

ONLY
£1.30

15-21 April 1998 | Issue 495 | £1.30

SCOOPS • 1ST DRIVES • TESTS • ONLY £1.30

AUTO EXPRESS

THE CAR NEWS WEEKLY

VAUXHALL'S NEW BABY

EXCLUSIVE PICTURES

Amazing small car never seen before - until now!



NEW ELISE-BEATER

Sensational sportster socks it to Lotus with 140mph of pure adrenaline

FIRST UK TEST



REVEALED



GOLF OR ASTRA?

Bitter rivals face-to-face in first British group test



NEW BMW M3

Hottest 3-Series ever breaks cover - see it first!

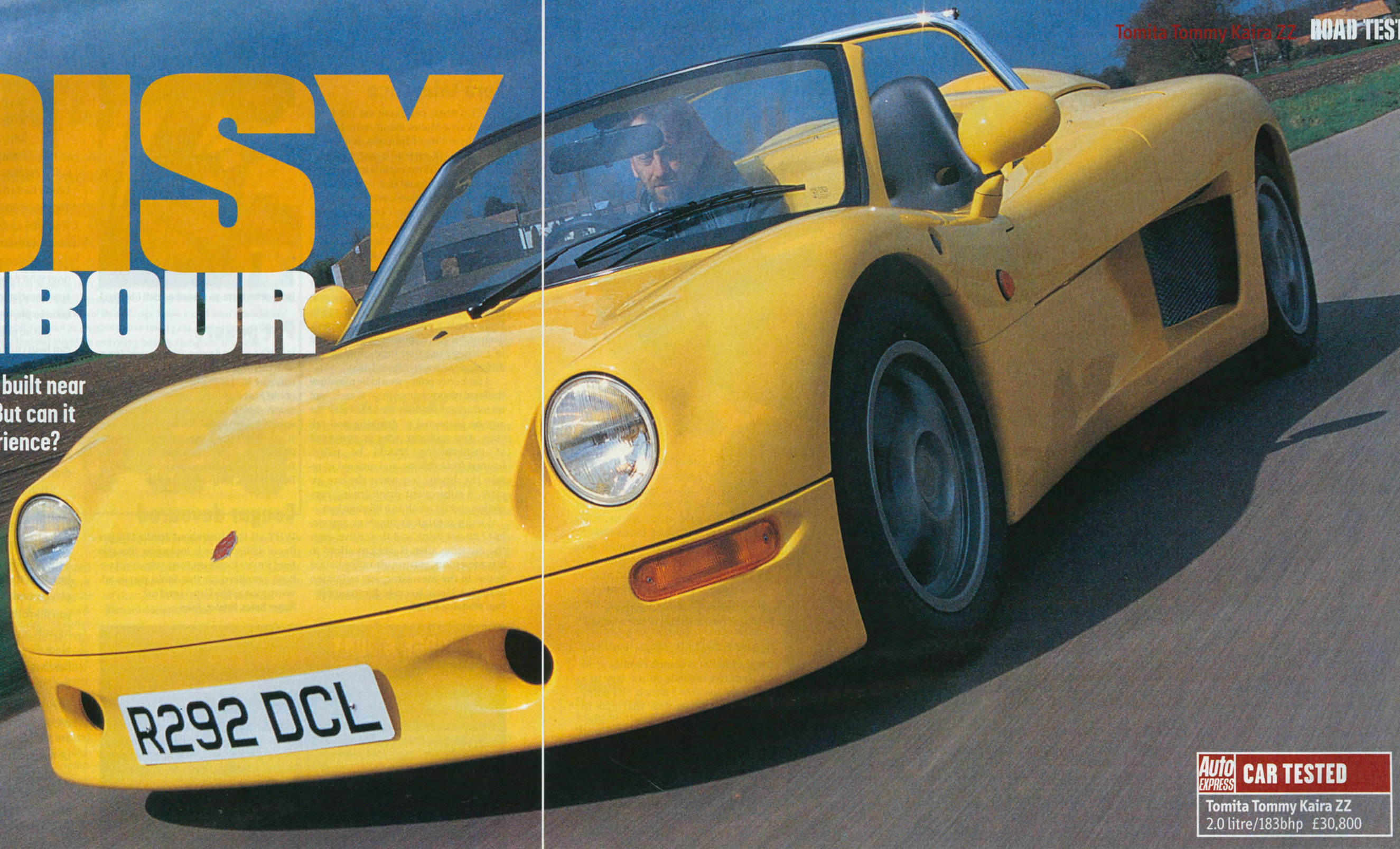
SPIED: RENAULT'S NEW SMALL 4x4; MERC'S S-CLASS UNDISGUISED
DRIVEN: DAEWOO MATIZ; SKODA OCTAVIA; VW PASSAT V6 TIPTRONIC



<http://www.autoexpress.co.uk>

NOISY NEIGHBOUR

This Japanese-designed sportster is built near the Norfolk home of the Lotus Elise. But can it match the British star's driving experience?



Auto EXPRESS CAR TESTED
Tomita Tommy Kaira ZZ
2.0 litre/183bhp £30,800

TOMMY is a daft name for a car, it's what you christen your pet dog. True, it's best enjoyed in the country on a sunny day, but the Tommy Kaira ZZ is anything but a dog. You may not have heard of it, but it's staking a very serious claim to Lotus Elise and Renault Spider territory as a small back-to-basics sports car with race-car inspiration and absolutely no concessions to any luxury which might dilute the purity of the driving experience.

It's already achieved cult car status in Japan, where more than 180 have been sold to date, and now it's on sale in the UK at just over £30,000. A lot of money for a car from a company you've never

heard of? Actually, there is plenty of pedigree to it. Tomita, which builds the car, is an offshoot of the racing constructor TOM'S which, among other things, built and ran the Toyota Le Mans racers and was due to run Toyota's F1 team until the plug was pulled. Independent of, but closely linked to Toyota, it also carries out much of the Japanese giant's development work. But for the purposes of constructing its own race cars, TOM'S established a factory in Britain, the heartland of this specialised business. Given that the technology used on the Tommy Kaira is pure race car, it was fitting that the plant is in Norfolk, a few miles away from Lotus's factory. Only the financing, design and, of course, the strange name,



are Japanese. The tag is derived from two of TOM'S top men, Yoshikazu Tomita and Kikuo Kaira, and the car is the brainchild of Kaira, a former racing driver. An unabashed admirer of Lotus's late boss Colin Chapman, he employed simplicity plus minimal weight as the essential tools in his quest for the holy grail of driving enjoyment. His aim was to transfer the driving sensation of a single-seater race car to a car for the road.

Tomita says that one result of achieving this aim is that the Tommy doesn't have a direct rival, and that nothing else is so obviously race-car inspired. True, it's even more spartan than a Lotus Elise or Renault Spider, and has racer-like adjustable suspension, but in reality it will

surely attract exactly the same sort of customer as those two. Yet even by the standards of the Elise, the Tommy looks set to be an exclusive car. Whereas Lotus is looking to build 1,200 of its babies a year, Tomita's nine-strong UK workforce will at most be putting together around a tenth of that total during 1998. Because of this, it is not yet authorised as a full production machine, being licensed instead through the EEC's single vehicle approval (SVA) for low-volume cars. This is another reason why the Tommy is constructed in the UK rather than Japan, where such a system is not in operation.

It's built from a deep and strong aluminium tub, which forms the passenger compartment, on which are bolted the

front and rear subframes carrying the double wishbone suspension set-up. The engine and gearbox, taken from a Nissan Primera GT, are transversely mounted behind the passengers but ahead of the rear wheels. In place of the Primera's fuel injection are four motorcycle-style carburettors, which improve the power output and produce a sportier noise, as well as eliminating the need for any electronic controls, something that Kikuo Kaira was keen to achieve.

All this is encased in a three-section fibreglass body that cleverly manages to look both Japanese and European. Even shorter and lower than an Elise (but wider), its stubby profile, with almost no overhang front or rear, has a race car's

purity, but there are styling elements inspired by the Porsche Boxster and Elise in the front section. The Fiat Coupé rear lights are ringers for those of the Elise, and its flat-top flanks flaring towards the back are very Ferrari Testarossa. In a hard-top version which will be coming soon, there are echoes of Ferrari's old 250LM in the rear screen arrangement.

In the open-top model we tried, there are no side windows, just a pair of shallow doors which are as easy to climb over as to open. A clever panel doubles as an extra engine cover or clip-on roof, its two 'bubbles', which allow extra headroom, looking as though they're intended to clear bulging mechanical parts when it is fixed on the back. It's all superbly



finished and seems to be solidly constructed, with the feel of a product from a major car manufacturer rather than a small specialist outfit.

As with the Elise, the interior is characterised by lots of bare aluminium, but the theme is taken a stage further. The gear linkage, for instance, is fully exposed, a rod running directly from the lever and out the back of the cockpit, likewise the handbrake cable, and there is no heater. A few dials face you, while the minor switchgear gathered in one panel above your right knee is very sparse and purposeful. Adding to this thoroughly developed feel, the pedal positioning is perfect, and there's none of the panel resonances you experience in many fibreglass-bodied cars. Be warned, though; if you're particularly tall, you

may have problems. The screen rail is set low enough to be an occasional visual intrusion even for a mere six-footer; if you're any taller you will be looking over the screen rather than through it. Long-legged passengers will also have their knees wedged awkwardly against the dashboard; all of which leaves the impression that the Tommy has been designed with typical Japanese physiques in mind rather than for Europeans.

But snuggle down inside and be prepared for the sort of fantastically breathless, invigorating ride you get on a fast motorbike. The lack of windows, together with the low doors, mean the open-air sensation is even more vivid than that of an Elise. A screenless Renault Spider or a Caterham Seven have a similar feel – you become part of the scenery, rather than

Small, spartan cabin has been designed to suit Japanese frames. Creature comforts are sacrificed to save weight, so you won't find a radio, heater, central locking or side windows

merely watching it flash by. Your senses are assaulted from every direction; you can feel every change in temperature, smell every farmyard you pass, and hear all the outdoor sounds whenever you are not revving the motor.

Fun

However, it is hard to resist doing just that, because the Primera engine is all sharp-honed, rorty-sounding, carb-fed reactions every time you give it even a touch of throttle. Combined with the super-positive gearchange – better than the stiff-moving shifts in the Elise and Renault Spider – you find yourself ripping up and down the rev scale just for the buzz of it. There would be even more fun if the standard Primera ratios had not been retained; they feel a bit widely-spaced for such a little racer of a car.

The configuration of the carburetors means that the engine needs to be warmed through before it gives clean responses, but after that the power comes smooth and consistent as the revs climb. In this four-carb form there is 183bhp on tap (33bhp more than standard) which, with a kerb weight of only 730kg, makes for genuine supercar acceleration. Way faster than the Renault Spider and the standard Elise, it falls just a little way

Body is fibreglass, and the rear-mounted panel doubles as a removable hard-top roof

short of the modified Sport Elise in a straight line, with 60mph coming up in less than five seconds on the way to a maximum speed of 140mph. Not many will want to take it near that max in open-top form, though; the wind buffeting inside the cockpit starts to get uncomfortable from around 85mph.

However, if the in-car aerodynamics are not up to the speed capability, the brakes certainly are. There is no servo and no ABS, but that doesn't affect the Tommy's ability to shed mph as quick as an insect against its screen, another key benefit of that low weight. The coupling of crisp engine response and a perfect pedal arrangement means heel-and-toe downchanges while under hard braking are easy, bringing yet another race-car dimension to every blast up the road.

But there is one part of the Tommy which is not at all race car: the ride comfort. It's astonishingly good. Although you'd expect it to be superbly damped at speed, what comes as a big surprise is its beautiful velvety compliance at the sort of low speeds that can make its two key rivals feel harsh. Such a quality may not be that important in a car such as this, but it is still a pleasant bonus. It does not come at the expense of handling or grip, either. The Tommy can change direction quick enough to make you feel dizzy, generates cornering loads comparable to the Elise's (but perhaps a little down



Tomita has succeeded in its aim of giving the Tommy Kaira ZZ the driving sensation of a single-seat race car. The 183bhp Nissan Primera GT engine is transversely mounted behind the driver



PICTURES: NATHAN MORGAN

on the larger-tyred Spider), and displays deliciously fluid handling. With the suspension settings of our test car, there was a suggestion of a touch more body roll than the Lotus, plus a little extra run-wide understeer on the entry to slow corners when pushed hard, but we're only talking degrees here. It will push its tail into oversteer more readily once into the corner, particularly under power (unlike the Elise, its rear tyres are no wider than its fronts), but you always get to know about this in plenty of time, and there is a reassuring adjustment of its line through the throttle pedal.

Delicate

The non-power-assisted steering has perfect weighting and communicates what the car is doing better than most race cars, but, critically, not quite as well as an Elise. This dialogue with the driver is the outstanding feature of the Tommy's rival from down the road – probably the result of its immensely stiff chassis – and it's a quality the Tommy shares, but not quite to the same delicate degree. But the fact that its handling can be spoken of in similar terms speaks volumes for the skill of its designers.

So, although it's something of an unknown quantity and is lumbered with a ridiculous name, the Tommy Kaira is a very serious, thoroughly developed and cutting-edge purist sports car that is worthy of comparison with the better-known Lotus Elise. It has even fewer concessions to practicality – witness the lack of a soft-top hood or side windows – and a more sparse interior, both points of honour in this specialised field. However, the Elise weighs in at 40kg lighter, a crucial advantage. The Tommy compensates for this with its power output, which is superior to the Lotus's, but it will cost you about £8,000 extra. This in turn brings its price close to that of the Sport Elise, and that car is endowed with

Auto EXPRESS VERDICT

It may have a silly name and lack the sculpted good looks of its lightweight Lotus Elise and Renault Spider rivals, but the Tommy Kaira ZZ is a well-executed sports car that delivers true race-car thrills. Its 183bhp Nissan engine is strong, torquey and, thanks to a special exhaust, sounds fantastic. The chassis is as finely balanced as its Lotus rival's, and equally impressive is the surprisingly supple ride.

Minus points are the size of the cabin, which seems to have been designed with Japanese physiques in mind, and more importantly, the cost. At £30,800, the ZZ is around the same price as the new Sport Elise, which is comparable on performance.

But the fact that we can compare it to the all-conquering Elise shows just how good a package the Tommy is. Light, fast and immensely enjoyable to drive, it might just give its Norfolk neighbour something to think about.

Tomita Tommy Kaira ZZ

- ➕ We like: Performance, chassis balance, surprisingly supple ride
- ➖ We don't like: Cramped and bare cabin, wind noise, gear ratios

much better grunt than the Tommy. Dynamically, it's as fabulous as its specification suggests, and although we'd say the Elise just shades it in this department, the Tommy manages to press the adrenaline buttons even more strongly, simply because of its more exposed-to-the-elements cockpit.

But perhaps its greatest advantage over the Lotus is that you won't have to wait for two years to take delivery of your Tommy. Not yet, at any rate... ●

HOW MUCH, HOW FAST, HOW EXCITING?



Tomita Tommy Kaira ZZ

On the road price	£30,800
Engine	4cyl in-line
Capacity	1,998cc
Peak power	183/6,900 bhp/rpm
Peak torque	192/4,900 Nm/rpm
Transmission	5-spd man/rwd
Dimensions (l:h:w)	3,630:1,110:1,740mm
Fuel tank capacity	40 litres
Insurance group	TBA
Basic warranty	None
Service intervals	9,000 miles
Recovery	No

Auto Express Test results

0-60mph (secs)	4.6
0-124mph (secs)	27.3
Max speed	140mph

What you get for your money

Airbag driver	No
Airbag passenger	No
Alarm	No
Alloy wheels	Yes
Anti-lock brakes	No
Boot compartment	Yes
Central locking	No
Heater	No
Removable roof panel	Yes
Soft top	No
Stereo	No

Auto Express star ratings

Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ride and handling	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Fun factor	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value	★ ★ ★

Star rating out of five. TBA To be announced

