

Fast Fleet



End of Term

Westfield XI

- Date completed: April 2006
- Duration of test: 8 months
- Total test mileage: 3151
- Average consumption: 34mpg
- Costs: see page 146
- Price new: approx £14,000 (self-build)
- Trade-in value: £15,000
- Depreciation: nope

The Project XI saga really began two years ago, when m'colleague Roger Green drove Westfield's demonstrator for a short 'Driven' article in issue 078. As he parked the Green rump in the Westy's tiny bucket seat, he'd no idea what to expect from this tiny, implausibly

low, plastic-bodied Lotus Eleven replica with its pram-like wheel-tracks and unpromising MG Midget mechanicals. As it turned out, it was a great deal of fun – so much so that we got it back for our Road and Track Car of the Year feature in spring 2005 (081), where it proved every bit as enjoyable as cars with five or six times its throbbing 65bhp.

So when Westfield offered us a kit so that we could build our own, we leapt at the chance. We (that is, Roger G and myself) would do the spanner-work and fund the rest of the build, and at the end of the story the car would be sold and the proceeds (if there were any) split. I think it's fair to say that we had absolutely no idea what we were letting ourselves in for.

First task was to source a 1275cc Midget, which would donate its engine, gearbox, back axle, steering rack and various other components. So in the late summer of 2005 we bought a rusty but healthy-sounding runner for £800 and after a couple of days in which WD40, spanners, hammers and a

large crowbar were liberally applied, we had a pile of oily bits and one gutted Midget, which was later crushed. It was a poignant moment, particularly when we realised we'd left a couple of important parts still attached...

Never mind. A couple of months later, after sending off the propshaft, back axle and wiring loom to be modified by Westfield, as per the build manual, we had all the parts we needed to start the build – and more importantly we had acquired the use of a well-equipped workshop and the expertise of someone who'd built kit cars before. Step forward Roger of the Swift variety, without whose help we'd probably still be trying to work out which way round to bolt the seats in.

It was the winter of 2005/06 when the build began in earnest – long weekend days (and evenings) spent in Roger S's garage, fingers numb from cold but warmed at regular intervals by the steaming mugs of coffee supplied by Roger's wife, Barbara. Slowly the powder-coated steel frame began to acquire



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suspension, rear axle, front hubs, steering gear, brake lines and wiring loom... and eventually the engine and gearbox, the former now sporting rather startling luminous paintwork (dubbed 'Roger green' after the bloke who chose it).

There were days of almost complete frustration – like when we found the petrol tank wouldn't fit without snipping away part of the aluminium sills, or when the distributor cap kept fouling the chassis frame, necessitating the fabrication of a spacer for the engine mounts to cant the engine over a couple of degrees.

Then again, solving those sort of problems made the little triumphs all the sweeter. I'll never forget the feeling of elation when we turned the ignition key and the little red light in the speedo glowed for the first time (I'd attached most of the wiring loom myself, so no-one was more surprised or delighted than I). Or the moment when we fired the engine for the first time and the characterful bark from the side-exit exhaust filled Roger S's garage to the

accompaniment of child-like whoops of joy.

Every week, it seemed, brought a new landmark. There was the first shakedown test (minus a few pieces of bodywork) on a private lane near RS's house, which was where we first became aware of the Westy's laughable lack of ground clearance. Then there was the fitting of the bodywork and, as we stood back to admire our work, the sudden realisation that we'd created our own baby Le Mans racer. Most nervewracking of all was the day of the SVA test, the final hurdle before we could legally drive the car on the road. When the call came through to the office to say it had passed, I began to fully appreciate just how much we'd invested emotionally as well as financially in the Westy. And then – at last! – there was driving it home after a celebratory lunch with Westfield's Holly Bond in the same pub where we'd first discussed Project XI.

Over the coming months, Roger G and myself would have the Westy for alternate weekends – the perfect car for those summer-evening drives to a

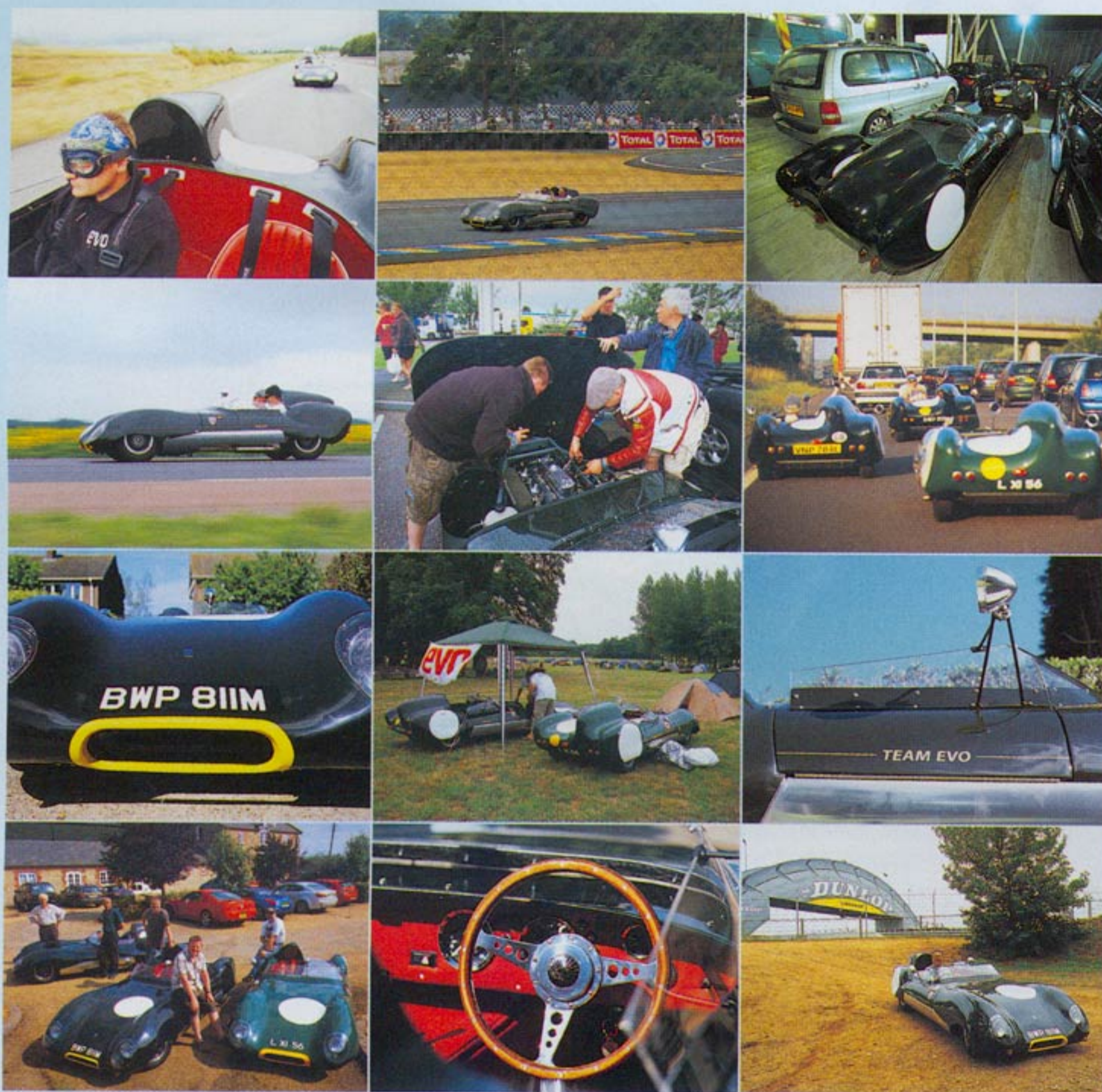
country pub. And at the end of the summer came a memorable day at the Bedford Autodrome, where we lapped the West Circuit in a highly commendable 1:40.66, only a couple of seconds slower than a BMW 120i.

Was the XI reliable? Nah. A tiny split in an oil-line did for the first engine; the gearbox had to be rebuilt; the carbs never quite seemed to be set-up right. In fact there were always things to fix, though to be fair we didn't run it long enough to be conclusive about its long-term viability. But let's be frank, if you imagine you're not going to spend a fair chunk of most weekends tinkering with a car like this, then you're a few shims short of a flange. We reckon we put around 500 man-hours into the project between us. Be under no illusions, building a car like this takes patience, a well-equipped garage

From far left: the kit arrives; plundering the Midget; installing the engine; starting the engine; Tomalin takes wheel for first shakedown run; Swift (yellow cap) and Green; first attempt to get to Le Mans thwarted by a split oil pipe; Team Evo en route



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Team Evo eventually made it to Le Mans for the 'Classic', travelling down in a trio of XIs and even taking to the circuit for the parade lap (above, middle left)

and a lot of hard graft, but if you're prepared for that then I reckon you'll have a real laugh, especially if you can rope in a few mates. For me it was the two Rogers, snapper Kenny P, staff writer Catchpole, and fellow XI owners Austin Weltman and John Martin, who accompanied us to the Le Mans Classic to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Lotus Eleven's debut in the 24hrs.

I guess the ultimate highlight of our time with the Westy would have to be driving it out of the Le Mans pit lane and onto the sun-drenched circuit on the Saturday morning of the Classic. From dismantling that rusty old Midget on Roger Green's drive to accelerating up towards the Dunlop bridge in our own classic Le Mans race-car replica – now that's quite a journey.

Along the way I learned to use a rivet gun, helped remove an engine and gearbox (several times), grappled with wiring looms, fitted lights, took apart (and put back together) a water temperature gauge, helped cut and fit sections of bodywork, learned how to adjust carburettors and engine timing. And every bit of it was utterly engrossing, frequently challenging, and surprisingly enjoyable. It was such a big part of our lives for so long – and then it was gone. At the end of the year, the story had simply run its course, and with heavy hearts we called Westfield to come and collect the XI.

I'd always rather scoffed at the whole kit car business. Like many of you, I suspect, I'd thought it was all a bit too beardy, too much oil-under-the-fingernails, too many noggins-and-natters at the Old Bull and Rubber Bush. The truth was far more interesting – and it has given me more priceless memories than any other single thing I've done in the car world. Just looking at these pictures now brings it all back with vivid intensity, and if I close my eyes I can still feel it, hear it, even smell it – that skinny-tracked, tiny engined, finned and gleaming, damned infuriating, absolutely bloody wonderful little car.

Peter Tomalin

COSTS

Kit price	£8995
Donor MG Midget	£800
Recon'd engine and carbs	£1120
Gearbox rebuild	£335
Recon'd front suspension uprights	£120
Revolution wheels x 4	£310
Avon tyres x 4	£120
Moto-Lita steering wheel	£186
Front anti-roll bar	£175
Various new and recon'd parts	£355
Electronic ignition	£87
Oils, fluids, filters, etc	£163
Tune-up x 2	£284
Specialist tools	£27
Miscellaneous parts	£438
Paint, roundels, etc	£100
SVA test	£160
Registration and road tax	£148
TOTAL	£13,923

Thanks to: Millers Oils, Moto-Lita, Revolution Wheels, Avon Tyres, Roger and Barbara Swift, Alex Wong, Jim Bickley, Tony Murray, Nathan and Roger Bovingdon, Austin Weltman, John Martin, Holly Bond and Chris Smith

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