

Doppelgänger

In 1981, Lotus' Essex Turbo Esprit came to America—or did it?



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN TEGLER

In 1980, Colin Chapman's Team Lotus was the most successful unit in Grand Prix history. Mario Andretti's 1978 world championship in the dominating Type 79 brought the team its sixth driver and seventh constructor titles. Awareness of the brand in America had never been higher. But Andretti's success couldn't persuade Team Lotus' longtime sponsor, Imperial Tobacco (John Players Special), to continue, and a replacement was needed. In the clinch, Chapman signed Essex Petroleum to a full sponsorship for 1980.

David Thieme, the company's flamboyant CEO, amassed a considerable fortune buying oil cheap and selling where demand was high. Auto racing was his passion, and Team Lotus was his main indulgence. The Essex F1 party at London's Royal Albert Hall in late 1979 was the most extravagant affair Formula One had ever seen. Chapman and Thieme were joined by drivers Andretti and Elio de Angelis and the Lotus Type 80. But there were other Lotus stars that evening. Three prototype Esprit Turbos were on hand in Essex livery. These were the first Esprit Turbos, the Essex Commemorative Esprits.

Racing success benefited the Norfolk-based manufacturer, but the launch of the Esprit in late 1975 had also caused a sensation. Styled by Giorgetto Giugiaro, it was first seen on his ItalDesign stand



The M72 Esprit's backbone chassis was galvanized, stiffened and widened to accommodate a new rear suspension, but—secretly—it also made way for an eventual V-8 engine.

at the 1972 Turin Motor Show. The initial 1970 design, known as "M70," was crafted by Lotus technical director Tony Rudd. It was to be a replacement for the somewhat awkward Europa, a more exotic flagship which Chapman felt would bolster Lotus' image and the meager profits derived from the company's late '60s lineup.

The M70's design was finalized in late 1973. In keeping with Lotus' practice of giving their machines names beginning with the letter "E," the new sports car was dubbed "Esprit." Slow sales of existing models and the oil-driven economic recession of the early 1970s thinned Lotus' checkbook, delaying the launch of the Esprit by almost a year and frustrating clients.

Finally in production by mid-1976, the car was simultaneously praised and criticized. The motoring press extolled the mid-engined Esprit's styling and handling but balked at its high price (£7,885, or \$14,193) and lack of power. The 160hp/140-lbs.ft. of torque from the S1's four was comparatively meager (contemporary Ferrari 308 GTBs claimed 255hp), earning the Esprit a reputation as a machine with an "exotic car price tag," lacking "exotic car performance." Reliability problems, an annoying boom at certain rpm, steering vibration and a "kit-car" image also dogged the S1. Still, publicity gained from the car's underwater heroics in the 1977 film, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, made it a kind of global celeb-



Giugiaro's ItalDesign provided the styling, which was primarily guided by aerodynamics.

ity. Sales in the U.S. were strong.

Chapman and Lotus were aware of the criticisms. Their answer was the Turbo Esprit. But their response came slowly. The S2, appearing in August 1978, was an interim step. Changes were primarily cosmetic, including Esprit decals, new seats, interior instruments, a digital clock, redesigned air intakes behind the quarter windows and a more attractive front spoiler. Speedline wheels replaced the Wolfrace rims. The Esprit's "exotic" character was slightly dimmed again when Lotus sourced new taillamps for the S2. Unmistakable units from the Rover SD1 now stared at following motorists. Power was unchanged, but new camshafts and tuning of the 2.0-liter four for more mid-range grunt yielded better 0-60 times (eight seconds, down from 8.5 for the S1) and a top speed of 130 mph. However, as performance increased, so did the price. The S2 sold for £11,125 (\$21,694).

Enthusiasts and the press still considered the S2 a high-dollar sports coupe, not a supercar. Surely, Lotus and its charismatic founder would put things right. But why was it taking so long?

Part of the answer stems from Chapman's involvement with John Z. DeLorean. DeLorean had contracted with Lotus for development work on his infamous DMC-12. Lotus adapted many of the Esprit's chassis and suspension design elements to the DMC-12 and made considerable efforts to prepare a Renault V-6-powered prototype for production. The result was a two-year distraction. Prosecuted for cocaine trafficking, but exonerated, DeLorean lost his company and his reputation. Chapman's association with the tarnished executive also dented his reputation.

Nevertheless, as work proceeded on the DeLorean, Lotus understood the urgency of providing the Esprit with the power and refinement necessary to make it a true supercar. There was another problem, however. Funds for development were in short supply. But according to noted Lotus chronicler Jeremy Walton, in his book, *Lotus Esprit: The Complete Story*, the arrival of Essex Petroleum and David



Styling and handling were the Esprit's calling cards, but the astronomical price tag and the lack of power had Americans concerned. The Turbo cured that early wariness.

Thieme changed the equation. Money from the Essex Team Lotus sponsorship was skimmed to bolster development of the Turbo Esprit.

The appearance of the Essex Esprits at Albert Hall marked the debut of what was essentially a new Esprit, the M72. The redesign had been extensive, starting with the Esprit's T-shaped steel backbone chassis. The frame was galvanized, made more rigid and widened to accommodate a new rear suspension, but also, secretly, to provide enough space for an eventual Lotus V-8.

Styling was again the province of Giugiaro's ItalDesign. Bodyshell changes were primarily guided by aerodynamics and functionality. Wraparound bumpers, nose and tail air dams and deep aerodynamic side sills were fine-tuned by Lotus to reduce front- and rear-end lift. NACA ducts in the side sills provide cool air to the engine bay, while a new fiberglass engine cover with air vents matching the horizontal slats on the tailgate allows hot air to escape.

The all-aluminum 907 engine underwent a complete redesign to become the new Type 910. Displacement was increased to 2.2 liters (a naturally aspirated version, the Type 912, powered the Esprit S2.2, a

car which the Turbo's simultaneous debut overshadowed) and a long-throw crank with a 95.29 x 76.2mm bore and stroke augmented low-speed torque. Dry sump lubrication was chosen to deal with the higher cornering and braking loads the M72 was expected to generate.

Ingeniously, the Type 910's twin Dell'Orto carbs were mounted downstream from the engine's Garrett AiResearch TO3 turbocharger. The turbo itself sits above the bell



Born out of Wedlock

The buzz created by the Essex Commemorative Esprit Turbo hadn't gone unnoticed in the U.S.A. Finally, there was a British supercar with performance that matched or surpassed offerings from Ferrari, Porsche and Lamborghini.

But the M72 was not being offered in the U.S. Still, all was not lost for Americans. A "gray market" for exotics had been growing through the late 1970s. Californian Jim Loose was among those who specialized in acquiring and "federalizing" gray market cars for customers.

The original owner of Bill Bonta's 1981 M72 was one of Loose's clients. He had lusted after an Essex for some time. When he learned that Loose had imported one car already, he visited the dealer in California and ordered his own. He paid Loose well in excess of \$50,000 for the Turbo, but had chronic problems with his dream car. The romance died, and he sold it to Bonta. This much was known as we began this feature, but the plot would thicken.

With help from Clive Chapman (Chapman's son), Esprit authorities Stephen Tryner (custodian of Club Lotus' Essex Register) and author Jeremy Walton (*Lotus Esprit, The Official Story*, Coterie Press), and Lotus Group PLC itself, we learned that the three cars that came to America are not Essexes—at least not according to the manufacturer.

Lotus' murky archives reveal that despite the official claim that "100" special Essex Commemorative Esprit Turbos were to be



made, only 34 production examples were ever screwed together. Domestic right-hand-drive production begins with chassis 003 and runs consecutively through chassis 025 for a total of 23 genuine U.K. Essexes. Left-hand-drive or export Essexes have the following arbitrary chassis numbers—301, 002, 004, 005, 007, 306, 100, 308, and a final three listed as 026, 029 and 100. So a total of 11 export versions left the factory.

Supplied with Bonta's VIN, we were able to confirm that his car did not leave the factory as an Essex Turbo. According to Lotus, "Our investigations show that three white European Turbo vehicles were supplied to a dealer (Edgar Schwyn) in Switzerland. One of these vehicles was identified as being the car in your correspondence. There is also evidence of several sets of Essex decals being supplied to the same Swiss dealer. The build records state that this car left the factory in June 1981 as a white Turbo Esprit. As far as Lotus is concerned, we did not produce any U.S.A. Essex Turbo vehicles."

In 1980-'81, Lotus was desperate to sell cars (1980 total production, 383 cars; 1981, 345). Supplying paint, striping and decals to satisfy one of its dealers was easily done. Apparently, these American M72s reached Loose via Schwyn. It's unknown whether the cars were finished in Switzerland or California.

So if the American Essexes are not the real McCoy, what are they? Bonta's numbers-matching car is a genuine Esprit Turbo and one of the earliest/rarest M72s, to boot. But it also has every piece of optional equipment specific to the Essex, from its dry-sump engine to the special Essex interior complete with the unobtainable Panasonic overhead stereo unit. As far as we can tell, the only difference is Lotus' definition.

If the cars left the factory complete, they are Essex Commemorative Esprit Turbos; if not, they something else—in this case, doppelgängers.



It's good that it's a mid-engine; the steeply raked nose doesn't allow much engine room.

housing behind the engine block. It's the reverse of the conventional turbo setup wherein the compressor sucks a mixture from the carburetors. Here, the turbo blows air, boosted to a peak 8.0 p.s.i. above atmospheric pressure, through the Dell'Ortos. To compensate, compression was reduced to 7.5:1 from the N/A version's 9.4:1. The unique configuration helped minimize turbo lag and increase throttle response and fuel economy. Power and torque soared to new heights, with factory ratings of 210hp at 6,000 rpm and 200-lbs.ft. of torque at 4,000 rpm.

Other enhancements include a revised camshaft profile, pistons with shallow bowls and thick crowns to assist in heat dissipation and sodium-filled exhaust valves with hardened valve seats. The Citroën-Maserati five-speed gearbox was retained, but a larger 9.5-inch clutch replaced the standard Esprit 8.5-inch disc. The M72 also got beefier three-piece, 15-inch Compomotive alloys, surrounded by Goodyear NCTs. Finally, brake size was increased, with non-ventilated 10.4-inch discs in front and 10.8-inch inboard discs at the rear.

Again, the price of admission was high (£20,900/\$50,200) for the new car when it went to dealers in August 1980. But performance finally matched the price tag. Factory figures claimed 5.6 seconds to 60 mph, and the quarter mile in 14.4 seconds. Hand-timed 0-60 runs in the January 1981 *Road & Track* clicked off in 6.2 seconds. A June 1980 *Autocar* review listed top speed as 155 mph. Cornering and braking were much improved, with reviewers praising the Essex's grip and stopping power.

Ironically, when the Esprit finally realized its potential, it was not available in America. Development work to federalize the Esprit Turbo was reportedly completed in the summer of 1980, but Lotus decided not to sell the new car in its most lucrative market. Three years would pass before the Esprit Turbo was offered stateside.

William Bonta of Phoenix, Maryland, is the second owner of this 1981 "American Essex." He initially spotted the car in an ad in 1985, but he wasn't ready to buy. A year later, the car turned up again, and he pounced. "The light weight and superb handling drew me," said Bonta.



The Turbo pushed the Esprit into supercar territory, with a top speed of 155 mph.

Its limits can only safely be explored at the track.



By 1980, the Esprit had reached its potential: Zero to 60 times had plummeted to 5.6 seconds, and the quarter mile came in 14.4 seconds.



William Bonta bought the Esprit from the second owner, not sure it was an Essex.

The car's interior is replete with all the special Essex equipment, and matches its showy exterior. Essex red is abundant. From its leather upholstered seats and doors to its vinyl-covered dash, the cabin is awash in color. Entry requires a minimum of gymnastics, and once seated, the leather buckets are surprisingly comfortable. Some might feel a bit cramped by the high center tunnel, but to us, it felt fine. You face a winged instrument cluster containing gauges for oil, water and boost, together with a 7,000-rpm tach and 170-mph speedometer. The center console houses the wood veneer-topped shifter, HVAC controls and a choke. Overhead, the Essex-specific Panasonic RM610 stereo is a bit awkward but provides satisfactory sound.

Rowing up through the five-speed box requires attention the first time, but the gears are relatively easy to locate. Throws are slightly long by modern standards but not bad for a car of the era. Bonta recently replaced all the rubber on the car, including bushings and shift linkage boots. Shifts are commendably smooth but cannot be hurried, with clutch engagement working

best at a measured pace. Still, pedal placement is good for heel-and-toeing, and the free-revving 2.2 provides plenty of power even off-boost. The turbo is well mannered, particularly for a car of the era. It comes online smoothly with little lag, and provides grin-inducing thrust. The boost can bite on downshifts at high rpm entering a corner, kicking the tail out. But once aware of this trait, the driver can compensate.

Bending Bonta's M72 through the corners of the tight two-lanes near his home is pure fun. The Esprit is in its element, its light weight and tractable power working as well here as on winding English country lanes. Understeer is present but progressive, and some body-roll is noticeable, but it's all relative; the Esprit can be cornered astonishingly hard. Its limits can only safely be explored at the track. Braking is more than adequate for the car's 2,690 pounds; however, fade is apparent with repeated hard use.

A charming or disconcerting feature, depending on your perspective, is the audible lift-throttle chirping from the wastegate. The noise arises from a venturi effect as the

wastegate alleviates back pressure from the turbo. We liked it. Together with the measured rasp of the exhaust, it gives the coupe an exotic sound.

Lotus made its reputation as a manufacturer building stylish, lightweight sports cars with terrific handling, but the M72 goes further. Visibility exceeds that of almost any exotic, while ride quality matches or betters modern sports cars. Surprisingly, this earliest Esprit Turbo is a car that can be driven hard or cruised on the highway equally well, a huge step up in performance and refinement over the original Esprit.

Despite Lotus' secret V-8, the Esprit would continue on in the same configuration until 1996, when a 3.5-liter twin-turbo V-8 was dropped into the wedge-shaped classic's engine bay. Production came to an end in 2004, with less than 11,000 examples having been built. The Essex Commemorative Esprit Turbo began a 16-year tradition of boosted Esprits, and is a prized rarity.

But are the American Essexes what they appear to be? After painstaking research, the answer is.... No! (see Born out of Wedlock)