



## Tripping the light fantastic

Low fat and track-focused, but do this pair deliver on the road, asks Andrew Frankel

To be honest, we did not expect much from the Exige 240R – a dedicated track-day car – on the streaming, bumpy B-roads of our test route. And, with a choppy ride, zero rear visibility and want of low-rev torque, it lived down to our expectations. But we had also expected the track tyres to find very little grip in such conditions and for the handling to need more than a little care. And it both these respects, the little Exige defied the odds and proved able to serve up a healthy portion of traditional Lotus fun.

But it never looked like bothering the Noble, which appeared blind to the weather. The M400's damping was better than any other's here, it provided huge traction when logic told you that it should be slithering down the road, and could be driven with such confidence that even a wet-road specialist like the Evo IX would have struggled to maintain the pace. Only a shortage of throttle progression brought on by turbo



Track-biased Exige surprisingly able on-road, but well beaten by Noble



**TRACK TAKE** Andy Priaulx

**M400**

'The faster you go, the better it gets. On those cut slicks, I was surprised how much wet grip the Noble had, but in these torrential conditions, and without anti-lock, it was too easy to lock the front brakes. The long throttle pedal and turbo lag also made it tricky to meter out the power.'

**Exige 240R**

The biggest problem I have with the Exige is that the wheelbase feels too short, which makes it hard to commit into a fast corner. You're never sure if you're going to get under- or oversteer, as if the front and rear springs aren't loading up equally. It doesn't stand out as that powerful, either.'

lag and a willingness to lock a wheel under braking in the wet marked it down.

We thought that whatever the Lotus lost to the Noble on the road, it would make back with interest on the track. Not so. If it can be said that we were mildly but pleasantly surprised by the Exige 240R on the road, so we were just a touch disappointed with its performance at Rockingham. For all its grip, mighty braking and mid-corner poise, the car never came really alive.

It never felt truly quick, either – not like the Noble or Ford GT – but more seriously it felt a little bit heavy, particularly in its control weights, which is not something we'd ever felt we'd say about a Lotus. Make no mistake, the 240R is a fine-handling car, but when you're expecting an icon, even that can be something of a let-down.

Which are absolutely the last words you'd use to describe the Noble. If its on-road performance can be said to be impressive, on track it was never less than outstanding. On the road it is the memory of the damping that lingers longest in the mind; at Rockingham it is how it combines turn-in characteristics not far short of a racer's, yet still remains utterly stable at the back. Whereas many of the others here make you want to spend all your time going sideways, in the Noble you simply want to go as fast as possible, carrying as much speed into turns and pushing it as hard as you dare. And that, believe us, is the mark of a true thoroughbred. It is also the reason that, if this contest were based on the track alone, it would have walked away with the top prize.

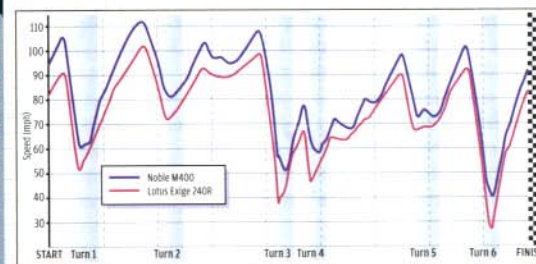
**'You want to go as fast as possible in the Noble, and that is the mark of a true thoroughbred'**

**TRACK-DAY MASTERS**

**VITALS**

	<b>LOTUS EXIGE 240R</b>	<b>NOBLE M400</b>
<b>PRICE</b>	£43,995	£55,995
<b>ENGINE</b>	4 cyls, 1798cc, s'charger	V6, 2968cc, twin turbo
<b>POWER</b>	243bhp at 8000rpm	425bhp at 6500rpm
<b>TORQUE</b>	174lb ft at 7000rpm	390lb ft at 5000rpm
<b>GEARBOX</b>	6-speed manual	6-speed manual
<b>BRAKES</b>	282mm vent'd discs (f+r)	330mm vent'd discs (f+r)
<b>WEIGHT</b>	930kg	1060kg
<b>BHP PER TONNE</b>	261	401

**THE LOWDOWN**





## The verdict

After two full days of driving, it came down to simple maths. Adam Towler is the man with the calculator and scorecard

The track fell silent when the time for decisions came. Huddled in a vacant pit garage, with the detritus of two long days of testing around us – discarded crash helmets, bits of GPS testing apparatus and a mountain of junk-food wrappers – judgement time had arrived. Ahead lay argument and counter-argument; universal gushings of praise and the odd condemnation. One thing we all agreed on: overall, the standard this year had been incredibly high.

Nevertheless, there were a few disappointments. The Morgan was sadly out of its depth here, the Corvette too crude and the Exige 240R promised much and then fizzled instead of inflaming our desires.

The hatchback face-off was always going to be controversial and, as we've come to expect, the Astra VXR was at its epicentre. Put simply, it failed to grasp our judges' imagination over the two days; principally because the conditions and arena exposed its flaws all too clearly. Another time and place and things could have been rather different, but the Golf GTi needs no such

caveat and consistently impressed all of us – we can't think of a more rounded, likeable and sensible performance package on sale at the moment, even if the Clio just nosed in front for raw entertainment.

The real stars, however, lie in the top eight positions. All of them are exceptional in their own way and we'd give any one of them a home on our driveways given half the chance.

The Boxster S was, at times, simply exquisite on the road – everything you could rationally ask for in a sports car – and yet it came in eighth. It's hard to pinpoint why the Boxster doesn't rise any higher. Perhaps it's just a little too smooth, too sensible. Sometimes you want fire in a sports car's soul, and occasionally it felt like Porsche has had the blanket off protecting the 911.

The M5 simply isn't a circuit car, although it's an unsurpassed hooligan if you've got an old set of rear tyres to kill. It's simply too heavy, and although it did better on the road, our tight and challenging routes just didn't suit it as well as the open flowing roads of previous tests. It's an

**The 911 Carrera S is the car for all situations and all drivers**

incredible package, with arguably the finest engine on sale at any price, but just occasionally it felt slightly blunt, constrained by its weight. Factor in its inherent practicality, though, and it's still awesome.

The Nismo 350Z, on the other hand, was an absolute star. Here's a simple message from us to Nissan UK: you must import these components. They're brilliant and turn the 350Z into one of the most enjoyable, raw and loveable cars on the market. Thank you.

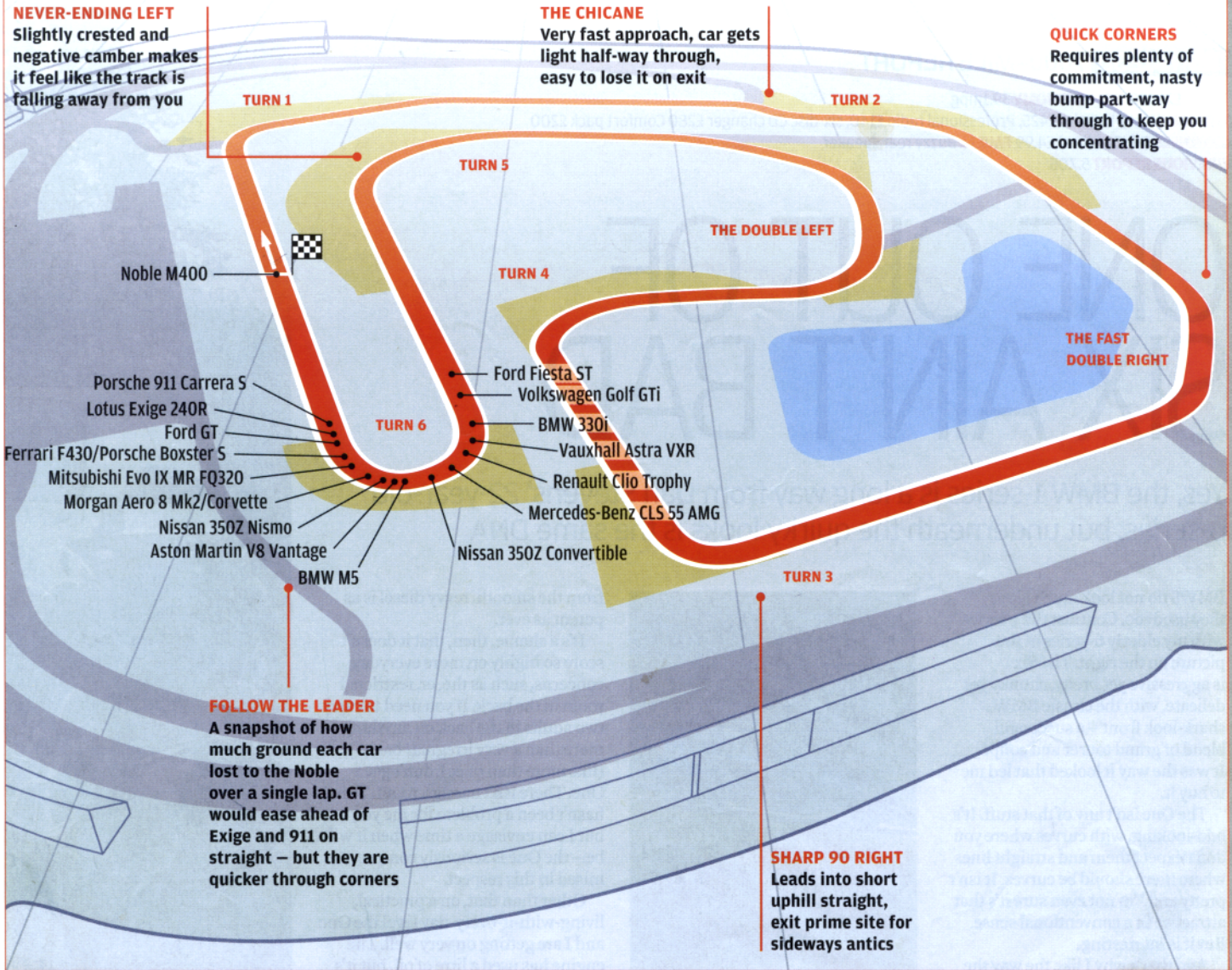
The Aston cruises sublimely into fifth place. It isn't quite sharp enough to win a test like this, but we'd all love one just the same. Well, just look at it.

The F430 was as intoxicating and exhilarating as a real Ferrari should be, yet with genuine usability. But it was out-gunned and overshadowed by the Ford GT. What a monster: outrageously fast, but controlled and amazingly useable on the road. If only there was a little more emotion in its character.

So that leaves two cars. The Noble, last year's champ, slips to second this time,

# SECRETS OF THE ROCKINGHAM TRACK

Where reputations were made and shattered



although it still continues to amaze. In the dry, as the times prove, it makes most things look faintly pedestrian, and it's intensely rewarding yet not overly intimidating. If you enjoy track days, and you want a car to deliver a massive hit of adrenaline yet with decent road manners, there's nothing quite like it on sale.

There is, however, a clear winner. It was like a scene from a spaghetti western when every judge and contributor held up their note pads in turn to reveal the 911 as their choice. Maybe we've become slightly complacent about its charms recently; certainly it has been winning group tests all over Europe with monotonous regularity. Yet when we surrounded it with the best it shone the brightest.

This is a car for every situation: ballistic on the circuit, yet practical and eminently useable; truly involving, characterful, stylish, and all with a deep sense of mechanical integrity. With the 911's evolution to this latest 997-series, Porsche has raised the bar significantly higher. In 2005, regardless of purchase price, the driver's choice is the Porsche 911 Carrera S. **D**

## THE SCORES Yes, points do mean prizes

TOTAL POINTS (out of 100)				LAP TIMES				
Place	Car	Total	Road	Track	Wet time (sec)	Dry time (sec)	Peak lateral g	Peak mph
1ST	Porsche 911 Carrera S	89	44	45	94.7	81.4	1.05	107.8
2ND	Noble M400	84	40	44	98.0	76.6	1.22	111.6
3RD	Ford GT	80	39	41	93.6	80.7	1.04	115.3
4TH	Ferrari F430	79	40	39	101.5	81.1	na	na
5TH	Aston Martin V8 Vantage	78	40	38	100.0	84.4	1.00	102.2
6TH =	Nissan Nismo 350Z	76	37	39	102.5	84.7	1.02	101.7
6TH =	BMW M5	76	39	37	98.3	84.4	0.98	108.0
8TH	Porsche Boxster S	75	40	35	99.1	82.7	1.09	101.2
9TH	Lotus Exige 240R	72	33	39	94.7	81.8	1.07	102.1
10TH	Mitsubishi Evo IX	71	36	35	98.4	82.5	1.01	106.5
11TH	Renault Clio Trophy	70	36	34	101.2	87.0	0.95	95.8
12TH	Volkswagen Golf GTi	69	38	31	103.8	88.8	0.93	96.0
13TH	BMW 330i	66	36	30	106.5	88.1	0.95	97.4
14TH	Nissan 350Z convertible	65	33	32	103.9	85.9	1.00	98.5
15TH	Ford Fiesta ST	64	29	35	105.0	89.1	0.97	90.8
16TH	Mercedes CLS 55 AMG	60	31	29	98.9	86.4	0.93	103.7
17TH	Corvette C6	56	29	27	94.7	84.0	1.02	105.8
18TH	Vauxhall Astra VXR	48	26	22	103.8	88.0	0.96	94.7
19TH	Morgan Aero 8 Mk2	35	10	25	103.9	84.0	1.04	103.0