

Photography by Tom Wood





Our entire weekend seemed to be about saving time. The task at hand was to take my little Lotus Elise sports car to Wiscombe Park near Honiton in Devon to compete in the latest round of the Lotus Hillclimb Championship, a busy two-day event held every year at the beginning of August. My wife and I knew that to do things properly we'd need to stay in a caravan. That would allow us to join our similarly accommodated friends (and rivals) in the meadow which the event's organisers had set aside for vanners. This was set at the top of the narrow but picturesque hillclimb track whose function for most of the year is to provide access to Wiscombe House, family home of the late Sir Francis Chichester, pioneering aviator and round-the-world yachtsman.

From the beginning we were on a schedule as tightly drawn as a harp-string. The plan was to leave work at lunchtime on Friday, then fight the West Country traffic as we made our 130-mile journey from Gloucestershire to Devon, my wife in charge of the Lotus while I towed the caravan with our Mitsubishi Shogun. News bulletins kept telling us this was the busiest weekend of the year for traffic, but we needed to reach our campsite in daylight to find a good

“From the moment my missus and I clapped eyes on it we knew this caravan was special”



pitch, unpack, set up the van and make key changes to the car which would convert it from road car to racer (adjust suspension and tyre pressures, fit racing numbers, remove junk from boot, empty washer bottle...). We also wanted to enjoy a convivial evening meal. Time, as I say, was a precious commodity.

Wacky races demand creature comforts
And so it remained all weekend. The whole point of speed hillclimbing is to shave fractions of seconds off previously-set track times - your own and those of your rivals. At a two-day event like Wiscombe you're allowed six runs on the circuit, which is usually steep and complex, often slippery and bumpy, and occasionally sopping wet. You drive as hard as you can but you mustn't overdrive because that just makes you go slower. The discipline is to deploy every shred of your car's performance without wasting time with excess wheelspin, too much sliding about or braking too heavily for corners which may look alarming but are usually faster than you think because they're uphill.

It's a hobby which is relaxing as well as exciting, but as meetings start early and go on all day, it demands the most convenient trackside accommodation available. Carlight's single-axle Commander 184EW fits the bill

Lotus eater

The rigours of a day's closed-road motor racing demand a little luxury when it's time to turn in. 'Wheels-man' Steve Cropley tries a top-of-the-range Carlight.





perfectly. You don't need to look at the price tag (a hefty £29,000) to know that it's one of the finest caravans in its class. No - from the moment my missus and I clapped eyes on it, we knew this caravan was special.

The smoothness and sheen on its gleaming glassfibre flanks announced a hand-crafted, Rolls-Royce quality to even the casual observer. Inside, it was like a luxury apartment: wood-panelled, with beautiful hand-fitted worksurfaces and cupboards, and a generous selection of seats and sofas which metamorphosed into wide and comfortable beds. Best of all was a full-width bathroom across the rear of the caravan, with a penthouse-style circular shower cubicle and a properly-proportioned, fully-flushing loo. This is not a caravan for owners who are prepared to compromise: big, modern and impressively well equipped, it is for people who enjoy luxury living, and every bit as comfortable as home.

A perfect marriage

Towing the Commander to Wiscombe Park was a breeze. Our motive power was perfect for the job: a five-door Mitsubishi Shogun complete with torquey 3.2-litre turbo-diesel

and one of those intelligent five-speed auto-transmissions so valuable to towers because they can detect when you're looking for added engine braking on long slopes and change down just as you're about to pull the lever back. So while I could certainly feel the considerable weight of the Commander - making me aware of all that elegant wood panelling - the stability of both vehicles remained exemplary. Whether we were manoeuvring a turn or whizzing along at maximum legal speed on the motorway, at no stage was our outfit anything but rock-steady. Bow-waves from passing trucks and other caravans had no effect, either. That said, we were lucky to be spared any significant crosswinds (a real test for a novice caravaner like me) so towing conditions were ideal.

A different way of life

Ideal, that is, except for the traffic. There was plenty of it as we headed south on the M5, looking for Junction 25 at Taunton where we would turn off onto the A358 until we joined the A303 for Honiton, continuing about seven miles south on the A375, looking for RAC signs to direct us to the Wiscombe Park estate.

Normally the traffic would have been a real

bugbear for me as I'm used to bombing along with the 'repmobiles', trying to get to where I'm going as quickly as possible. But for truck and caravan traffic, limited as it is to 60 mph, there's a different kind of motorway life - more polite, more 'professional'. You can spend more time travelling closer to your optimum speed, even when it's busy, and other road-users tend to respect your extra length and lack of agility, so co-operation prevails.

We made it to Junction 25 sooner than I had expected, and were on the sinuous A303 in good time, too. By now I had become used to the outfit, which was just as well because the A303 becomes particularly narrow around Monkton, and you need to place a bulky outfit accurately on the road to avoid trouble with oncoming traffic.

There was even less room for manoeuvre as we approached Wiscombe itself, skirting the pretty but busy town of Honiton on the ring road, though happily there was surprisingly little traffic.

Then, suddenly, we were there, needing only to negotiate a tight entrance (marked by stone pillars) to get into the meadow set aside for caravaners. We saw in an instant why the



entrance road had been so quiet: many of our fellow campers - those who knew the ropes - had already arrived. They had also occupied all of the level pitches. There was plenty of space left but it sloped rather steeply away from the entrance road, down towards the much smaller road which tomorrow would become the racetrack. There seemed nowhere suitable to park and I really had no idea what to do. I decided to seek expert advice.

A little help from some friends

Motor sport competitors have always been dedicated caravanners, and seated in a row of deckchairs under some trees sat four gentlemen - their own caravans long since perfectly pitched - who had noted the arrival of our £60,000 equipe and were, I noticed, discussing its finer points.

I approached them and explained that despite appearances I was in fact the most inexperienced of caravanners, with no more to see me through than some printed instructions in the van. What I knew about pitching on a field which sloped this alarmingly could be written on the back of a postage stamp. When I told them this, my new friends smiled reassuringly. It was heartening. Where, I continued, should I park this van? And how should I compensate for the slope of the field?

“We must have invited 20 people into the Commander’s bathroom over that weekend”



Experienced caravanners tend to be helpful people, and the quartet of experts fell to dealing with my problem. In seconds they had recommended a position which was level in the east-west direction, so we only needed to level the van in the north-south direction.

One of them remembered a nearby woodpile (experienced caravanners have eagle eyes) from which we could pluck a couple of large, round, foot-high tree sections to fit under the Commander's front legs to level it on the sloping ground. So, a short trip in the Shogun and we had all the wood packing we needed. Five minutes later we had the caravan secure and set up. (My new friends had spirit levels to burn.) And after we'd all inspected the Commander's bank of gas taps behind a panel on the front outside, we had the gas fridge working and a full flow to the full-size, four-burner gas hob.

A little help from some friends

After that came the pow-wow. My new friends were extremely interested in the Commander, stem to stern. They were impressed with the van mover, the twin electric drive motors you activate via a TV-style remote control. They loved the caravan's slide-out battery, the neatness and logic of the water system's taps and drains - but most of all they liked the flushing loo. We must have



MITSUBISHI SHOGUN

We could hardly have chosen a better car for towing the Carlight Commander 184EW than the five-door Mitsubishi Shogun diesel automatic. It has both bulk and tyres big enough to stabilise even the largest caravan, the torque (a whopping 275lb ft at just 2000rpm) to manage a hill-start in the steepest terrain, and plenty of space in the rear for luggage and equipment too large or heavy for the van itself. With the van hitched

up, steering feels normal and exterior mirrors provide a decent view behind. Responsive and economic, it can crawl along on a mere whiff of throttle, regardless of load, and on our weekend – around 400 miles of towing – returned just under 20 mpg. Two gripes: the spare wheel carrier got in the way of hitching and unhitching, and the two power sockets seemed unnecessarily close together. Otherwise, the Shogun seemed the ideal partner for this van in terms of prestige as well as power.

CARLIGHT COMMANDER 184EW

SPECIFICATIONS

Price	£28,985
Warranty	1 year
Mass in running order	1460kg
MTPLM	1800kg
User payload	300kg
Interior length	5.6m / 18ft 4 1/2 ins
Shipping length	7.14m / 23ft 5ins
Width	2.16m / 7ft 1in
Berths	2 or 4
Spare wheel	no
Blinds/flyscreens	yes
Blown air heating	yes
Number of burners	4
Fitted stereo	yes
External mains socket	no
Cassette toilet/flushing	yes/electrical
Alarm	yes



invited 20 people into the Commander's bathroom over that weekend, and every one of them gave it their seal of approval. So did wc, because it meant no compromise was needed in order to live in our 'mobile penthouse'.

In fact, I found it almost impossible criticise this fine vehicle. It had everything: wide-opening Windows, good roof insulation against the heat, robust and easy-to-use flyscreens, space, comfortable places to sit, and all the mod cons you could ask for - all laid out with a logic that made it simple to use. My only criticisms were of the bathroom: the overly long curtain tended to hang into the hand basin, and there was no cabinet (Carlight will fit one on future models).



HOW TO TAKE UP HILLCLIMBING

Speed hillclimbing provides a unique combination of excitement, relaxation, competition and companionship. Meetings tend to occupy at least one day of a weekend and are often held at picturesque venues like Wiscombe Park. The profusion of classes means it is still possible for road cars to compete in the same meeting as the powerful vehicles driven by the champions of the sport, though you'll probably need some elementary preparation (driver's harness, possibly a

roll-cage) and to wear an approved helmet and driving suit. You can enter by joining a car club and applying to the Motor Sports Association for a National B Speed competition licence (phone 01753 681736). You'll need to do this in plenty of time (details are published in the motorsport press at the beginning of every season) and to pay an entry fee of £60-£80. It's far easier to be a novice hillclimb competitor than a circuit racer, but remember that for true enjoyment you need a convenient place to stay, so buy your caravan first.

Race Day

By 9.30 am on Saturday the first cars were blasting up the tunnel of trees towards the finish-line. As scheduled, I took six runs in two days: four for practice and two to set a time. The course record is held at 35.38 seconds by Tim Mason in a 600-break horsepower Gouldjudd, a vehicle which looks like a Formula One car but is actually faster on a course like this. In the hands of a decent, lighter, driver my Lotus could break 50 seconds. My first run was a pretty dreadful 56.58 but I improved each time, setting a best of 51.81 seconds on Sunday afternoon, only a little short of the 50.50-second target which would have won my class. But the joy of hillclimbing is as much in beating yourself as your rivals, and I now have a target for the next Wiscombe meeting.

Happy days

As it turned out, my new-found caravanning friends were officials at the event: they were the start-line crew. So, each time I rolled up the line, one of them would lean into the cockpit and say something like, "Are you sure it's level?" Or, "Where's the tow-hitch on this one?" Obviously, without these distractions I'd have broken the course record...

But without these men I wouldn't have had half as an enjoyable weekend with the Carlight Commander. They were the soul of caravanning expertise, and I'd like to thank them for what they did to help me out.

When the meeting ended we hitched up easily and departed, and though the traffic was dense again nothing could shift our sense of fulfilment. The van was returned to its makers but will always have a secret history as a key player in our unforgettable weekend.

NON-COMPETITORS CAN STAY HERE

1. Oakdown Park

A *Practical Caravan* Top 100 Family Park 2001 Oakdown is a quiet, peaceful site, spectacularly well-kept and featuring trees and shrubbery throughout. The drives to the pitches are very neat. It's close to many major attractions, too. The park is a recent David Bellamy Gold Award winner and is a nature lover's heaven.

- **WE LIKED** The peace, the friendly staff, the greenery, the good spacing between units and the very clean toilet facilities.
- **BE WARNED** Quite a long walk from some pitches to the toilet facilities.
- **WOULD SUIT** Anyone who is after some peace and quiet.

Address Weston, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0PH.
Tel 01297 680387

Open End March to early November.

Charges Outfit (two persons plus car) £7.75-£11.70; awning £1.75; hook-up £2.20; extra person (5+) £1.75; under-5s free.



Facilities 120 all-16A electric pitches, of which 90 are hardstanding, and 26 serviced pitches.

Shopping Basics on site. Spar grocer in Sidford.

Nearest pub 1/2 mile (the Blue Bell)

Gas exchange Calor/Camping Gaz

OS ref 192/SY 167 902

ETC Grading ★★★★★



Other parks to consider

2. King's Down Tail Caravan Park

Salcombe Regis, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0PD. Tel 01297 680313

Open 15 Mar-15 Nov

Charges Outfit £7-£9

ETC Grading ★★★★★

3. Salcombe Regis Caravan Park

Salcombe Regis, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0JH. Tel 01395 514303

Open 13 Apr-31 Oct

Charges Outfit £7-£11

ETC Grading ★★★★★

