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Ewan Scott visits sunny Barnsley to see how the Carlton Carrera demonstrator has stood up to four years of hard use



Kit Car representatives last visited the Royston works of Carlton to view the Carrera some eighteen months ago. At the time the country was cold and fogbound. The car tested at that time was the 2 year old demonstrator and this return visit was to have another look at the same car to see how it was standing up to the ravages of time. It is, after all, important that a car remains serviceable and presentable for more than the first few months of its life.

Muscle Car

Having read about the Carrera and having seen pictures of it, I arrived at Royston to confess that I was surprised

have not done this car any favours. The first impression is that it is in the style of the Datsun 260/280Z series which must have been the first Japanese cars to hit the big time in the States. A second, closer look though, suggests that this car owes more to American Muscle car of the late '60s and early '70s. The more I looked at it the more I saw. The car has bulges everywhere, and all of them in the right places. The rear wheel arches flow into the bodywork, the tyres, BF Goodrich 245/60R14s on Alleycats, filling the available space. The flipfront bonnet has a built in power bulge, whilst the wings appear to be stretched to accept the front wheels — yet more bulges. The bonnet flows smoothly from the windscreen, curving down to the

front of the body just flows back to the rear spoiler on the hatchback. The Carrera is all curves; it is a style that you will either love or hate. I loved it.

Cruising Van Nuys

I could easily imagine this car with a 350ci Chevy under the hood, Edelbrock manifold and a Holley 4 barrel, Crane cam and Hooker headers, narrowed axle and lots of rubber at the rear end, Appliance Five Spokes, and a full flame paint job on a scarlet background, the driver sitting in a custom built bucket seat, the rest of the trim discarded in favour of alloy panelling, and a massive rev counter sitting on top of the dash. It wouldn't have looked out of place

CALi★FORNIA

DREAMIN

a Marylou sitting on the floor, Jan and Dean blasting from the stereo, the officers in the police cruisers eyeing the motor jealously, waiting for an excuse to pull it over...Well there has to be a let down in every dream doesn't there?

Coming back to reality, this Carrera did have a V8, the ubiquitous Rover sort, slightly tired, but a V8 nevertheless, connected to the Ford rear axle via the Rover 3 speed autobox, again slightly tired. To criticise on these grounds would however be unfair, as the car still ran well enough once the intricacies of using the autobox were mastered. Opening the door gives the first surprise: it was so heavy it felt like steel. The door holds all the Ford winder and lock gear, but it also incorporates a steel side protection bar. All this weight requires a massive hinge to keep it in place, and even after four years of hard use the doors showed no sign of sagging.



A rigid affair

In the driver's footwell on the door frame there is the bonnet release lever; a tug on it lets the bonnet pop up. Lifting the bonnet is a revelation: it is a rigid affair with far less flex than many steel flip fronts, part of which is due to the heavy lay up of fibreglass, part to the integral inner wheel arches which prevent ingress of mud and spray. There is plenty of room in there for a far bigger engine than the Rover V8, a V12 perhaps, or at a push, a big block V8. Anything less than the V8 just will not suit the image of this car, although if you wanted you could fit a Ford 1100, but why? A neat touch is the inclusion of ducting in the bonnet for ram air intakes, which meet with ducting in the

clicks to either side, so there is never any doubt about it being securely closed or not.

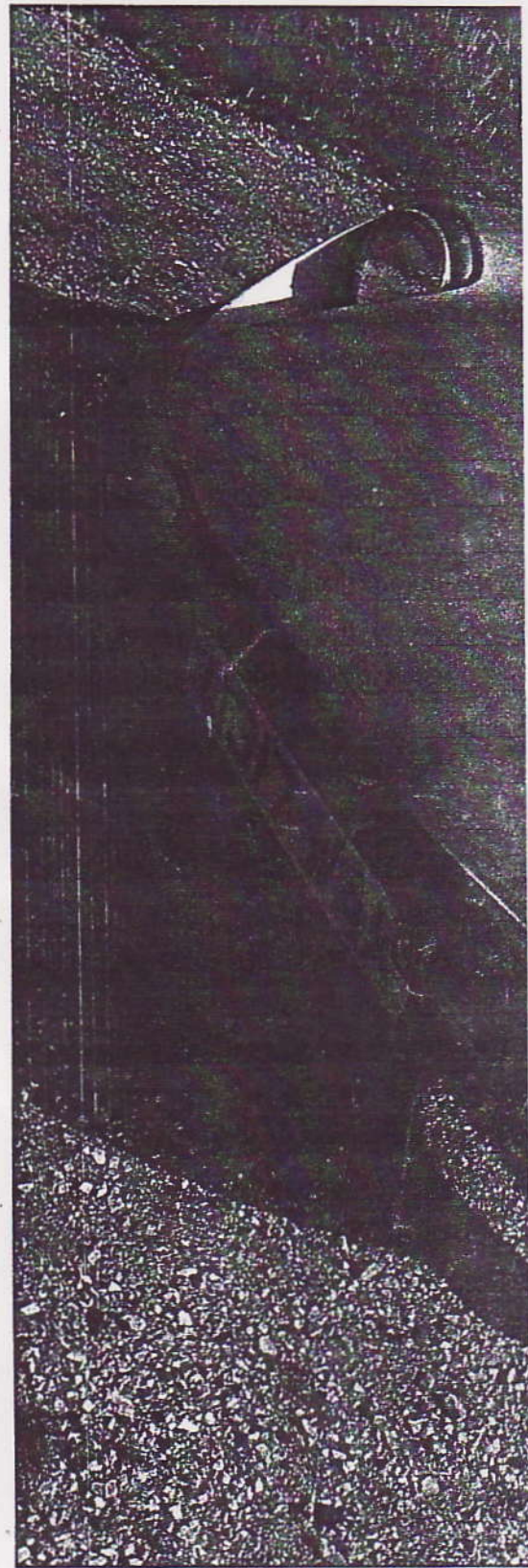
To the rear of the door frame is a second release catch for the hatchback. The rear hatch opens without any fuss, and is held aloft by a pair of gas struts.

Again it is a solid piece of work, and incorporates the rear spoiler. The opening gives access to a cavernous rear storage area, cavernous that is for a sports car, although fitting the car out as a 2+2 would remove a fair whack of the available space.

Relaxed Driver

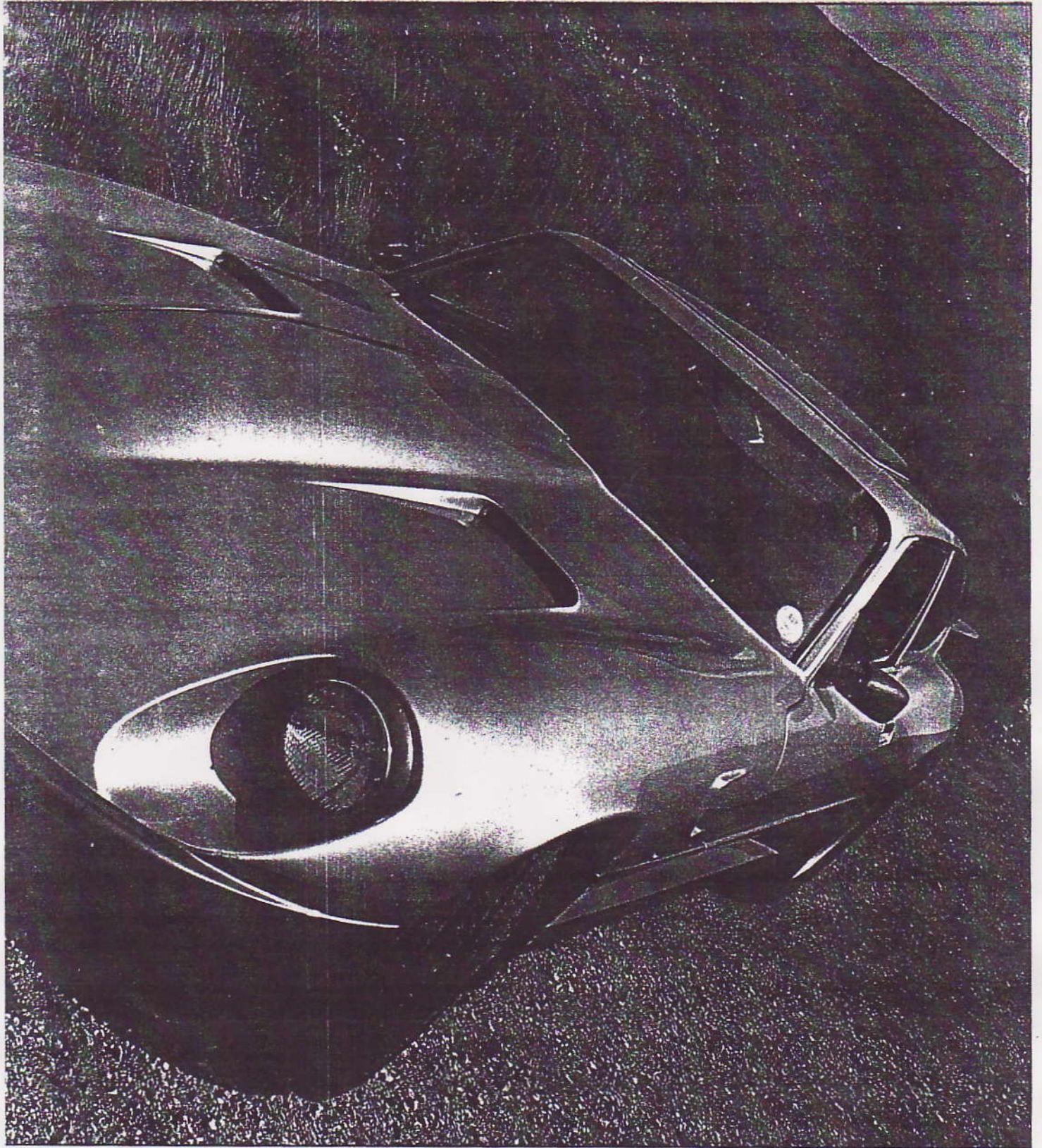
Moving back round to the accommodation. The occupants sit comfortably in Corbeau seats and rather high, so that they are sitting more on top of rather than in the car, a position that I found satisfactory; in fact it is a long time since I felt so relaxed whilst driving a car. All the controls fall easily to hand and the instruments are well sited, but then they are straight out of a Cortina and fitted to a replacement fibreglass dash unit. Speaking of which, it rather lets the interior of the car down, as the finish to the fit of the heater controls etc. is a little shabby. The handbrake and shift lever are perhaps a little high, but still comfortable to use, although if the box is held in 1st the column tends to foul the handbrake. I do not see any of these problems as insurmountable. All round visibility is good with the exception of the usual rear quarter problems, which is adequately covered by mirrors. On winding down the window I did notice that the finish to the upper front of the door is a mite untidy, but a little care in the building could sort that out.

The carpet and headlining in the car



botched attempt at a luxury finish.

The driver's seat is adjustable and the brake and clutch pedals seem to be in the right place; however, in this car I feel that the Go pedal is set a touch too far back, as I have to stretch to floor it, or move the seat so that I am too close to the steering wheel and the brake and clutch pedals. Minor problems though as each builder will surely adjust to suit



the Rover up, a rasp from the exhaust followed by that musical burble. Into 1st and off with the handbrake, the car noses out from the kerb and down to the junction. Wait for a break in the traffic and out onto the main street, holding it in second as the traffic and the pedestrians restrict any alacrity. People hear the note of the exhaust and turn to look, their gaze falls upon the car and they are fixed. Their eyes take time to

look powerful in the muscular sense, and it sounds it too, the 3.5 just on tickover sounding so lazy pulling this motor through the streets. Once clear of the town I let the box into top and drive the car in a sedate fashion getting used to the handling of the machine. It seems to oversteer on the slightest of corners, but once familiarised with the long nose of the car, it is just the geometry creating an optical illusion, as with most cars

suspension seems a little stiff and soaks up few of the bumps; you can almost count pennies on the road with it. Again this is often a problem with kit cars, one which can be overcome by fitting softer springs and adjustable dampers to provide the best possible ride. The answer is in the hands of the builder. Now finding the car user friendly, I reach an open stretch of road, drop the box into second and let the car find its

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN

Undulations are not a problem and there is no induced wallowing or pitching, but watch out for potholes. On some twisting sections of the road I start to push the Carrera through the corners. Holding it in 1st and pressing hard, the car corners well; pushing even harder and in 2nd there is no hint of bad habits in the handling: the car corners flat and goes where it is pointed. It is worth considering just exactly what the car is to be used as, or how it will be driven before adjusting the suspension, as to soften it may ease the ride, but it could induce body roll, and poorer handling. Also this model is fitted with Ford running gear, but it can be fitted with Jaguar front and rear units, giving a much better ride and higher standard of performance.

All this, remember, is in a car that has been used as a demonstrator for four years, which means that it has been abused by the worst kind of people to get their hands on cars, dreamers and reporters. It has lived up to this very well, and there are no signs of fatigue on the bodywork, although I confess that the fresh coat of paint could be hiding the odd flaw. Benefit of the doubt must be given to the boys at Carlton, though, and I think the Carrera has stood the test of time well.

Carlton was born from the long standing friendship of two schoolboys, David Peasant and Stuart Allatt. Many years ago Stuart bought and built a Nova, but, unhappy with the VW engine, soon had enlisted the help of David to glue in a Lotus engine, which was later discarded for a 3L V6. Thus began the duo's involvement with kit cars. They soon drew up plans for the Commando, which took 18 months to develop, and once in production with the Commando they set about the next model, the Carrera.

This demonstrator was the prototype, and there are slight waves in the castings, in particular the doors and the bonnet, but the car is of such a shape that these points are not too noticeable; I was looking for them and found them. I am assured that on newer models this is not a problem.

The chassis for the Carrera is yet again a solid ladder frame chassis from

on a jig and finished to the standard required by the customer, either painted, zinc plated or coated. All mounting points and bolt holes are pre-drilled to suit the donor parts, whilst the body panels are a minimum lay up of

oz, reinforced in places by a 12oz lay up. Early models had steel floor pans, but recent cars have removable fibreglass trays which permit the driver and passenger to sit lower in the car, an absolute necessity in the convertible.

To summarise: I enjoyed this car, I love its curves and I could live with the minor irritations such as the handbrake being too close to the shift lever. I would throw away the dash unit and replace it with something more suitable, and I would tidy up the finish on the doors. The engine would need to be at least a good 3.5 Rover, and the box would need to be up to scratch, a better set of wheels than Alleycats would be required and the gas pedal would receive some attention. Other than these mainly personal preferences, this has to be a car worth a look, especially with a basic price tag of £1999 and £2399 for Ford and Jag based kits respectively.

