

protected and strengthened housing 'twist the bifurcated rear chassis legs, is accompanied by a limited slip differential, as on the 26R. The final drive ratio is lower than the standard Elan in view of the uprated engine's high-revving potential. The gearbox, complete with magnesium bellhousing, houses straight-cut close ratios. Persuading the starter motor to remain attached to the bellhousing has been one of the major problems encountered with the car. "We lock-tabbed it, wired it, Loctited it, put nuts on the ends, yet still the bolts worked loose", bemoans Dick Saunders.

Inside the Elan the layout suggests a carefully worked out and experienced approach to competition. The controls are arrayed for ease of access under pressure. Relevant switches are duplicated on the co-driver's side, although the Terratrip rally computer dominates his view, adjacent to the fuses and relays that normally live in the engine compartment. There are access panels on each side of the gearbox tunnel and all fuel and fluid plumbing runs inside the car where it is safe from flying rocks that might otherwise wreak havoc under the car on rough stages. The roll cage is a formidable affair but it is well padded in the necessary places. When not being worn, crash helmets live in padded pockets behind the seats, along with the headphones that are essential to protect the ears and allow communication on road stages. Pockets and clips are provided for the stowage of maps, watches, drink bottles and other in-car essentials.

Space is certainly at a premium in the little car, even with every item of normal trim removed. You need to fold yourself up to get into the driving seat and once settled you are held by its clinging sides. It's a good idea to arrange the harness before getting in because once in place it's almost impossible to manoeuvre trapped straps or adjust buckles. My head almost touched the thin glassfibre roof. With my crash hat on, it did.

Master switch on, primary fuel pump on and a couple of dabs on the throttle are sufficient to prepare the engine for activity. From cold it starts readily and soon idles, sounding a little like a caged lion. Without ear protection, the noise bouncing round the unsoundproofed cockpit is deafening, even with the motor just idling. Dip the throttle and your eyeballs start dancing.

Commitment is needed to get the Elan moving cleanly as the clutch bites sharply and it's all too easy to let the revs die. Keeping the revs down until the gauges come up is difficult as it's clear early on that there is plenty of power on tap. What is also clear is that the engine has been put together superbly. It pulls cleanly and strongly right through to 8,000rpm. Lack of peakiness is exactly what is needed for a rally car where instant response is of the essence and speed out of the corners makes all the difference to stage times.

The gearchange has a lovely positive feel to it and you can slice the lever

## "keep going, it's built to take it"

through the 'box with barely any loss of momentum. On smooth tarmac the grip of the sticky Avon Formula Ford tyres is immense. In fact there is probably too much grip for the car's own good. If that seems a slightly preposterous concept it's simply that a rally car needs to be 'chuckable' and forgiving. The Elan is not overendowed in either respect and the margin between grip and total loss that the driver must work within is smaller than most drivers would find comfortable. On many smooth predictable roads the Elan will be unbeatable, but on stages being driven blind where it's difficult to be precise on entry line and apex, a car that can be drifted or thrown sideways more easily may well be quicker, in the right hands.

As we ate up the miles around Pembrey's excellent rallying roads and runways, the level of grip, even on the dust-covered and mud-encrusted sections continued to astonish me. In fact, the Elan demonstrated an alarming propensity to two-wheel round some corners although to an extent this reflects the compromise ride height for mixed surfaces. This forces the Elan to run higher than might always be optimum for best suspension behaviour and handling. Under hard acceleration the same tenacious grip was evident, while under braking I constantly had to reassess my braking points. Even on the loose I found time after time that I was hitting the middle pedal far too early.

On the sections where I was able to give the Elan its head, its speed was simply electrifying with the revs peaking in each gear. I savoured that wonderful sensation of a well-sorted car

responding instantly to each slight movement of the steering wheel. I winced as we hit bumps and potholes or flew across depressions in the runway. "Keep going, it's built to take it," said Paul Howcroft through the intercom: brave man, being driven in his own car for the first time!

To say that I enjoyed driving the Elan is an understatement. It is clearly a car of the highest calibre and the utmost potential. There is no secret to the Elan's success in Historic events; as the rules stand it is simply the best car for the job. Paul Howcroft may yet have only tapped part of his Elan's potential, but he is gaining experience with the car all the time.

Paul Howcroft and Simon Warner will be flying the Autostorica banner in all seven rounds of the 1989 European Historic Championship. The San Remo will be over by the time this story is published but this is followed by the *Coppa d'Italia* toward the end of April. Then there is the French Macon Rally in May, followed by the hugely enjoyable and well-organised Bavaria Trophy in June. The only domestic round is the Manx in September and then the season winds down with the Austrian *Alpen Fahrt* in October, followed by the *Rallye du Var* at the end of November.

Add to that all the events on the burgeoning domestic Historic Rally scene, plus the work associated with running Autostorica and you will gather that Paul Howcroft and Simon Warner have a pretty busy year in store. While others talk about tackling the European Championship, Paul and Simon have actually got on with the job and have two Championship trophies to show for their trouble. There seems no reason why they shouldn't make it three in a row this year and we wish them the best of luck.

**AUTOSTORICA. Tel: 04862 60549.** ☎



The Elan has exceptional grip but lets go quickly; Paul Howcroft kicks up the Pembrey dust to prove the point dramatically