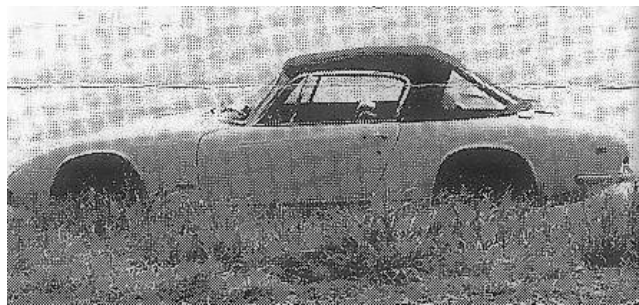




CLUB LOTUS ELAN SECTION



The Elan Plus 2 Drop Head Coupe Versions

Having reviewed some of the specials produced for the Elan and Plus 2, notably the Shapecraft Elan, Hexagon Elan Estate and Plus 2 Estate versions in previous magazine articles, we thought in this offering we would look at the conversions of the Plus 2 to Drop Head configuration.

The Lotus Policy Committee had always intended that the Plus 2 would one day be made as a convertible by the factory, if there was demand from the market. In the event, as we are aware, Lotus never did put a convertible Plus 2 into production, but others did. The first was London dealer Hexagon of Highgate in 1972. It was not until the mid 1980s that the next two firms, Christopher Neil and The Classic Transport Company, introduced their take on the Plus 2 convertible.

The Hexagon Drophead



Hexagon were quick to spot the potential for a DHC version of the Plus 2

Hexagon were an active and successful Lotus dealer, run then by the effervescent Paul Michaels, as it is still today. With his inventive mind, Michaels came up with two versions of the then current Lotus offering, the Elan Estate, better known now as the Elanbulance and the Plus 2S Drophead. We are aware of two such cars, both still in existence in private ownership.



The two Hexagon Plus 2S Drophead conversions at Castle Combe in 2018

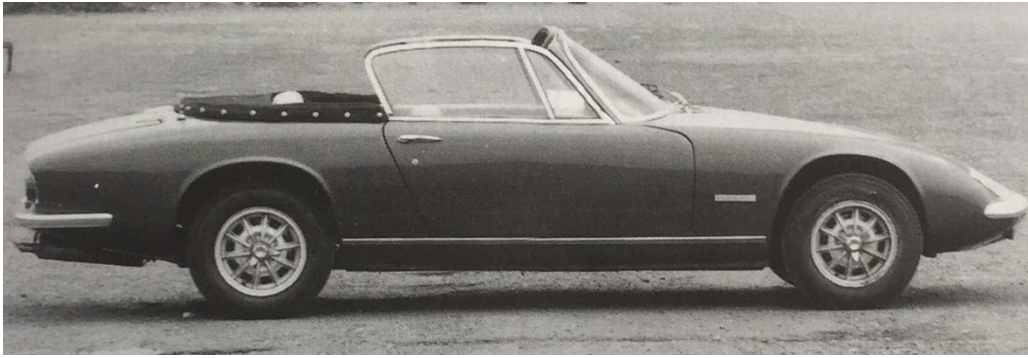
A Duracol fabric hood sat on the steel structure that formed the roof support. The windscreen surround incorporated strengthening steel supports and the header rail, incorporating three over arch levers, dropped down directly onto the windscreen fibreglass top. As far as we are aware, these conversions were carried out on cars already road registered and in Hexagon stock at the time.



The Hexagon folding roof mechanism exposed

In a well-produced brochure, Hexagon explained that the roof line of their conversion allowed for better headroom than in the normal car, as well as excellent rear vision through the three window panels of the hood. With the hood up the handsome profile of the Plus 2 was retained. However, with the roof folded down rear vision was affected by the somewhat bulky folding hood side supports which, unable to fold entirely flat, meant that the profile of the car was not as neat as subsequent conversions.

The Classic Transport Company Drop Head Coupe



This photo of the Classic Transport Company Plus 2 Convertible demonstrator shows off the neat lines of the folded roof

Guy Griffiths owned the Classic Transport Company, which was based in Cannock, Staffordshire. His business specialised in sales, servicing and bodywork for early Lotus cars. He described his Plus 2 DHC conversion as 'quite simply the finest vehicle of its type available.' Introduced in 1984, his conversion was said to be of the highest standard, with impressive care taken in the work carried out.

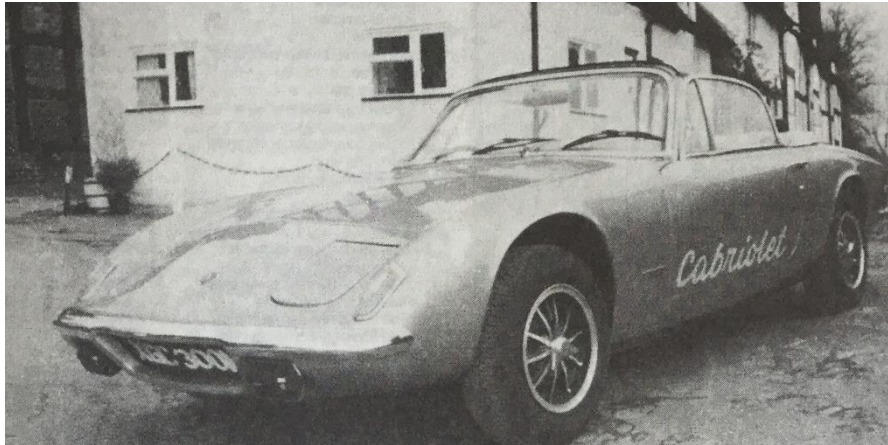
It is perhaps significant that Griffiths referred to his version as a DHC, for the shape and workings of his hood closely match that of the Elan DHC. For example, he utilised D section tubes for the roof bows, of which there were four. In addition two tubes ran parallel to the top of each side window frame, to clip under a raised button on each end of the windscreen top frame, which incorporated an aluminium strip along its length, into which the front end of the roof was secured, in the same way as in the Elan DHC. The structure was hinged at each side and the bows and tubes folded flat against the hood tray behind the rear seats, the hood fabric then being folded on top. When secured by the half tonneau, the car had a similar neat appearance to the Elan with its hood folded down.



The neat arrangement of the Classic Transport Company roof mechanism and the windscreen header

In carrying out the conversion Griffiths was careful to ensure the structure of the car remained rigid. He incorporated steel stiffeners around the windscreen, behind the dashboard and around the door openings. It is not known how many Plus 2s were converted by Griffiths and his craftsmen, but it was not a large number. We have records of four cars.

The Christopher Neil Cabriolet



The Christopher Neil Cabriolet was a popular conversion; about 100 cars are known to have had the treatment

Christopher Neil had built a large business based on Lotus cars, in time becoming an authorised dealer. In the early 1980s the two founders of the Cheshire based business, Christopher Dunscombe and Neil Shepherdson, were enthusiastic Elan owners and suppliers of parts for twin-cam engined Lotus. They later spotted a niche in the marketplace for a 'new' Elan with the CN Sprint. However, in 1984 they introduced their CN Cabriolet version of the Plus 2. More often than not these conversions used double-duck hood material and were braced by an up and over frame, which locked into the screen moulding via a forward facing U section aluminium strip. The profile with the hood erected looked the same as the fixed head version and, with the hood folded away flat behind the rear seats, presented a handsome profile.

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The advertisement ran by Christopher Neil to promote their cabriolet conversion

The CN Cabriolet proved to be popular and many still exist. The demonstrator was also fitted with a Sierra 5 speed gearbox as well as electrically operated headlamps, both offerings from the fertile minds of the eponymous founders.



This conversion has removed the side window frames, giving an even cleaner look with the hood down

Others

A number of private owners carried out their own conversions to their Plus 2s and it is known that Christopher Neil would sell their conversion as a kit. Presumably you supplied your own angle grinder! We have seen photos of two Plus 2s converted to targa roof styles. We know nothing more about these cars and would welcome any additional information members may have. Incidentally, we also know of one Elan FHC that was converted to a targa top, by Spanish coachbuilder Emilio Garcia, of EG Autocraft. Well known Lotus dealer Bell & Colvill had seen the car in 1972, when Garcia worked for them in race preparation, claiming it to be 'very satisfying'. It is not known to exist now.



To our eyes these targa conversions, which appear to have been carried out quite competently, have mitigated the fine lines of the original car

Some folk query the ability of the Plus 2 to withstand the structural changes of a drop head conversion, yet remain as stiffly rigid as with the roof still on. To this end it is interesting to note that, in research carried out by Cranfield Institute of Technology for Christopher Neil in 1986, it was reported that 'the structural characteristics of the Elan Plus 2 Cabriolet chassis/body combination for normal running loads are more than adequate' and that 'the bending stiffness of the chassis/body combination of the Plus 2 is almost as good as that for the Elan drophead.' We must assume they investigated a car that

had new side sill members recently fitted, since they partially assume responsibility for that stiffness. It would appear prudent to reinforce the scuttle area as well as the A pillars, not only to increase stiffness, but also to reduce scuttle shake.

With the provision of a suitable soft top hood, frame and hood tray, the work needed to be carried out includes cutting the body some three inches back from the windscreen and one inch up the B pillar, adding steel bar reinforcements around the windscreen and behind the dashboard, then boxing in the rear quarter panels to link the outer body to the inner as well as around the bulkhead, to aid stiffness further. Another area that can be addressed is to add bracing to the steering column, again in an effort to reduce scuttle shake.

There are some who decry chopping off the roof of a perfectly good Elan Plus 2, yet it can provide an owner with a four seat express, capable of long distances, with the added opportunity to enjoy the wind in their hair that an ordinary saloon or coupe may not. We feel that a well-executed DHC conversion of the Plus 2 detracts little from the integrity of the car and adds another dimension to the driving experience of these wonderful cars.

Afternote from Susan Miller: I was just riffling through your Elan article in Issue3 2019 when I saw you mentioned an Elan rebuilt by Emilio Garcia. We owned that car on two separate occasions in the 1980's. It was a targa top then and we nicknamed it The Animal because it handled so badly! It had a great number of Alpha parts, including lamps, cut-down +2 walnut dashboard and odd seats with headrests. Mick traced Emilio who by then was apparently living in Wales and got the impression that he had crashed it; it was going to be expensive to repair to originality so he decided radically to alter it. Bell & Colville were also Alpha dealers, as well as Lotus, hence all the Alpha parts. The body was, as I remember, some 10 inches wider than normal, but still on an original chassis. We sold it to a local customer who fell in love with it and drove it for several years. He wanted a convertible, so we altered the body to accept a hood and hood frame and did away with the targa top; but I don't think he ever got around to having frame and hood custom-made. Then he went through a mid-life crisis, losing interest in cars but becoming obsessed with big motor bikes. We bought The Animal back and his Europa Special; we kept the Europa but finance wouldn't allow us to keep The Animal as well. We eventually sold it to a young man from the Liverpool area who drove it home from Suffolk with no hood, the week before Christmas. Since when I have lost track of it. Somewhere I have a photo, but probably not showing the registration number, which I can't remember. I will see if I can find the photo and send it on.

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