

As I clasp the familiar Porsche door handle, angling my posterior for the awkward launch at the Recaro bucket seat, I wonder, like many of us, if this Autofarm car I have been waiting so anxiously to drive is a Cayman with the gloves off?

I say many of us, but that's by no means all of us, of course, because few topics seem to be able to divide a collection of Porsche enthusiasts like the Cayman. Pub talk and the science of vehicle dynamics become blurred, and personal preferences strike for the surface like lava in an erupting volcano. Is it too easy to drive? Is it soulless? Why isn't it faster? Or is it just utterly brilliant? I'm convinced any quick poll of people reading this would throw up a typical spread of views. For the record, I tend to lean towards the last point.

And then, despite the surprisingly strong performance of the new Genz Cayman, there's the theory of Porsche's deliberate dampening down of the Cayman's ability – you know the sort of thing: carefully-controlled range structures so as not to endanger the 911; a complete blackout on factory competition participation. Whatever the truth, the Cayman fan club seems to be slowly but surely growing, and that extends to tuning them. Go-faster Caymans might well be something we see rather a lot of in 2009 as the used values fall.

Whatever your views, there's one theory that garners near universal agreement: if Porsche put its mind to really sharpening a Cayman, the result would be really quite some car. I am, of course, talking about the prospect of an 'RS' Cayman – or, at the very least, a Cayman 'Club Sport'.

For a while, the existence of such a car seemed to be the favourite will they?/won't they? spotted testing at the 'Ring news story, but Porsche's resilience at sticking to its master plan has extinguished much of that fervour. It's clearly up to others to step into the breach and, although the established German tuners – and American firms, too, where the Cayman seems to have something of a cult following – have been doing this for a while, now a British firm is taking up the mantle.

Autofarm is a name closely associated with Porsche in the UK, with a rich history in 911s over many decades, but lately there's been a less tail-heavy creation shuffling between sheds on its picturesque farm base in east Oxfordshire. The team overseeing the Cayman project has set about creating a fast road/trackday vehicle, with a modification path accessed in stages, the ultimate specification being a car that should be achievable for the price of a well-optioned new car from the factory.

The company has also brought something of its own style to the project, which is a flavour ironically more associated with specialist cars from the factory than the aftermarket world. In essence, this is a no-nonsense kind of car, with the modifications carried out in the name of performance, and little attention paid to creating a car-park stir. In this respect, I think the factory might approve. If you can ignore the gold wheels – and experience latterly suggests most can't – and removed the graphics, then

Killer Cayman

Is this the Cayman we've all been waiting for? Stripped of weight and with a big-bore 3.7-litre version of the M96 engine, this is Autofarm's take on Porsche's best-kept secret

Words: Adam Towler Photography: Antony Fraser

there are few clues for the untrained eye as to the potential here, and certainly no dubious body 'styling' to ruin Porsche's lines.

But look closer, and those modifications are there: a beautiful carbon-fibre bonnet and a tailgate made from the same exotic material, plus a polycarbonate rear screen à la GT3RS. The ride height is 35mm lower, too, and then there are those Volk alloy wheels, chosen with determination by Autofarm's Robin Bartholomew – the project's leader and a man with a variety of previous experience beyond the world of Porsche. Although you're more likely to see them on some fire-breathing Nissan Skyline GTR, their choice here is a pragmatic one: they each weigh around 2kg less than the factory items.

As you can probably guess by now, Autofarm has stuck to the traditional 'RS' philosophy for tuning this Cayman: namely, removing weight wherever possible and then tuning the motor. Actually, saving weight on a modern car isn't as easy as it might seem, but there are the measures mentioned above – and also a pair of classically hardcore Recaro bucket seats, in themselves a considerable saving over the

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standard chairs. Unfortunately, I can't say what these measures equate to on the scales but, considering the Cayman S usually weighs a reasonably svelte (OK, by modern car standards that is!) 1350kg, you've got to hope that the second number may now be a '2'.

So that's our puppy fat carefully trimmed, what about in the engine room? Autofarm's Stage one modifications centre around improving the breathing of the regular 3.4-litre flat-six, with differing exhaust and remap configurations to suit your wallet. But things get much more interesting when you access Stage two, as we have here. Over recent years, the firm has become known for its Silsleeve engine rebuilds that aim to remove some of the well-known weaknesses in the 996's M96 3.4 engine, while boosting power and torque through a hike in capacity to 3.7 litres.

The engine in this Cayman is just such a motor, with the benefit of Schrick cams, new headers and 200-cell primary cats, Milltek sports silencers and secondary cats, a carbon-fibre airbox and an ECU remap. The result of all this is 367bhp and 295lbs/ft of torque – outputs to make any Cayman driver break into an excitable grin. Factor in a kerb weight that, let's just estimate for now, is around 1300kg, and you

While our photographer wouldn't agree on such a grey day, the Autofarm Cayman does look good in black with contrasting red graphics and gold wheels. Weight loss is key to performance gains, and the carbon-fibre bonnet and rear deck do their bit for the cause, as well as looking good





have a power-to-weight ratio of at least 282bhp per tonne, compared with that of a 997 GT3 at 293bhp/tonne. The two cars' torque outputs are virtually identical.

And if you've just dropped your spoon into your cornflakes with the words: 'But why not just drop a GT3 engine in there!', then the answer is straightforward: it's a great deal more complicated. Sadly – and what a pity this really is – the GT3's gearbox is located differently, thereby requiring costly modifications. What you can do – and as quite a few established tuners have done – is to fit any stock Porsche flat-six, meaning the 3.6 and 3.8S 997 engines will drop in, including the brawny X51 3.8S 'Power kit' engine available as an expensive option on the Gen1 997 Carrera S. The downside to a straightforward 3.8 swap is cost – and that's where Autofarm hopes to find a niche with this 3.7-litre conversion built up from your existing engine or via exchange. And anyway, if you want more welly, they're working on a 3.9-litre version.

However, there's a lot more to this car than a few lightweight panels and a bigger engine. There's a single-mass lightweight flywheel, a Quaife limited-slip differential and a stronger clutch; a bar with four-point harnesses and fire

just the nature of the short-shift mechanism, requiring a firm push but hardly any actual movement. Promising.

If those initial moments provided some clues, then the first few miles are a wide window into the soul of this car. The engine is perfectly tractable and sane once it's got over the initial histrionics, and on a light throttle the volume levels are only slightly higher than the standard car. Ambling along at under 3000rpm in top is easy, but if you should leave the gear lever alone and squeeze the accelerator to the floor, the cabin is suddenly filled with a booming blast of noise, overlaid with the distant clatter of the single-mass flywheel. Stick with it and watch the digital speedo gain momentum; get past 3000rpm and the chatter is long gone, the boom fades, and the note redefines itself into a multi-layered howl, its texture constantly shifting with each fresh nuance. Now the speed really is beginning to pile on in a way utterly alien to the standard car. Ah, torque, the kind that negates the need to change down on a motorway overtake; the kind that makes this Cayman feel effortlessly fast.

In short, this is now a properly quick car. The regular throttle map is perfectly easy-going, but

“ This is now a properly fast car. The regular throttle map is perfectly easy-going, but the 'Sport' map is hard to resist ”

extinguisher in the cockpit; larger 355mm Brembo front discs featuring four-pot calipers with GT3 spec items on the rear; H&R springs and anti-roll bars working with the original dampers (PASM in this case); plus a host of other smaller mods. In development are a deeper sump, a lengthened oil pick-up with oil cooler and Porsche's motorsport oil separator to try to prevent the oil surge issues that can blight these engines during severe track work.

To really understand a car, there's no substitute for racking up the miles, but sometimes you can get a surprisingly accurate feel for a car's character during the very first moments of your relationship. This Cayman's brain currently has a bit of a mental block when it comes to the cold-start sequence, so the first 30 seconds after I turn the key are a bad-tempered stomp from slumber. The motor fires with a roar, echoing off the brickwork behind it with venom before hunting aggressively in definable spits of revs, a lack of flywheel effect allowing the rev counter needle to jump from one number to the next without seeming to pass through any in between. Grrr, it's a bit of an animal, then!

Forget the mild manners of the standard car going about its business in a diligent, precise, controlled fashion. This is a Cayman looking for a fight, and it's an impression amplified as I select first in the six-speed 'box and then reselect it, wondering if I've found first or not. I have – it's

the hard response and crispness of the 'Sport' map are difficult to resist – even if, with temperatures as low as minus three degrees centigrade during our test, it's really easy to spin up the rear wheels in a straight line! So I have to treat second gear with caution, but third doesn't give too many problems and, anyway, confidence soon builds, as it does in any Cayman.

You can blip down a gear with just an instant flare of revs – often accompanied by a 'pop' from the exhaust – and then revel in the shriek of power as you approach the redline, before a brief crack of the gearlever has the next gear home and the process repeating itself. It's quick, there's no doubt about that, although it doesn't have the virtuoso final 1000rpm of dizzying power and revs that distinguishes a GT3 motor, as you might expect given the technology and costs involved (more on which in a bit).

My confidence in the car is further boosted by the outright power and reassurance of the uprated brakes. They particularly impress with their pedal feel once you're into the meat of the pedal's travel. Nevertheless, it's harder to comment on the chassis alterations in weather conditions such as these – and as we don't have access to a proper circuit on this occasion, and this set-up is intended for trackday use, any judgement was always going to be a bit open-ended.

Certainly, the ride is a lot firmer than before and, although it smoothes out at speed, it's rather unyielding over sharp intrusions at lower speeds. As an everyday set-up it may well be a bit too much, but then in this form the car is envisioned as a weekend car for trackdays, and that should be borne in mind.

Far left: Strut brace helps to stiffen up the front end. Middle: The gold Volk alloy wheels are from Japan, and usually to be seen on Skylines and 350Zs. However, they make a change from the usual add-ons and they weigh 2kg less than the standard wheels. The 355mm discs and calipers are Brembo





So, it still steers as faithfully as ever, with less roll, and you can feel that trademark balance to the chassis as you turn into and drive through a corner, but it's frustrating in these conditions to not be able to push the car harder. Put simply, there's not enough heat getting into the Michelin Pilot Cup Sports – and with either ice or cold, damp tarmac to contend with, I find it hard to gather the confidence to put any serious

tyre for this time of year.

As we recently discovered with the facelifted Cayman S from the factory, with an LSD fitted the car loses a fair old slice of the benign and cosy nature it once had to its grip levels being exceeded. When it does let go, you have to be ready to actually do something now. But so clear are its lines of communication, that this is usually more fun than it is alarming – and on a

Yes, I winced too when I saw those numbers, and my head filled with what you could buy each different GT3 iteration for at the moment by way of comparison. But then this car does cost roughly what an optioned-up Cayman from the factory would cost, and that was always Autofarm's intention. And, of course, you don't have to go as extreme as this car, or get the work done all at the same time.

To give you some idea of the breakdown of costs, you're looking at around £16,000 for the ultimate 3.7-litre engine, including labour, removal and refitting of the engine and a rebuild of the internal components. That's quite a bit less than buying a 3.8-litre motor off the shelf. The big brake kit? Well, that's £5290, and so it goes on.

It is a lot of money but, being the car obsessive as ever, I waste the next few evenings crunching in my head pounds and pence I haven't got. It's always been patently obvious that there was even more ability lurking within this quite unassuming but brilliant car. Now, with cars like the Autofarm RS, we're really starting to see it. **12**

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loadings through the tyres. That's not to say that the car is a liability, because it isn't: driven normally it copes fine, even in these wintry conditions, and you can still press on at a reasonably rapid rate. But do so, and the car always feels on its tippy-toes, liable to twitch – or something more drastic – at any moment.

It certainly focuses the mind, and the Cup Sports often slide quicker than the PSM can compute a response, yet you can also feel the inherent potential – masses, in fact – that on a dry road it could be extraordinary. It would also be interesting to try it on a more suitable

circuit this will surely be a crucial new element to its repertoire.

I'll admit that the idea of a hardcore Cayman has been one of my favoured motoring 'what ifs?' for quite some while, and the more miles I drive in this 'RS' version, the more it gets under my skin. It's an angry little car, with a bite that belies its size, and there's something about it that I find really addictive.

The car you see here cost roughly £60,000 to build, based on an early used Cayman S in the low £20,000 bracket and a bill to Autofarm for around £36,000 including VAT.

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