



CLUB LOTUS ELAN SECTION

Around the Bend with Wheels

As promised in the last issue, we now turn our attention from gear knobs to Elan steering wheels. Whatever the attraction is, we believe most of us have an affinity and affection for our car's steering wheel in particular. For some owners the original item is too large, too dangerous, too slim or too uncomfortable and so they find ready alternatives from the replacement market. The Mota-Lita Elan specific leather covered 13 inch wheel is especially popular and readily available.

For other owners only the original item will do. Lotus supplied a variety of different styles of steering wheel throughout Elan and Plus 2 production and we thought it would be illuminating to examine what was fitted to which car and when. As we have often said before, with Lotus in the 60s and 70s nothing can be exactly pinned down and we know there are some exceptions to the rule. However, we have had a crack at it below.

The firm of PD Springall Ltd was the steering wheel supplier to Lotus throughout Elan and Plus 2 production. Peter Springall founded the company in 1957 in a small workshop behind the Railway Hotel, Hornsey close to Lotus. He made steering wheels for the Elite and S2 Lotus 7 and by 1960 had three men working for him, necessitating a move to a larger factory in Hitchin. These early wheels had wood rims but by 1962 leather had become more popular. In addition to Lotus, Springall supplied steering wheels to the Mini Cooper works cars, Ford AVO cars and the Brabham F1 team. 1965 proved a busy and remarkable year for the firm. Springall wheels steered Jim Clark's F1, F2 and Indy championship cars; they were OEM fitment to Elans, Sevens, Lotus Cortina's and several other sports car makes. In 1966 Springall entered into a marketing agreement for Alexander Engineering to be their sales agent and the Springalex name was born.

In the table below we have listed the key types of steering wheel supplied by Springall for fitment by Lotus. We have also included a photo of most types to help identification.

Car	Diameter	Covering	Spokes	Boss & Horn Style/Badge Colour	Notes	Photo No.
S1 Elan	15"	Wood with rivet grips; later open grips	Slots, brushed aluminium	Top Hat/Yellow	Small number of early cars had spokes at 12, 4 and 8 o'clock. Also fitted to Lotus Cortina	1
S2 Elan	15"	Wood (Beech)	Slots, brushed aluminium	Top Hat/Yellow	26R was fitted with a 13" leather covered wheel with slots	2

S2 Elan SE	15"	Leather (Black)	Slots, brushed aluminium	Top Hat/Yellow	Also fitted to Lotus Cortina SE but with a deeper dish and different boss	3
S3 Elan	15"	Wood (Beech)	Slots, brushed aluminium	Top Hat/Yellow	Small number of late cars fitted with SE wheel below	2
S3 Elan SE	15"	Leather (Black)	Slots, brushed aluminium; later 4 holes with signature as below	Top Hat/Yellow, later black	Last six months of production fitted with wheel below	3
S4 Elan	14"	PVC (Black)	4 Holes, brushed aluminium, signature, leather spats cover smallest hole	Top Hat/Black	Also fitted to Europa & S4 Seven, no signature, leather spats cover smallest hole	4
S4 Elan SE	14"	Leather (Black)	4 Holes, brushed aluminium, signature	Top Hat/Black		5
Elan Sprint	14"	PVC (Black)	4 Holes, brushed aluminium, signature, leather spats cover smallest hole	Ash Tray/Black mottled surround, later lines	Small number of early cars fitted with S4 wheels of both varieties and the top hat boss	6
+2 & +2S	15"	PVC (Black)	4 Holes, brushed aluminium, leather spats cover smallest hole	Top Hat/Black	Some earlier wheels have signature	7
Plus 2 130	15"	Leather (Black)	4 Holes, signature, black, no spats	Ash Tray/Black mottled surround, later lines surround		8

The steering wheel diameters were considered large by the late 1960s and many Lotus wheels were replaced with smaller types by owners. This accounts for the rarity of original wheels now. The second-hand values of good condition Elan steering wheels of all styles leads us to consider them a safer haven than gold! The wooden wheels were potentially lethal; they had no steel rim inside the wood, the spokes being screwed to the wood. In an accident, or even when pushing the car and using the wheel, they had a propensity to shatter rather alarmingly. The introduction of the S2 Elan coincided with the increased popularity of leather wheels, where the steel rim was covered with closed-cell foam, which in turn was covered in black leather. These wheels have a delightful feel to them as the foam padding was minimal, ensuring a slimmer feel compared to other makes of wheel.

Alongside the success of Mini Coopers in competition, which were fitted with Springall wheels with holes drilled in the spokes, many 1960s car owners started to fit replacement steering wheels with similar styles in their cars. It was therefore not surprising when Lotus chose the sporting Springall offering for the S3 SE when it was introduced and thus set the styling precedent for the subsequent Lotus wheels. In fact, the same brushed aluminium rim with 4 drilled holes in the spokes remained the basis for the Elan wheel. It was the use of leather or PVC, whether small leather spats covered the smallest hole or not and whether the downward spoke had Colin Chapman's signature engraved in or not and diameter that differentiated steering wheels.

With the introduction of the +2S PVC was used as a covering for the first time, probably for cost reduction reasons. The PVC was applied around the closed-cell foam padding and then heat welded around the inside, with a single vertical seam welded at the six o'clock position. Over time the welded seam tended to become brittle and split, proving impossible (so far!) to repair effectively. Many owners have thus had their wheels recovered in leather. The PVC had a tendency to spill over onto each spoke when it was being applied. In an effort to cover this, small leather-covered spring clips or spats were used to enclose the spoke by the smallest hole, closest to where the spoke met the wheel rim. These spats were not necessary for the leather covered wheels. The later Plus 2 S/130 was fitted with the 15" rim with black anodised spokes and a leather rim.

The style of central securing boss and horn push also changed with different Elan versions. For the sake of brevity we have distinguished them as the 'top hat' and the 'ashtray'. The former stands proud of the wheel centre and gently rises to meet the edge of the horn push. The latter, introduced in late 1971, is flatter but wider in design; the Lotus emblem being a smaller part of the horn push and surrounded with a mottled rim, later changed to radiating lines. The font for the word Lotus was changed from the normal badges Informa SC Medium to ITC New Espirit Black at the same time.

Wheels for the Lotus Cortina, Lotus Seven and Europa all differed slightly from the above. For example, the Lotus Cortina wheel was more deeply dished and the Europa wheel had an external boss fixing ring surrounding the horn push. In general terms, it was only the Elan that had wheels with Colin Chapman's signature engraved on them. Why this should be is not known and the only correlation we can find is that on Springall after-market replacement steering wheels they placed their small blue logo in the same place, at the top of the downward spoke. However, this does not explain the signature exclusion from other Lotus models. There is something very fine about driving the Elan with that iconic signature sitting on the wheel.

Contact Us

Tim Wilkes and Mark Kempson can be contacted via email at elansection@clublotus.co.uk or via Club HQ by post or on 07720 288100

Photos:



