This is it, the first, the original

Engine 1700cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 110bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 5.5 seconds, max speed 124mph Weight 720kg Price £60,000 est

#### BAILEY SAYS:

"My first time in an Elise, I'd not known what to expect. It's a bit scary, with understeer than unpredictable roll-induced oversteer"



# 13

LAPTIME: 1:37.8

### Lotus Exige 177bhp [Series 1]

Baby 'Group C' racer, with serious downforce, huge cornering speeds, extra grunt

Engine 1700cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 177bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 3.6 seconds, max speed 133mph Weight 1030kg Price £60,000 est

#### BAILEY SAYS:

"I like it, but the new-on brake pads weren't bedded in. Not as sorted as the 340RS, but I guess that's a weight issue"



# 08

LAPTIME: 1:36.4

### Lotus Elise 135R [Series 2]

Unique interior, flush adjustable sports suspension plus D2 wheels equals track-day fun

Engine 1700cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 120bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 3.4 seconds, max speed 127mph Weight 760kg Price £60,000 est

#### BAILEY SAYS:

"Fell really good, a nice all-round car. The track-spec tyres make a big difference – you can really exploit the chassis' balance"



17

LAPTIME: 1:38.9

## LOTUS ELISE SPORT 160 [SERIES 1]

Tuned K-Series, close-ratio 'box, sports suspension and tyres for race, late-in-life 160

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 165bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 5.0 seconds, max speed 120mph Weight 770kg Price (aswd) £74,000 est

## BAILEY SAYS:

"The engine really didn't feel like it had the power it said it had. A bit of a let-down. But the steering and suspension made up for it"



16

LAPTIME: 1:54.18

## LOTUS ELISE SPORT 190 [SERIES 1]

Hot K-Series plus fairly accompaniments, aimed at track-day users with a big budget

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 187bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 4.4 seconds, max speed 141mph Weight 870kg Price (aswd) £19,000 est

## BAILEY SAYS:

"The hardest to drive. It's got the power and the noise, but unstable under braking. Lots of oversteer and feels on a knife-edge"



15

LAPTIME: 1:37.63

## LOTUS ELISE 1115 [SERIES 1]

A new rather than tuned engine pitched the flagship Elise at a broader audience

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line VVC 6-cyl, 102bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 5.4 seconds, max speed 130mph Weight 770kg Price (aswd) £17,000 est

## BAILEY SAYS:

"To be honest, it didn't really stand out for any one reason in particular. It just felt a bit more peaky than the standard model"



12

LAPTIME: 1:25.3

## VAUXHALL VX220 TURBO

Ultra-potent turbo model turns Elise and many superior owners green with envy

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl turbo, 200bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 4.7 seconds, max speed 137mph Weight 1200kg Price £26,495

## BAILEY SAYS:

"A messy lap. It feels soft and rolls around a lot, but delivers a lot of speed - too much almost. It definitely relied on the ABS!"



11

LAPTIME: 1:37.3

## LOTUS ELISE SPORT 135 [SERIES 2]

A new cylinder head, inlet manifold, airbox and re-programmed ECU eased up the power

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 120bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 5.4 seconds, max speed 125mph Weight 750kg Price £21,000 est

## BAILEY SAYS:

"Would have been faster but we had a huge oversteer moment coming through Chicago corner! Extra power isn't so noticeable"



10

LAPTIME: 1:38.4

## LOTUS ELISE 1115 [SERIES 2]

A more powerful MD Rover VVC engine marks the 1115 out from its predecessor

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line VVC 4-cyl, 150bhp  
Performance 0-60mph in 5.3 seconds, max speed 130mph Weight 780kg Price £26,995

## BAILEY SAYS:

"This would definitely make a nice day-to-day car. It pushes wide at the front, but is stable and nice. Refined too"



'It was my first time in an Elise, so I'd not known what to expect. It's a bit scary'



07

LAPTIME: 1:05.3

LOTUS 340R (1779RHP)

Utterly outrageous, only 340 were built. The name refers to its power-to-weight ratio

Engine 1794cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 1779hp  
Performance 0-60mph in 4.6 seconds, max speed 120mph Weight 155kg Price base£124,900 est

BAILEY SAYS:

"The hardest to get into! Lazy, fast, huge fun. I'd say it handles the most predictably of all the cars so far! But it's a toy, really"



06

LAPTIME: 1:04.7

LOTUS ELISE 1.8 (SERIES 2)

Introduced in 2001, and designed by Steven Crigo, the S2 broadened the Elise's appeal

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 120hp  
Performance 0-60mph in 5.7 seconds, max speed 125mph Weight 750kg Price £22,999

BAILEY SAYS:

"You can really feel the improvement over the Series 1. Handles better, easier to drive hard... No longer has rough edges to it"



05

LAPTIME: 1:37.5

LOTUS EXIGE 190 (SERIES 1)

Engine upgrade proved popular, delivering the performance the Exige's looks hinted at

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 185hp  
Performance 0-60mph in 7.11 seconds, max speed 147mph Weight 760kg Price base£120,000 est

BAILEY SAYS:

"Felt great through the corners - really planted - but it's still not up there with the 340R. I guess that is a weight issue"



04

LAPTIME: 1:34.5

LOTUS 340R (1908RHP)

The 190 conversion delivered the extra grunt the 340R's chassis craved for

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 1879hp  
Performance 0-60mph in 4.2 seconds, max speed 120mph Weight 160kg (track pack) Price base£128,000 est

BAILEY SAYS:

"The tyres on this particular car let it down. It broke away too easily at the back. But saying that, it was still a buzz to drive"



03

LAPTIME: 1:36.3

LOTUS ELISE 111R (SERIES 2)

Latest addition to the range, and a welcome one at that, with mad VVTL-4 Toyota power

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line VVTL-4 4-cyl, 180hp  
Performance 0-60mph in 4.9 seconds, max speed 130mph Weight 750kg Price £21,999

BAILEY SAYS:

"Definitely the most peaky engine here. But great when it gets going. Beware that if new comes with ABS, but pedal has dead travel"



02

LAPTIME: 1:35.3

LOTUS ELISE SPORT 190 (SERIES 2)

Special order, pricey 190 features tuned K-Series and adjustable sports suspension

Engine 1796cc 16v in-line 4-cyl, 187hp  
Performance 0-60mph in 4.3 seconds, max speed 140mph Weight 750kg Price £31,500

BAILEY SAYS:

"The stiff suspension and sticky tyres deliver huge levels of grip, but as with the 111R it's hard work to keep the engine on the cam"



'It handles the most predictably of all the cars so far. But it's a toy, really'



## THE WINNER: LOTUS EXIGE SERIES 2

Not the fastest, but for Bailey it proves the most entertaining on the day. And entertainment, after all, is what we were after.

**Engine** 1796cc, 16v in-line four-cylinder, 180hp; **Performance** 0-60mph in 5.2 seconds, max speed 167mph; **Weight** 2900kg; **Price** £29,995

It may be the latest, shining example of Lotus's ever-diversifying Elise family, but the Exige Series 2 has a lot to live up to. Not just the intense adrenalin rush that its predecessor delivered direct into your bloodstream, but also the other 18 cars which we have gathered here.

Without exception, and as you'd hope, all will put a smile on your face. But none will stretch your skin beyond the point of elasticity quite like this little black number. At least, that's what our man Julian Bailey reckons. Clearly, he's been

enjoying himself in it. When we asked him if he'd avoid hanging around at the end of the day's test to drive the manic, rev-happy racer for a few action shots, his response couldn't have been more enthusiastic. The Exige bounces past angrily, its Toyota-sourced 1.8-litre VVT-i engine spinning up past 8,300rpm (try that in your car and it'll launch itself) and the nose diving into the corner with the sort of feverish abandon a football player normally reserves for throwing themselves to the floor in the penalty area.

Bailey climbs out, complaining in the process. "It's a right pain to get in and out of, isn't it?" Yeah, but come on, Julian, do you care? "No, I suppose not. It's a riot. The best car I've driven today, and totally at home on the track. It stays flat and carries more speed through the corners than the 111R, but you still get the electric windows!" He likes his creature comforts, does our Julian. "But what it's got above all the others here is the perfect balance of performance and handling." More action shots are needed.

Next up is a series of donuts – well, at least I believe that's the technical term for them. The ultra-sticky tyres and lack of a limited-slip differential make it sticky but Bailey perseveres, hanging a rear wheel in the air in the process as he smokes by. Further praise awaits the Exige. This time, it's the brakes: "Lotus ought to fit this car's ABS system to every Elise." He's right, and soon enough it'll have to be law. It's a pretty unequivocal decision. As far as the top Elise-based car goes, now, in this case, it's best.

**'It's a riot. The best car I've driven today, and totally at home on the track'**

