

Ian Bennett

## Feature Sample

Title *Restoring Rochdale's Pride*  
Pages 4  
Publication Qv  
Type *Lifestyle Magazine*  
Publisher *ACE Corporate Editions*  
Words *Ian Bennett*  
Photography *Ian Bennett*

---

Feature researched, written and photographed for the launch issue of a new lifestyle magazine.

The feature centres on a charismatic restoration facility housed in a former chicken shed on a farm where specialist Rochdale Olympic cars are restored, racing cars designed and built - and parts for Airbus produced!

---

*Note:*

*This feature is provided as an example of Ian Bennett / Vic Marelle writing and photography only. The feature is fully copyright protected and may not be reproduced in any way, whether words or images, in whole or in part, without the written permission of Ian Bennett*

# Restoring Rochdale's pride

The story of

ground breaking technology, a chicken shed, and Airbus

UTTER THE WORDS 'GLASS FIBRE MONOCOQUE' and any self confessed petrolhead is absolutely guaranteed to respond with the equally iconic model name, Lotus Elite. Some might even show off their extensive anorak knowledge by adding that high manufacturing costs killed the Elite off in favour of a more conventional replacement and that nobody else dared design a plastic car without a steel chassis until the Imp based Clan or Mini based Midas came along decades later.

But that's not the full story, for while Lotus were battling away in Norfolk to build the Elite profitably, some 204 miles up north in Lancashire another company was actually developing a more advanced manufacturing process for its own monocoque car shell.

The Elite was launched into a largely sports car starved market in 1957 and since Rochdale Motor Panels did not actually complete the Olympic moulds until 1960, going on to put some 30,000 miles of testing on their prototype in that year, it is feasible that Colin Chapman's little Elite monocoque was an inspiration for the Rochdale Olympic.

The Lotus Elite and Rochdale Olympic were of course both monocoques, but whatever the catalyst, and even though the Elite pre-dated it by some three years, the Olympic is still held by some to be the first true GRP monocoque. Rochdale devotees put emphasis on their car being a manufactured monocoque, so the distinction here is more how the two bodyshells were actually made than their final forms.

Remember that these two cars were produced at a time when mass produced steel bodies were pressed in their thousands and GRP was a new fangled material that had to be laid up by hand. Monocoque technology developed by Lotus

and Rochdale flew in the face of the then current procedures and was truly world leading, but the way the two companies approached the task was entirely different.

The various sections making up the Lotus Elite monocoque were produced individually and then glued together rather like a full size Airfix plastic model. Bringing the outer shell together with bulkheads, floor, tunnel and other sections required accurate jiggging and was time consuming. Though not requiring a steel chassis, the monocoque was still a collection of sections glued together.

In contrast, all the sections of the Rochdale Olympic monocoque were actually bonded into the outer shell while it was still in the mould which meant that the process was essentially self jiggging. When the time came to release the shell, the monocoque came out of the mould as a complete unit. In theory it was faster, more accurate and stronger.

With more than 41% known to survive almost half a century after the launch of this forgotten marque, the strength and longevity of Richard Parker's design is not in doubt, though in one way or another, perhaps some of the credit for that must also be attributed to Keith Hamer.

A self confessed fan of Rochdale cars, former firefighter Hamer co-founded the Rochdale Owners Club, was a committee member for years and set up the ROC annual bash at Capesthorpe Hall. A complex man with automotive blood in his veins, these days you are more likely to find Fireman Keith surrounded by Olympics and GT's in an old chicken shed on a farm than clinging to a fire appliance with Green Watch.

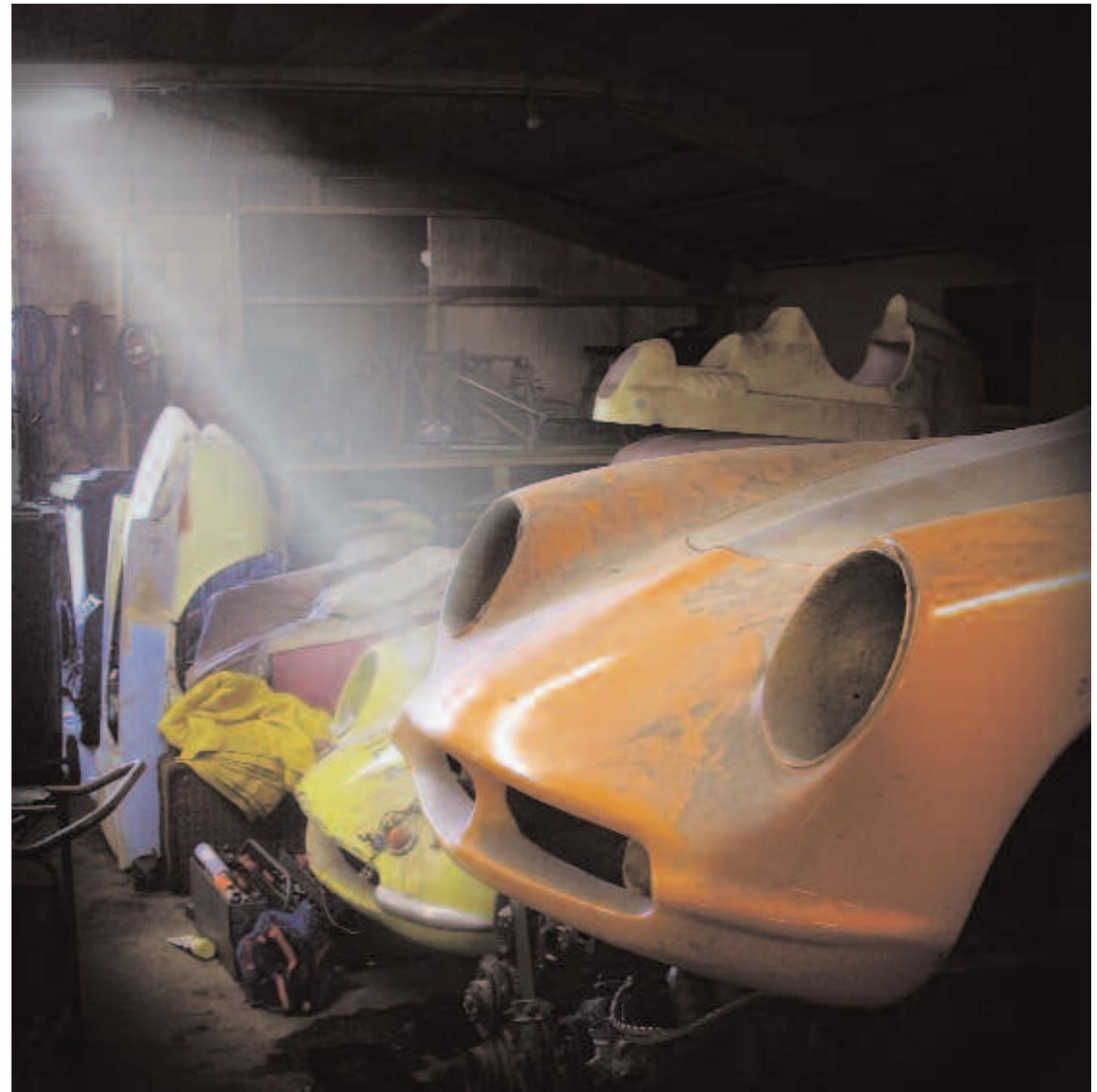
Accessed down a rutted lane in beautiful countryside, the shed lives under the rather

grandiose sounding title of Scholar Racing but actually houses a veritable Aladin's Cave of sixties sportscar bodyshells in various states of repair. Picture an eccentric professor whiling away his time in a shed at the bottom of his yard and you'd be close to the mark.

At 4000sq ft this shed is a bit bigger and it's not at the bottom of Hamer's back yard, but it reeks of potting shed charisma and in among the cobwebs are Unipower GT's, Formula 750 race cars, the new Scholar 983 prototype, Rochdale GT's and no less than six Olympics. The corners are dark, unknown gems repose under dust sheets and tarps and if the day ever came when it all had to be cleared out, it wouldn't be at all surprising if a few more Rochdales weren't hiding away.

Trained engineer Hamer has over the years competed in hillclimbs and circuit racing, designed a number of racing cars and was the K in the DRK company that manufactured Morganesque three wheelers. His race cars have always been called Scholar "I don't know why, it sounded good and just happened, I think we predate the engine company by some years" but the name was only formalised in 1996 when Scholar Racing was formed. By the time Hamer had left the fire brigade in 2000 to run Scholar Racing on a full time basis his reputation as a master restorer of Rochdales was well established and today his outlook towards these projects is refreshing. 'Customers pay the wages so we try to give them what they want, however unusual that may be. Sometimes we advise against modifications but we don't insist in keeping the cars stock and ultimately we will carry out the customer's wishes.'

Rochdale managed to find homes for around 400 Olympics over more than a decade of



# Restoring Rochdale's pride

production and examples are still turning up almost 50 years later. And unlike many of their contemporaries their almost timeless design still looks as fresh and up to date now as it did in



1960, so they make excellent restoration or upgrade projects.

Combined with elements of the GT, particularly the trailing strakes from the front wheel arches, Olympic styling owes a great deal to designer Richard Parker's love of Porsche. The car is undeniably Porsche inspired and being a fixed head coupe was potentially quite rigid.

But its timeless appeal owes more to its perfectly coordinated elements and smooth curves than lip service paid to fashion icons of the time. While its predecessor the GT was basically an open sports car to which a roof had been added to create a coupe, the Olympic was a fixed head design from the start. And where the GT was over-long in the flanks and a little tall in the cabin like a gangly youth with a portly belly, the Olympic is beautifully proportioned, with vital statistics as perfect as those of a size zero catwalk supermodel.

Car design fashion has at last come full circle after its mid life crisis of razor edge and harsh flat panels and we are now back with soft curves and tight integrated designs - for which the Olympic is iconic. Precious little needs to be done to bring the design right up to date. Externally, subtle flaring of the wheelarches and perhaps a small lip spoiler under the front valence will keep the car's character yet accommodate modern mechanical upgrades. And perhaps a little reworking of the interior to bring it up to date would complete the exercise.

But that's all it needs. Go any further and you run the risk of ruining the aesthetics and crating a beast.

In retirement, Richard Parker completed a brilliant upgrade on an original Olympic, installing modern running gear and a fire breathing Cosworth engine. Famous in

Rochdale circles and in the hands of Tony Stanton since Parker's death, 902 DUF is the epitome of a good design, the modifications being so natural that the car looks as though nothing has been done. Even the wheelarches look as though that was how the car was designed in the first place.

Hamer's acceptance of his client's ideas usually keeps within the same reasonable limits and a little 'advice' usually resolves the issue when they don't, as evidenced by a green Olympic nearing completion. This featured a Hamer disk brake upgrade at the front to cope with the extra power of its intended Rover K Series engine but still retained a standard bodysheet and managed to look totally modern. With a recent acquisition being a CNC milling machine giving the company an in-house facility for custom engineered components, such upgrades are not out of the ordinary (all Scholar race cars use machined uprights and hubs). This facility is also driving an additional business supplying the aerospace industry - testimony to Hamer's high standards.

Not nearly so well progressed was another seemingly stock model Olympic poised on stands and bereft of mechanicals. And while the tell tale marks of refurbishment pock marked its deep golden bodywork, the shell seemed pretty standard.

But it wasn't. Standard that is. Just four lightweight Olympics were built by the factory and only one remains.

This one.

Though some claim that more lightweights were built the fate of all four official shells is known and it is believed that those claims actually refer to localised thinner laminates in small areas of standard shells resulting from

hand layup. This genuine lightweight is in Hamer's hands for a second time, having been restored for a client years ago and after a countrywide search years later purchased for its current rebuild.

But the downside of Hamer's accommodation of his client's requirements is ably illustrated by yet another Olympic project under development in the chicken shed.

With a rather potent engine, all round disk brakes and a fully independent rear end, the specification of this Olympic reads fine on paper but doesn't seem to translate as well in reality.

Previously installed in a Sylva race car, the engine is not as tractable as the more powerful Cosworth in 902 DUF. To keep the coupe in check Hamer installed an all-round disk braking system. The IRS was lifted more or less intact from a BMW 3 Series, its slightly wider track necessitating gentle flaring of the rear

wheelarches. Taken together, this basket of modifications could not be accommodated by the standard fixing points and this led to major reconstruction including a completely fabricated front subframe.

But this Olympic has none of Hamer's characteristic reserve, it's owner having taken a boy racer route by purchasing inappropriately wide wheels and tyres. It's the straw that broke the camel's back, for not only are they wrong for the weight and power of the car, when added to the wider BMW track they have required more work by Hamer to create huge wheelarches at the rear and a complete rework at the front. In hot rod style, Hamer also frenched the rearlight clusters but Parker's design is not just compromised - it is ruined - and the car will probably handle like a dog too. Yet if nothing else, the Brute illustrates the vast styling options presented by the Olympic and the skills of Keith Hamer.

So in that case, what is acceptable and what is not?

Hamer plans to sit his own Olympic on the same wishbone front / BMW IRS suspension he developed for the Brute but with lightweight style rear arches. With power from an ex-M535 BMW 3.5l engine it should weigh in at about 750kg giving approx 380 BHP / ton while still being drivable.

And me? I would go the mid engine route by removing the rear internal sections and replacing the lost strength with a bulkhead behind the seats. I would then graft in a new subframe carrying an Alfa V6 engine, transmission and suspension to create a mid engine Olympic that sounds like Pavarotti and goes like \*\*\*\*\*.

Is this one man's meat - or does one size suit no-one?

*finis*

