NELSON S350

The Personal Touch

Bryce Nelson turns out very few cars per year at the moment but his back garden workshop approach means you get very personal service for a highly individual car sold at an amazingly low price. Report by Iain Ayre, who reckons the S350 goes well too. Bargain of the year?

BRYCE NELSON STARTED OFF AS AN engraver, back in the mists of time. He graduated to running a small workshop, and then moved into the design and construction of brass fittings for pubs. Footrails, handrails, blocks for the pump handles, all the Olde Englishe bits and pieces that the Americans think are rustic and cute. As you can imagine, this became less than totally interesting after a while.

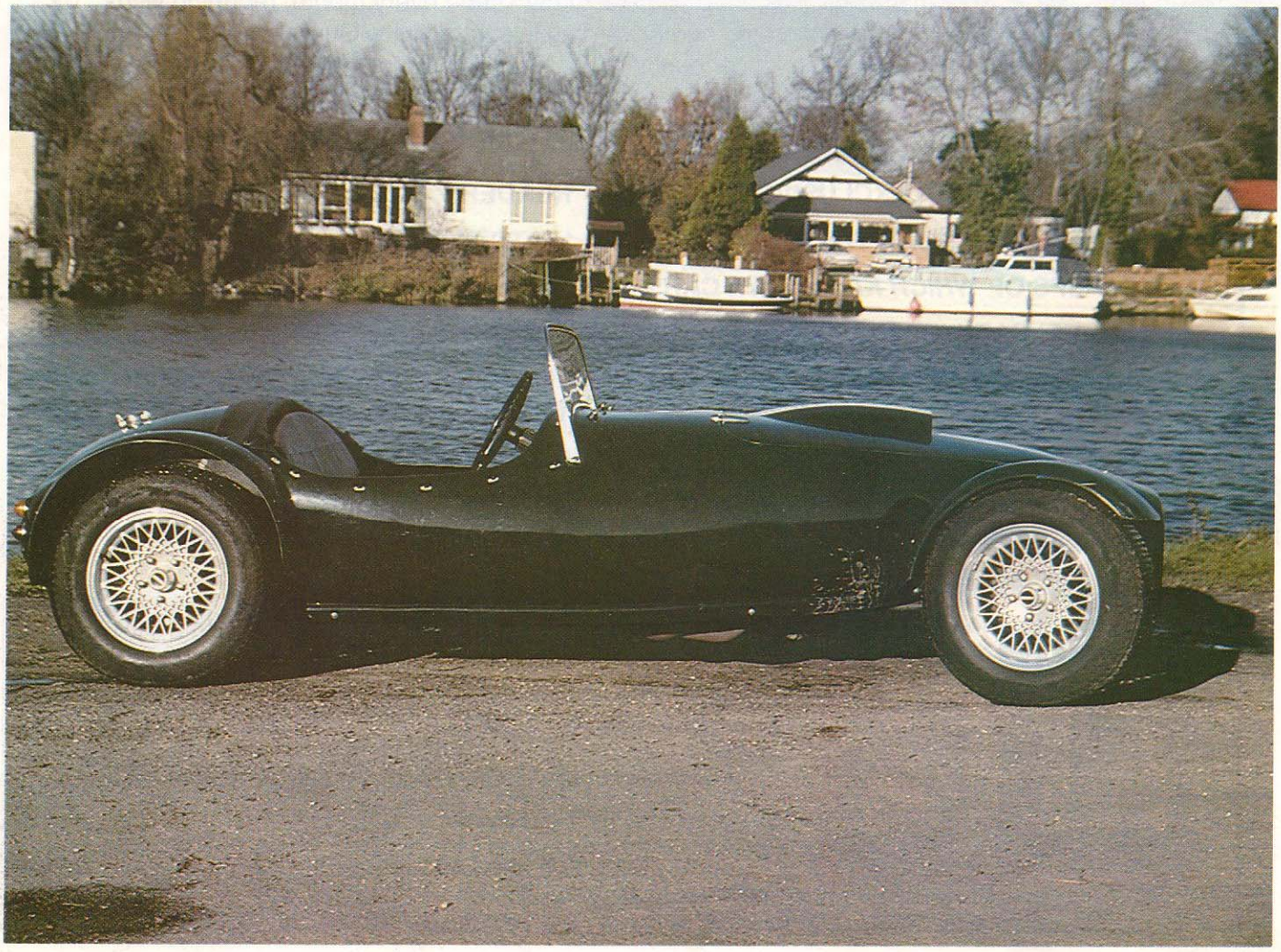
When a friend started building an NG, he got involved in helping. The NG was quite fun, but he began to think about the sort of car that he'd like himself. Then he began to design it, and then he began to build it.

The prototype Nelson first ran in 1984. It was driven for a while, then sold to fund the next, which was sold to fund the one after, and so on. Six years later, he's given up the day job, and the Nelson S350 is now in full-time production.

A completely original design, the Nelson S350 reflects elements of Lotus 7 and elements of Cobra. Its backbone chassis is fitted with fully independent Jaguar suspension, and the engine is from a Rover SD1 V8. The car is about the length of a Midget, and the nose is in fact slightly reminiscent of the Arkley Midget conversions of the seventies, although better proportioned. It must be the smallest Jag suspended, V8 powered kit on the market, although the cockpit is roomy enough.

The S350's chassis consists of a basic tubular backbone, with extra rails to support the floor and to provide protection against side impacts. There is an additional tubular frame protecting the fuel tank against rear impacts from dim punters keen to turn their Fords into donor vehicles.

The Jaguar rear subframe and axle assembly is used in its entirety. The front suspension dispenses with the subframe, but retains the Jag's double wishbones and coil-over-shock arrangement.



Provision is made for adjustments to camber and castor angles, so you can set the car up to handle just the way you like it.

Rear springs from the Jag are used all round, as the front springs for an XJ6 are designed to support a huge cast-iron engine and an extra ton of rust, both of which have been dispensed with on the Nelson. With four shocks at the rear, the suspension is similar to the TVRs of the early seventies, which handled well. The braking system is Jaguar throughout, and uses the XJ6 master cylinder and servo. New brake lines are fitted to each kit as standard, as is a complete custom-made wiring loom.

The S350 has evolved in two senses: as Bryce's hobby gradually became a business, and as the car developed into a cohesive whole. He started by building the prototypes, and then selling each finished car to finance the next; nowadays, he builds to order. Continuous development has meant that the car is currently pretty well sorted out.

'Fat cycle mudguards over fat wheels, chrome headlights and the fat little bulge that conceals the carbs . . .'

The cars are supplied almost complete, and at the astonishing price of £3500 plus VAT. This even includes paint, and reflects Bryce Nelson's current workshop-at-the-end-of-the-garden overheads, and his enthusiast's approach. Bryce makes virtually the entire car himself, from the chassis up, right down to details such as the battery clamp/wash bottle holder. His approach is serious and careful, and this can be seen in the quality of the finished product, and will probably be seen in the long term survival of the company.

The XJ6 rear axle is fitted at its standard width rather than narrowed, so the rear view, combined with fat wheels, looks very purposeful indeed. The demonstrator is fitted with Compomotive spoked alloys, which look quite good and bridge the gap between period and modern. However, the standard steel wheels from a Jaguar, painted the right sort of colour, could look equally good.

The exhaust is pretty well standard Rover, so would be easily replaced. The only problem with it is the extremely delicious noise it makes, tempting you to give it unnecessary stick just for the privilege of listening to it turn from a rumble into a muted roar. Yum yum.

The bodywork is a clean, simple design. It was developed from a series of plaster and wire bucks until it looked right, and covered all the necessary bits without being any bigger than it had to be. There are little bulges for the front wishbone mounts, and a fat bulge in the middle of the bonnet for the carbs. Although the surface finish of the GRP is not perfect, it's not bad, and it is very solid indeed. There are no returns on the rear wheel arches or the upper edge of the body tub, because the fibreglass is thick enough not to need them, and they would have spoiled the clean line of the wings.

We had a little demonstration of the strength of the bodywork during my test drive — the demonstrator's bonnet catch had been cannibalised for a customer's car, and we'd forgotten to tie the bonnet down. Needless to say, at fifty or so, it caught the wind and came off, breaking the windscreen on its way over the car.

"Goodness gracious, what a surprise," I said, or words to that effect.

"Deary me, the bonnet's come off," said Bryce, or words to that effect. When we retrieved it, there were one or two chips out of the gelcoat and some tyre marks where somebody had driven over it, but it was virtually undamaged. Amazing.

The front mudguards are Nelson fabrications, made in steel to the same sort of standard as the rest of the car. They hug the tyres fairly closely, and turn with the wheels.

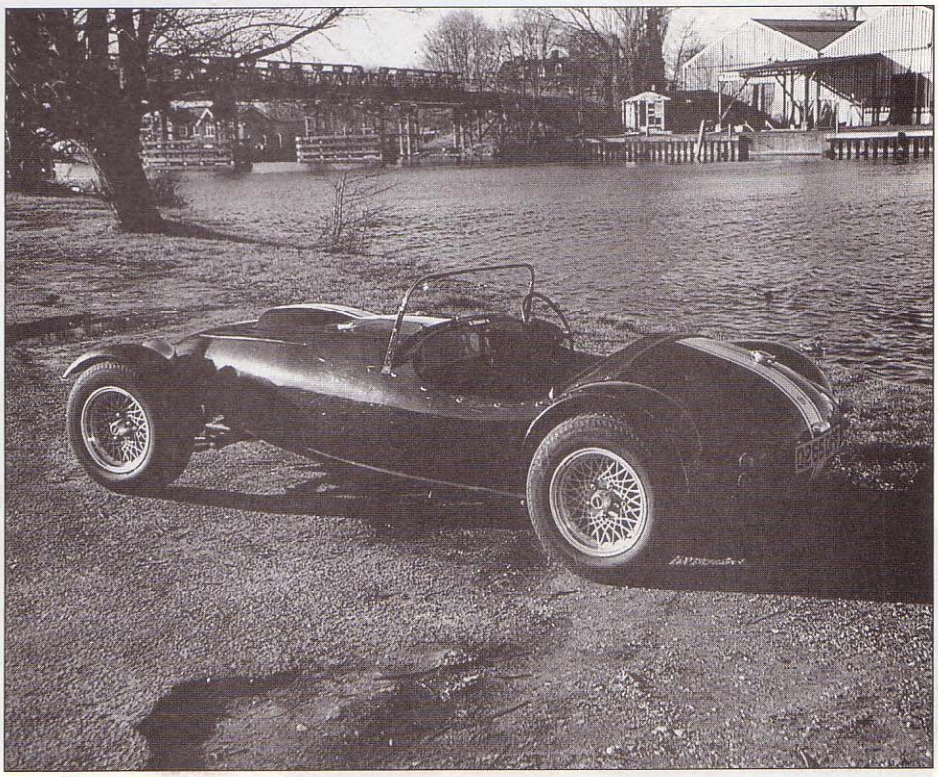
Getting into the car is a clamber job, but fairly easy. The sides and the boot are solid, so you can balance easily to slide into the seat. Except that there are no seats as such, simply upholstered pads on the floor and rear bulkhead, like a Marcos. Comfortable enough, but you'd have to modify them if you were an unusual shape or height. There is rudimentary luggage space, behind the upper part of the seat pad, but the majority of the back end is crammed full of either axle or petrol.

'. . . plenty of grunt to keep you amused, and good enough handling to keep you out of trouble.'

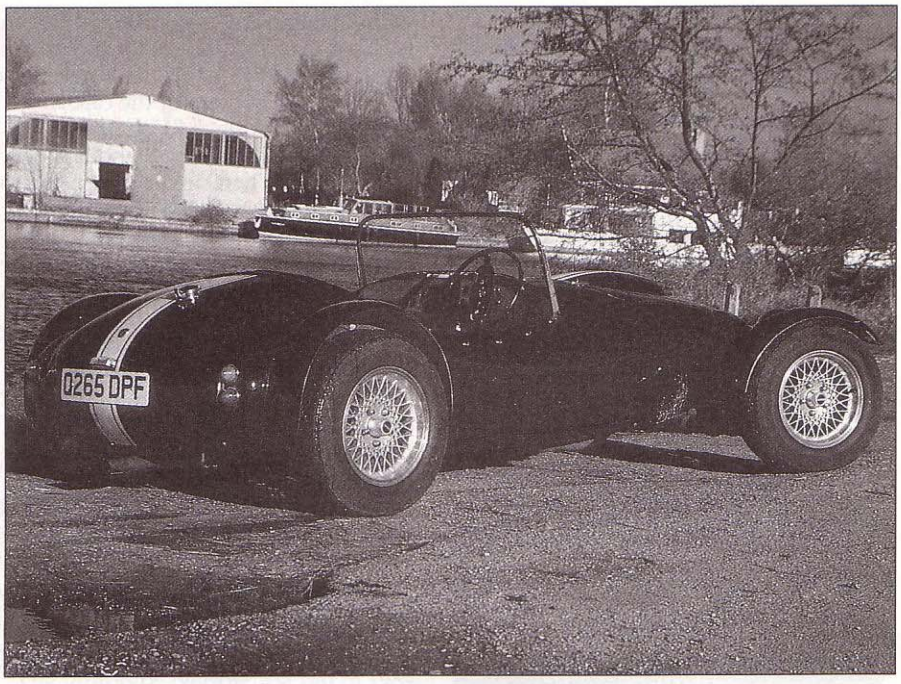
From the driver's seat, the view forward is attractive. Fat cycle mudguards over fat wheels, chrome headlights and the fat little bulge that conceals the carbs. The windscreen frame is a solid chrome item (strong enough to withstand airborne panelwork) but no better than a Cobra at protecting you from the wind. However, you wouldn't still be reading this if you cared about that, would you?

The dashboard, instrument panel and instruments are supplied and fitted with the car. The instruments themselves are retrieved from the Rover and consist of two main circular dials and two smaller ones on either side. There are holes cut in the dash for them and, although on close inspection they're a little too stylised for this sort of car, they look quite good. You would certainly think twice about spending maybe three or four hundred pounds to replace them with a new set.

On early cars, Bryce attempted to use veneered dashboards, but the S350 is really too open for that. The Formica dash supplied, or possibly varnished marine ply, is probably a better option if you don't fancy a flaky dashboard. The other controls and the Mini heater are fitted under the dash, and are all within comfortable reach.



NELSON S530



The gear lever falls nicely to hand, and how good the change is depends entirely on your luck with the donor. The golden rule applies — drive it if you can. The handbrake is on the right, and on the demonstrator is awkward to operate as it's too close to the side of the car.

It is possible to fit a hood but it's quite definitely not the sort of car that ought to have one. A tonneau yes, but a flying jacket would be much more in keeping than a hood. And I say that having driven it in freezing fog.

On the road, the S350 is impressively solid, with no squeaks or rattles. It's heavy for its size, and feels reassuringly stable. The suspension is firm, but still reasonably civilised, with no discernible body roll.

The standard Rover engine gives it quite a lot of grunt, but with little unwanted drama. Keep your foot down, and the wide power band and reasonable torque mean it accelerates with enthusiasm, but without trying to step out of line the way light cars with over-tuned engines tend to do. Even before you've got used to the controls, you find yourself zooming about with gusto; the car simply doesn't feel as if it's going to sneak up on you and do something nasty. And, of course, it sounds lovely to anyone who's a sucker for a V8.

Wide and low with plenty of controllable power, the Nelson offered plenty of driving pleasure. The top speed is certainly over 100mph, but the real limit is determined by what you could stand in the way of battering by the elements. This sort of car is at its best on decent A-roads; it has plenty of grunt to keep you amused and good enough handling to keep you out of trouble.

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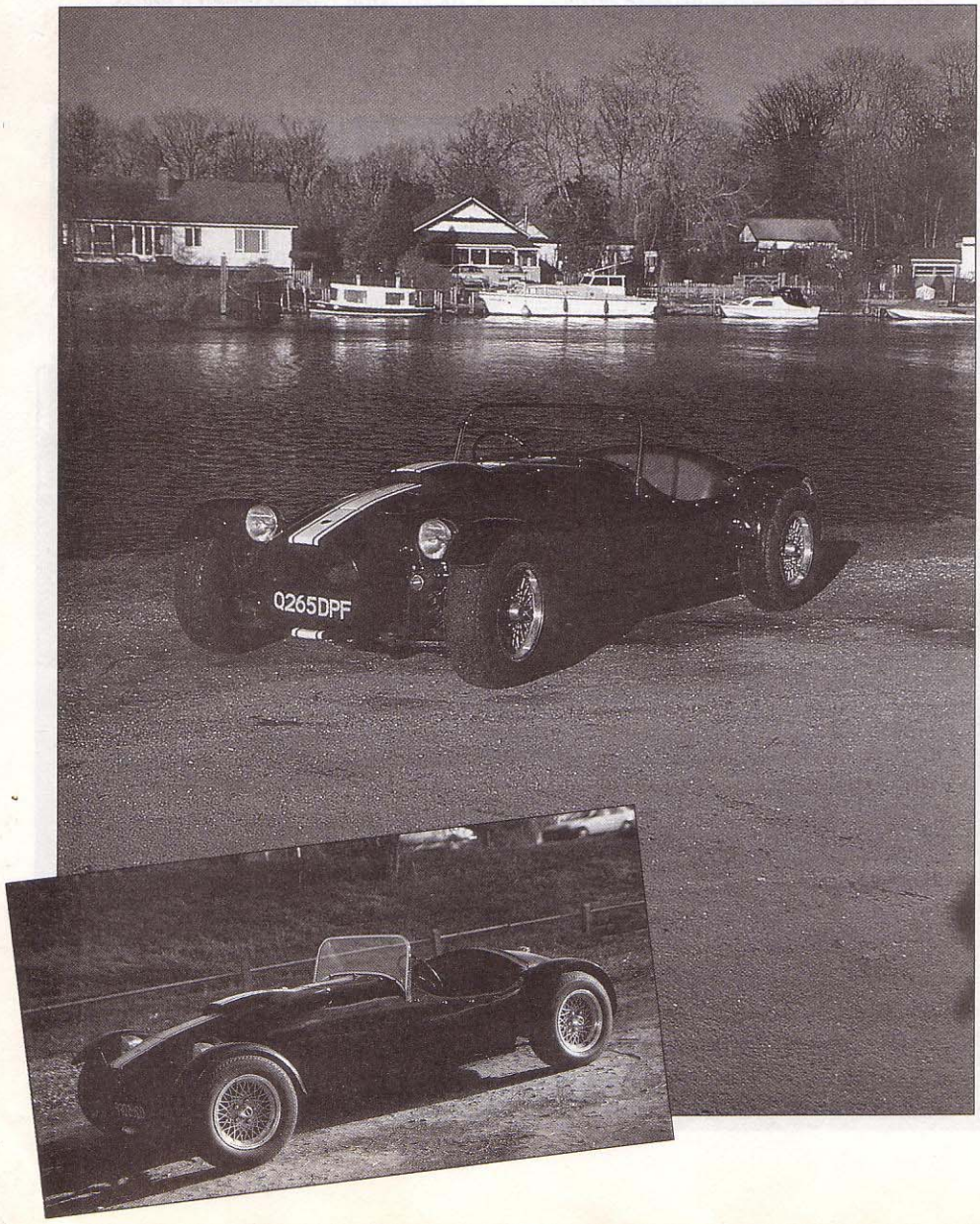
There isn't an assembly manual. The car is virtually a complete rolling chassis, so it would be a bit daft to publish a manual showing you how to fit the engine, wheels and seat belts.

One thing to bear in mind is that the demand for these cars is growing, and when the operation becomes more of a business and less of a hobby, the price is going to have to become more business-like. At the moment, it even includes the paint job. So, if you fancy one at the current price, get your order in sharpish. You won't regret it.

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