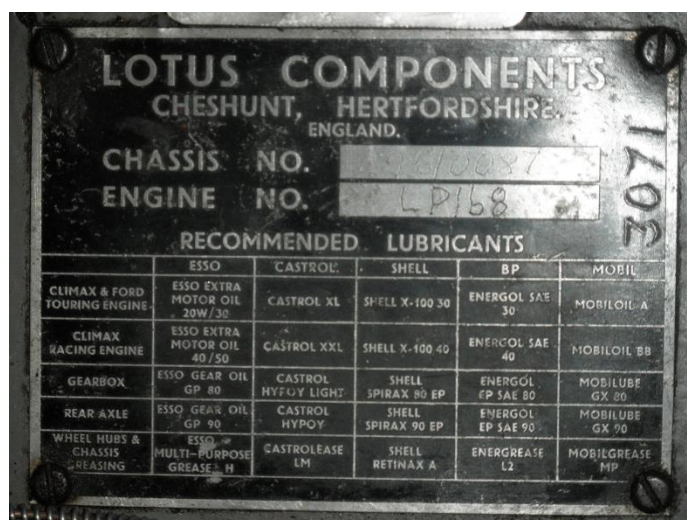




CLUB LOTUS ELAN SECTION



A very early Elan 1600 VIN plate, unusually issued by Lotus Components, for a car sold to David Buxton of Elite Cars, in June 1963. The Elan is still in use today

Lotus Elan VIN Systems, 1963 through 1974

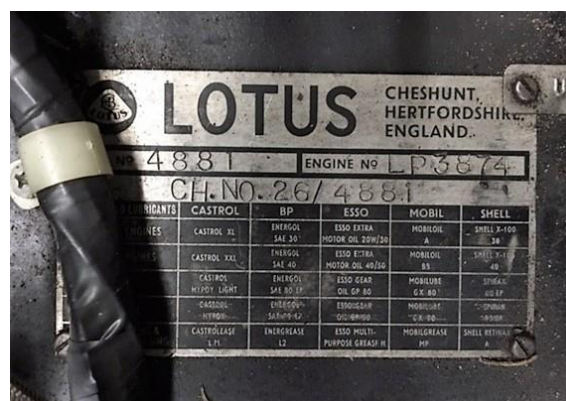
Lotus used two different Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) systems during Elan production. In the early days the system was complicated slightly by an initial lack of consistency. However, by the end of production matters had improved considerably. It has to be borne in mind that, especially in the early days, little thought was given to historical record keeping and what future generations might require from those records. It was not really until the late 1960s, with legislation and the onset of public ownership, that Lotus had to keep more detailed records than they had previously.

Sources of records for Elans are somewhat varied and haphazard. Unfortunately not all the original records have been kept or survived. There was a flood at Hethel in the late 1970s at the old airfield fire hut, where some of these records were kept. That resulted in a large hole for data amongst the Elan and Sprint records. Some of the record keeping during the 1967 move to Hethel from Cheshunt left a considerable number of lines of data either unfinished or absent. We have composed a full list of all the

Elans that were made, though some factory records have no data recorded against a few cars. Sales sheets exist for a small number of Elans, as do a few Works Order cards. Despatch Books and Radio Books provide other data. The dates that we have for Elans are the day on which the car was invoiced by the factory, in the vast majority of cases. We do have a few build dates for later cars. Efforts are now being made by the factory archivist and ourselves to rebuild Elan records, to capture as much of the missing data as we can. We welcome copies of all original factory documentation and information owners may have for their cars.

The Elan production comprised a number of series: the Elan 1600 (now referred to as the Series, or S1); the Series 2, the Series 3, the Series 4 and the Sprint (with a small number designated as Sprint/5 when fitted with the five speed gearbox). The S2, S3 & S4 were available as Standard or Special Equipment models. The +2 began life as such, then became the +2S, the Plus 2S, the Plus 2S 130 and lastly the Plus 2S 130/5

First System



The usual VIN plate issued by Lotus at Cheshunt, this for a Series 2 Elan that was sold to the US in July 1965. It was for sale as a non-runner in 2016

The VIN system in use from the introduction of the first production Type 26 Elan in 1963 through to the end of 1969 was based on the Type Number followed by the Unit Number, for example 26/4680. However, the very earliest Elan 1600s tended not to use the Unit No, but to use the Chassis Number instead. So it behoves us now to look at what numbers were used during this period.

Type Number – Fortunately this is one set of numbers that are consistent and simple! For Elans only four Types apply: 26 covers the Elan 1600 and the Series 2. Type 36 was used for the Fixed Head Coupe and 45 for the Drop Head Coupe versions of the Series 3, 4 and Sprint. The Type 50 covers all versions of the Elan +2. In the system we are looking at, each car tended to have its major numbers (but not the engine) prefixed with the Type No followed by a forward slash.

Unit Number – This is the key defining number for all Elans and for both systems. It is the number by which Lotus ordered the factory records and, for the sake of consistency, needs to be the number all owners use to identify their car by. Unit Nos consist of four digits and started at 0001. When they got to 0049, it was decided, for reasons that in all probability had to do with homologation of the car for racing, to add 3000 to the number, so car 50's Unit No became 3050. But the message appears to have taken a little while to go from the accounts department to the production line, since VIN plates attached to the cars took a while to show the 3#### system. These cars therefore had VIN plates which showed, for example, a unit number as 26/0123. The Unit No was first showed vertically at the side of the VIN plate. By around Unit No 3900 all Elans leaving the factory had the 3 inserted on their VIN plates.

Chassis Number – For the Elan 1600 the Chassis No can be easily confused with the Unit No, since the early VIN plates tended to show only the Chassis No. These early cars had different numbers for the Unit and the Chassis. The Chassis No did not reflect the jump to 3 in the first digit, either. This has subsequently led to confusion as to the identity of some of these cars. Fortunately, Lotus made it easier for us when, in May 1964, from Unit No 3602 all Chassis Nos matched Chassis Nos.

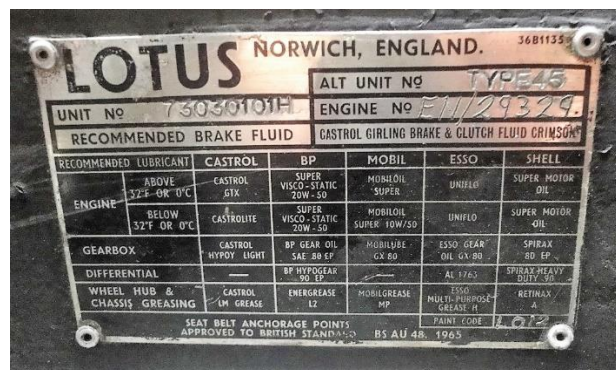
Body Number – These are funny old things! Body Nos were allocated to Elans, though not in any sequential sequence and seem to be related more to the number of times a body mould was used on the production line. However, we are not sure about that, so if anyone knows any better, please get in contact with us. In the October 2017 magazine our article concerned the Bourne bodied Elans. These were numbered and a tag in the engine compartment displayed that number. Thereafter the body number was not enumerated to view. They were crayoned onto the gel coat of the body in various places. They have been recorded on the transmission tunnel, the underside of the roof on FHCs, in the boot compartment and on the front valance. They may also be found on individual items, such as the boot, bonnet, headlight buckets and inside the two doors. This clearly enabled the body shop to assemble the relevant parts for a car before it progressed to the spray booth for painting.

Engine Number – To begin with all engines were preceded with the suffix LP, which appears to have stood for Lotus Power. This was then followed by the sequential number, starting from 1, for each engine. The number was allocated as the engine was completed at Lotus; it had no connection numerically with any car until it was recorded as having been fitted to a particular vehicle. In March 1968 the factory began to use a new system to delineate engine types. This coincided with the start of

in-house engine production at the new factory at Hethel. Below is a list of all the engine types fitted to Elans from that date on:

Engine Prefix	Engine Type & Market	Elan Application & Dates
C	SE Weber, Domestic & Export	Elan Sep 68 to Jan 71
D	Standard Weber, Domestic & Export	Elan Mar 68 to Dec 70
F	SE Weber, Domestic & Export	Plus 2 & S Jul 69
G	Stromberg Federal	Elan Jun 68 to Feb 72: Plus 2 Nov 68
H	Super SE Weber, Domestic	Elan Oct 68-Oct 70: Plus 2 Jun 68-Mar 69
I	Stromberg Federal	Plus 2 Mar 69 - Dec 72
K	Standard Stromberg, Domestic	Elan Dec 68 - Mar 71
L	SE Stromberg, Domestic	Elan Jan 69 - Mar 71: Plus 2 Apr 69
M	SE Stromberg, Domestic	Plus 2S Apr 68-Jan 71
N	Big Valve Weber, later Dellorto, Domestic	Sprint late 1970 on
P	Big Valve Weber, later Dellorto, Domestic	Plus 2S 130 Feb 71 on
T	Big Valve Stromberg, Federal	Sprint 71 on
U	Big Valve Stromberg, Federal	Plus 2S 71 on
W	Big Valve Stromberg, Federal	Elan 71 on: Plus 2 Fed on
EN	Big Valve Dellorto, European	Sprint 72 on
EP	Big Valve Dellorto, European	Plus 2S 130 72 on

System Two



A Lotus Hethel VIN plate for one of the very last Sprints produced fully built at the factory, showing the Unit, Engine, Type and Colour numbers. This car was exported to Portugal and is still in regular use today

From 1 January 1970 Lotus revised the way in which VINs were allocated and enumerated. This new system was probably introduced to comply with international conventions and to allow for more sophisticated internal procedures, commensurate with a publicly listed company and a maturing business.

The new VIN format was made up of a two digit year, two digit month and two digit batch number followed by the Unit No and a Type letter. An example would be 7003060034H

Year Number – For all Elans these years are simple, covering 1970 through to 1974, though of course they are shown as 70 through to 74

Month Number – Again, this is simple to understand. The example above would be for March 1970

Batch Number – The Batch No was a short-lived guest to the VIN party. It was only used during the 1970 and 1971 production years. The example above indicates Batch No 06. We are aware of a total of 24 batches in 1970 and of 29 in 1971. We have found no correlation between Batch Nos and total cars made per batch or any time related element to them either. The fact they were dropped after only two years would indicate that the factory found they did not aid their record keeping in any meaningful way.

Unit Number – All Unit Nos were reset to zero for the new system. The above example is thus Unit No 0034. On the face of it this might cause some confusion! However the key element to each Unit No now became the addition of a Type letter immediately after it.

Type Suffix Letter – It is the Type letter that delineates which variety of Elan the Unit No refers to. In our example the H refers to a Rest of the World Drop Head Coupe Special Equipment Elan. The table below gives the full list:

Suffix Letter	Elan Type
A	Standard Domestic FHC
B	Standard Export FHC
C	Standard Domestic DHC
D	Standard Export DHC
E	SE, later Sprint, Domestic FHC
F	SE, later Sprint, Export FHC
G	SE, later Sprint, Domestic DHC
H	SE, later Sprint, Export DHC
J	SE, later Sprint, Federal DHC
K	SE, later Sprint, Federal DHC

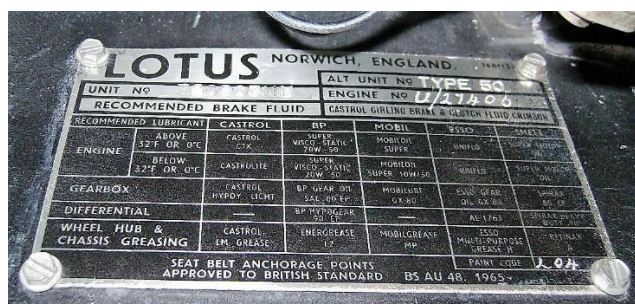
Engine Number – Under the second system Engine Nos continued with the system introduced in March 1968, as outlined above. In the records Engine Nos usually have an additional sequence of suffix letters, such as LBA. These indicate engine block cylinder bore thickness casting grade by Ford, giving an indication of how much the engine can be safely over-bored. They were used in both systems:

Suffix Letters	Notes
B	
LA	Good for bigger bore engines
LB	For lower end of range on 1558cc engines only

LBA	
LBB	
LAA	A block that met LA wall thickness specification but needed a re-bore to restore trueness. Usually found their way into racing programs. Very rare, mostly found in Ford's RS program

Colour Code – In the bottom right hand corner of the VIN plates produced after the November 1967 move to Hethel there appeared a box for the Lotus colour code to be entered. The list of colour codes and additional information on each colour was written about in detail by us in our July 2013 article for this magazine. We therefore do not intend tabulating them here. Lotus colour codes start with LO and then go in sequential numbering. Type 14s and early Elans did not have colour codes, though they were introduced very soon after the Elan launch. Colour Codes retained the same numbers throughout production.

Having reviewed the two VIN systems in use by Lotus for the Elan, it is worth looking at the types of VIN plate used during production. Essentially there were three types: Lotus Components, Cheshunt and Norwich. The rarest to find is the Lotus Components plate. Components were the race car department at the factory, though they also largely produced the Lotus 7. They also put together development, or prototype, cars when new versions were required. Essentially they were a specialist low volume production facility. Early Elans and +2s can be found with Components plates and of course all Type 26R racing Elans had these plates too.



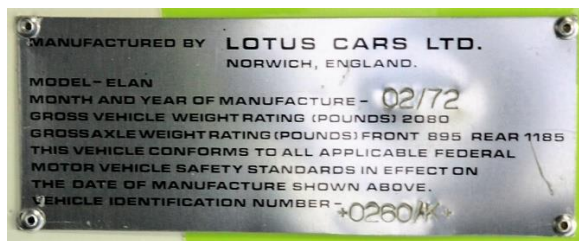
Federal Plus 2S 130 VIN plate

It is therefore more usual to find Elans produced from January 1963 until November 1967 with the Cheshunt plate. In addition to a table containing recommended oil and lubricant brands for racing and touring engines, the gearbox, differential and wheel hubs and chassis greasing, there were windows for the Unit No and the Engine No.

When the factory moved from Cheshunt to Hethel, the VIN plate was changed. A few Cheshunt plates appeared to have been used up by the production line in Norfolk during the early days there. The new

plate stated that Lotus was based in Norwich, England, a departure from the Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, England of the old style. Again the lubrication table was there, though this time the engine was not differentiated. There was an additional statement concerning the British Standard for seat belt mountings and windows for the Unit No, Engine No and Paint Code. Later plates, from around late 1972 onwards, also had an additional window for the Alt Unit No, though we have never seen the alternator number filled in, other than with the Type No.

The VIN plates tended to be fixed in place by rivets. However, some original examples have been seen fitted in with cross headed self-taping screws. Several methods of scribing the data onto the plate were used. There appear to be no hard and fast rules about what was used, when. In general, the Cheshunt plates were hand scribed, whilst the Unit No on Norwich plates were stamped, with the Engine No and Colour Code hand scribed. Another element we have noted is that in general factory completed cars had the Unit and Engine Nos filled in, whilst component cars had only the Unit No shown. We would however point out that this is not a guaranteed way to tell how a car left the factory.



Federal conformation plate, found on the driver's side door jamb



Federal windscreen VIN plate

The VIN plate was always positioned on the horizontal surface against the engine bulkhead, close to the engine thermostat housing on the Elan. On +2s the plate was fixed on the sloping surface inside the engine compartment above the exhaust side front tyre. In some other markets additional plates became required fitting during the Elans production. In North America a Chassis No had to be shown in addition to the Unit No. This tended to be scribed under the Unit/Engine windows on the Cheshunt plates. By the time the Norwich plate was in use, Federal cars had to show three additional plates. One was a small black strip fitted inside the front windscreen on the driver's side, showing the Unit No. The other was an aluminium plate fitted to the driver's door jamb, showing that the car conformed to safety standards, stated the weights and showed the month and year of manufacture, as well as the Unit No and suffix letter. The third plate showed emissions conformity information and was fitted, upside down so as to be read by a person standing looking in, on the vertical surface inside the engine compartment alongside the air box housing.



Federal emissions conformity plate



A German Sprint showing the two additional plates required for that territory

In Germany there was a requirement to show two additional plates. The first was a small plate with windows for weights, Unit & Engine Nos and vehicle type. The second was a small strip for the Unit No. These plates were fitted, again upside down for easy reading, inside the engine compartment on the vertical side close to the air box.

In addition to the data outlined above, in the UK we have an additional helpful resource, the registration plates. From the registration number we can find the date of issue and the registration office that issued the number. The date is often close to the invoice date and gives us an indication of when the first owner took delivery from the dealer. The last two letters of the registration number give us the registration office. This can sometimes give us a closer idea of which dealer may have handled the sale.



Dyno tape location showing the Body No

On some Elans there are other markings or numbers to be found, which can be either confusing or helpful! The most notable and helpful is a Dyno tape four digit number, placed on the engine bulkhead close to the voltage regulator. This is the Body No. As often as not the tape has, over time, become detached or painted over. Another Dyno tape can sometimes be found, often on the inside of doors, again of four digits, though two separated by a dash. We believe these to be related to moulds but are not certain as to their true purpose. They are therefore firmly in the confusing category for the time being!



The perplexing Dyno tape number, thought to be related to body moulds

We have now looked at all the various numbers associated with Elan production. They might appear at first to be confusing and numerous. However, they are helpful in letting us determine correct identities of cars, in assessing changes during production and in gathering data on individual cars that we otherwise lack. Thus their importance is great and we should do all we can to continue to gather and assess this data, for the benefit of future owners and marque historians.

Contact Us

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