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JAPANESE

HONDA S2000

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Welcome to the fourth issue of ClassicsWorld German. This, along with two sister series focusing on cars from Germany and Europe, will form a collection of publications focusing not on brands, but on individual aspects of our motoring heritage. In this series, we'll be looking at the very best classics Japan has to offer, discussing their stories and driving them to see if they're everything our hearts promised. In this issue our focus is on one of the greatest sportscars ever to emanate from Japan; the Honda S2000.

The S2000 took a market sector traditionally cominated by England and Germany and revolutionised it. Where once six cylinders would dominate, Honda used advanced technology to wring equivalent power from just four. The S2000 became just as great a legend as the Subaru Impreza and Mitsubishi Evo, in no small part owing to the Playstation generation and its appearance in the Gran Turismo series, and when enthusiasts were able to buy their dream cars the S2000's star only shone more brightly. Values never had

the opportunity to drop into banger territory, and they're rising now the car is a widely accepted modern classic.

We've looked at some of the best examples while putting this publication together, we've pitted them against the competition and we've delved into the Honda S family tree in a bid to discover just how the S2000 has managed to capture our hearts. Whether a long term fan or new to the S2000's delights, this is a must-read for Honda ejthusiasts.

Thank you for buying this bookazine. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed producing it.

Sam Skelton,
Editor

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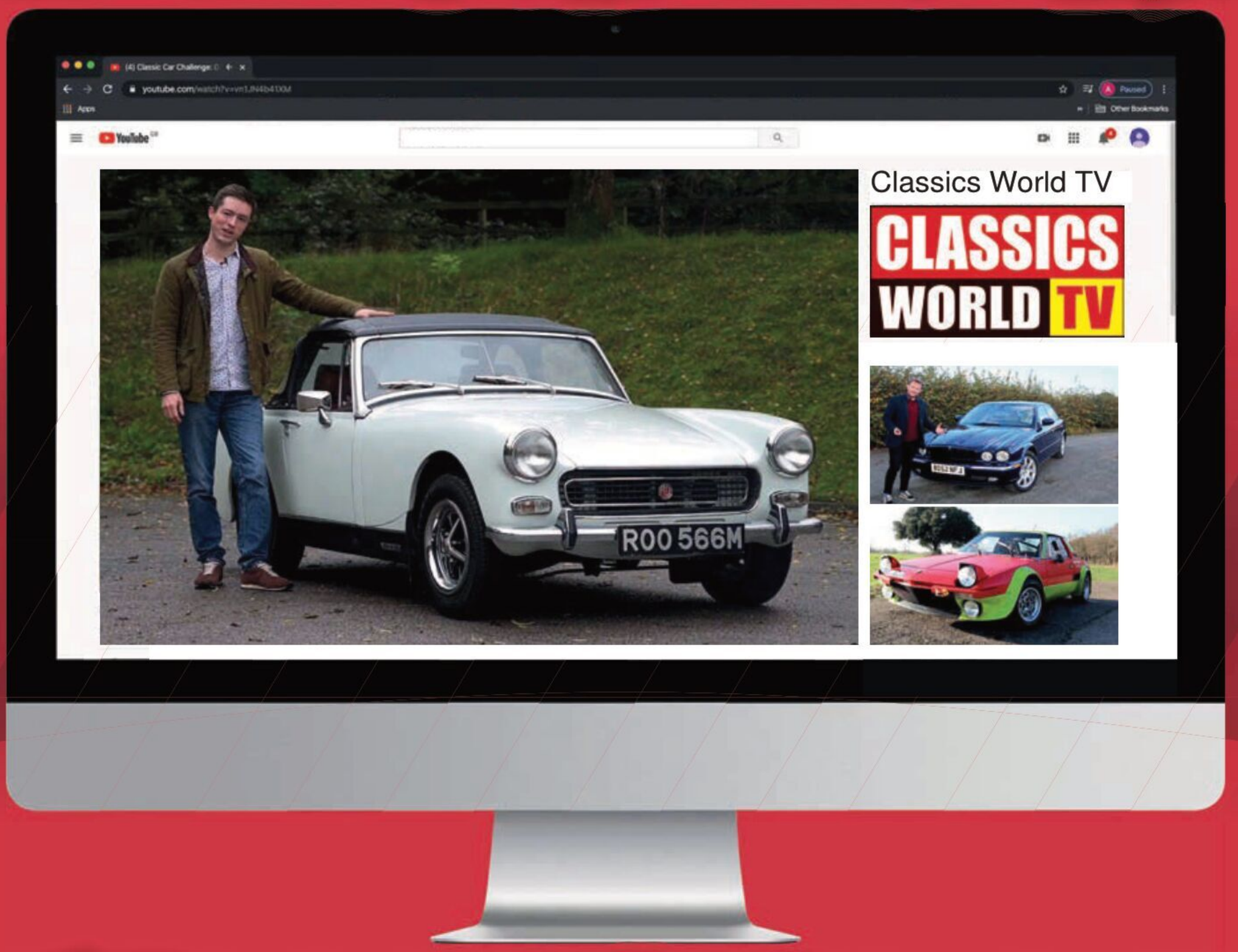

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HONDA S HISTORY

We chart the life and times of Honda's famous sports car line.

WORDS SAM SKELTON

The very first Honda car was an S-series sports car. So was its first concept car. And since then the nomenclature has been applied to a series of successful sports cars – cars which have long been key choices for the enthusiastic driver within their segments. As far back as 1962, Honda had been experimenting with the open sports formula, and while there was a considerable gap between the S800 and the S2000 the largest and most powerful S car conforms to the same design credentials as the smaller offerings, trading torque for revviness and power beyond the realistic expectation of its cubic capacity.

It's sixty years since the very first S car was unveiled, even if it was a concept that didn't exactly get the green light. Seven iterations on, it's only right that we commemorate that model and celebrate the achievements of the company which brought power to the people. These cars realised the power of dreams.

S360

The first Honda car never strictly made production. But it is key to the S story because it cast the die for the next three generations, each of which enjoyed road and track success. The S360's roots can be traced back to the Ministry of International Trade and Industry's promotional program of 1955 to build a car for the people. It would have to cost under ¥150,000, hit 62mph, and carry four people. This would eventually result in cars such as the Subaru 360 and the Suzulight 360TL. Honda was expected to join the ranks of kei-car producers – after all, its Super Cub motorcycle was launched in 1958, and has become the favoured transport of millions not only in Japan but around the world. But company founder Soichiro Honda was cautious; in December 1959 he stated that Honda shouldn't rush into

car production without research. He stated that Honda must be "absolutely confident that every requirement has been fulfilled, including the performance of our cars and production facilities."

The kei car regulations were strict. By 1951 they had relaxed to permit cars of up to 360cc, 4'3" in width, 9'10" in length and 6'6" in height, but were a means of offering transport to those whose budgets wouldn't justify a full sized car, but who could afford a motorcycle. It's important to note that the Ministry's "national car" directive of 1955 was not to develop a kei-car, it was to permit something larger and subject to fewer restrictions, that the public could still afford. By 1962, Honda had a proposal. The S360 was unveiled on 5 June 1962 at Suzuka Circuit, paraded by Soichiro Honda himself. Dealers were impressed – the car would give them something to sell when motorcycle sales dropped off during the winter, as an alternative for those who felt two wheels in bad weather was a risk.

That October, Honda unveiled three four wheeled products at the Japan National Auto Show – the T360 kei-truck, the S360, and the larger engined S500. While the public response was strong, Honda never productionised the S360 and it was felt that the larger engined S500 would be a more marketable concept.

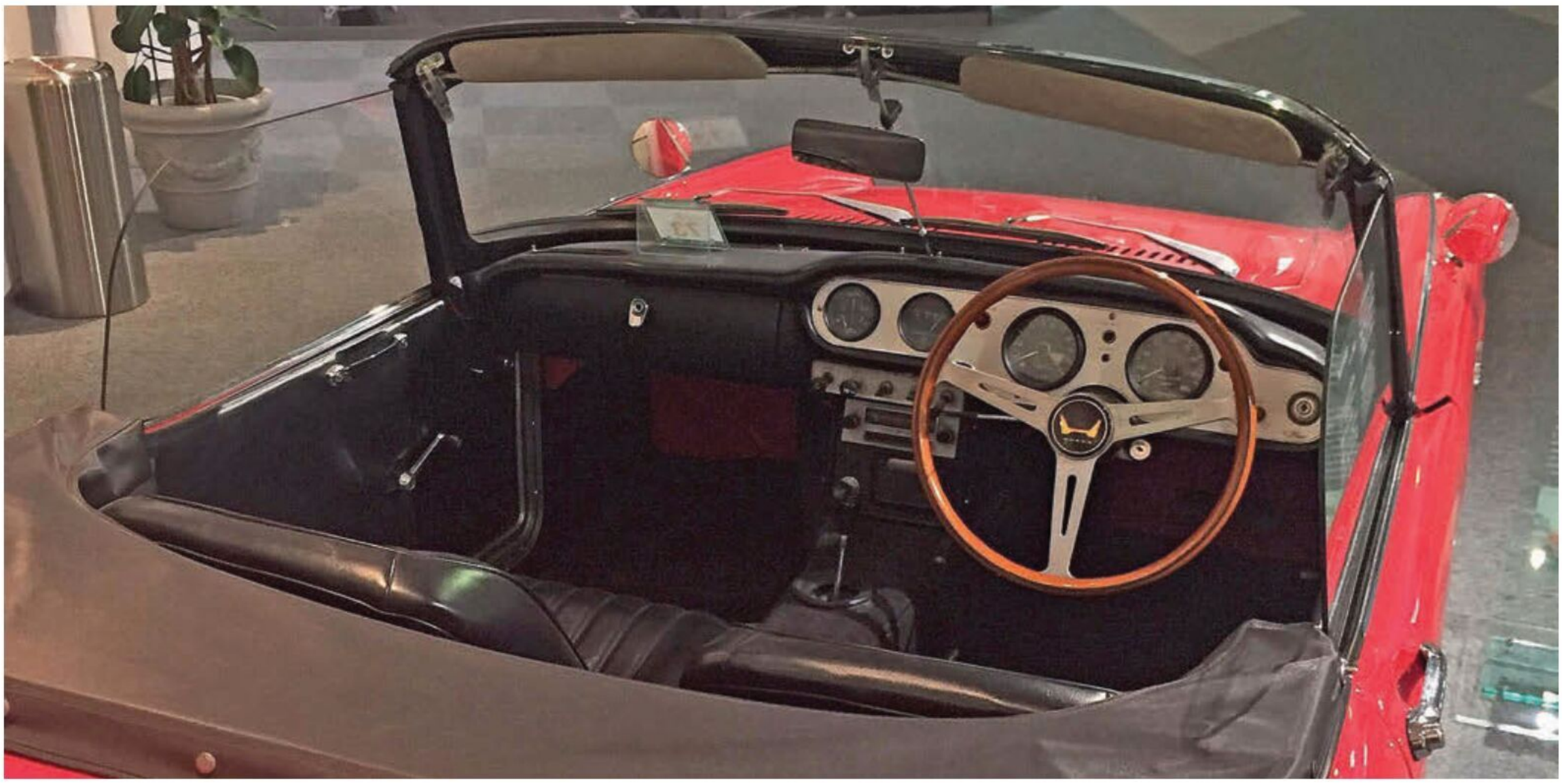
HONDA S HISTORY

S500

The S500, on the surface, seemed little different to the S360 that had previously been seen. But the S360's AK250E twin cam four produced 30bhp – an astounding amount for its cubic capacity and a specific output of 85bhp per litre in a world where the BMC A-series could produce well under half of that figure, but not much in a sports car. First produced in October 1963, the S500 used a 532cc version of the same unit – itself destined eventually for the T360 van – which produced 44bhp, offering almost half as much power again over the S360 prototype. It may have been larger than the kei-car regulations of the time permitted an engine to be, but as the car itself was too large to meet the kei-jidosha regulartions it wasn't strictly relevant. This was to become a national sports car, and the fact that it wasn't bound by speed regulations levied upon the kei-cars was a distinct advantage.

"This was to become a national sports car, and the fact that it wasn't bound by speed regulations levied upon the kei-cars was a distinct advantage.

The engine's specifications were avdnaced for its era; double overhead cam, quad carburettors, a needle roller bearing crank, and a redline of 9500rpm. Maximum power was produced at 8000rpm. 80mph was possible, thanks in no small part to the car's low kerb weight.



Underneath, there were definite hints of Honda's heritage as a motorcycle manufacturer. Fully independent suspension was a distinct advantage over any of the car's rivals – and Honda avoided the difficulties posed by a live rear axle by mounting the differential and driveshafts ahead of the rear wheels, using the trailing arms as mounts for individual chain drives to each rear wheel in the manner of that fitted to a bike. Rear springing was by coils over shock absorbers, while at the front there were torsion bars. A four speed gearbox with synchro on the top three was used.

1363 S500s were produced in just eleven months, before production wound down in September 1964. This success would prompt rivals such as Toyota (Sports 800) and Datsun (Fairlady 1500) to work on their own small sports cars, and subsequent Honda models would enjoy competition.

S600

Production became serious with the introduction in March 1964 of the S600 – which, for the first time, would be available with a choice of bodystyles. In 1965 Honda launched the fixed head S600 Coupe – an even greater sop to the would be motorbikers who wanted to avoid the bad weather, and something welcomes with open arms by Honda dealers. Once again, power would come from a twin cam, water cooled engine with quad Keihin carburettors – but this time, the S500's 531cc would be expanded to 606cc, enough to offer 57bhp. The convertible weighed just 715kg, and the coupe 730kg courtesy of its roof panels – 57bhp was enough for both models to exceed 90mph. Once again, there would be independent suspension, a four speed

gearbox, and a chain drive to each rear wheel.

Where the S600 built upon its predecessor would be in marketing. The S600 was the first Honda to be produced for the mass market – initially only in right hand drive as befitted a Japanese classic, but subsequently also in left hand drive to satisfy international requirements. The first export market was Australia, though left hand drive would enable Honda to offer cars throughout Europe. Six right hand drive cars had come to the UK in a tentative exploration of the market, but were never officially marketed in Britain. In countries such as Italy with tax classes based upon cubic capacity, the small Honda enjoyed relative popularity and a strong sporting image.

Honda offered two levels of trim for the S600 – the basic car and the luxurious SM600, which offered exclusive badging, a radio and speaker, standard reversing lights, a cigarette lighter, a heater and better seats. There would also be special paint colours available. Total S600 production would amount to 11284 convertibles and 1800 coupes by the time production ceased in 1966. By this point, the largest-engined and most popular S, the S800, would be available.

S800

The S800 built upon the achievements of the S600 by offering yet another larger engine. Now, it was 791cc, but that was enough for 70bhp, and that made the S800 Honda's first 100mph car. For an engine still well under 1000cc this was astonishing, and in April 1967 it was given the title of the world's most powerful 1-litre car. Its rev-happiness helped; more so than previous iterations, as the S800 was capable of revving to 10,000rpm.

Early cars kept the chain drive system of the S500 and S600, but after the first 994 S800s were produced this

switched to a cheaper live axle rear with four radius rods and a Panhard rod. With the export market in mind, costs had to be saved if the list price was to absorb the cost of shipping outside of Japan without raising it beyond the level of its competition.

A further 673 were built before the front drums were replaced by discs. By then the S800 was available in Britain, at a Spitfire and Mini Cooper beating price of just £779 inclusive of purchase tax. Autocar reported a 0-60 time of 13.4 seconds. It also praised the lack of noise and the well chosen gear ratios, some drivers felt 12mph/1000rpm a shade undergeared but when using all the available rev range the performance was exemplary. Mild understeer was found to mask exemplary grip at the rear, with no tendency to slide. 1548 found homes in the UK – more than 10% of production.

While these early S cars may not have had VTEC, their basic revviness and driver involvement makes them as big a breath of fresh air when compared with period rivals as the S2000 would prove to be almost thirty years later. The S800 would be the final iteration of the original S series. 11536 would be produced before the model was discontinued in 1970.

“ Ranked highly in ownership surveys worldwide, the S2000 became a modern classic the day that the first one left the factory.

S2000

The S2000 would be the first Honda to carry the S name in almost thirty years. It updated the concept thoroughly – while the jump in cubic capacity seems alarming, it maintained a high specific output, and based its engine size requirements around what had become a normal engine size by 1999. This meant that it was competing in a more serious sportscar market than the S800 had done – while that may have been seen reasonable as a precursor to cars like the Mazda MX-5, the Honda S2000 would compete against the BMW Z3 2.8 and the Porsche Boxster.

Honda previewed the concept with the SSM concept car of 1995, and by the time of the S2000's launch it was clothed in one of the most attractive bodyshells of its generation. The lightweight aluminium engine utilised twin overhead camshafts, now with VTEC in use on each one. The cylinder linings were fibre reinforced, while the piston skirts were coated in molybdenum disulphide to reduce friction at high revs. And it could reach 9000rpm when pushed – a return to the high revving spirit of the 1960s S cars. When it was launched road testers around the world united in their praise for the car, with its well weighted steering, pointable chassis and excellent gearbox it became one of the most entertaining sportscars of its era. It might have lacked cubic capacity but it made up for it with engineering intelligence which meant

that the 2.0 Honda could fight cars with half as much engine again.

Ranked highly in ownership surveys worldwide, the S2000 became a modern classic the day that the first one left the factory. The subsequent AP2 model of 2004 would soften the chassis slightly in the interests of easier control, but the model remained popular right to the end of production in 2009.

“ Few Japanese manufacturers have this ability to consistently please their audience. The Honda S-cars all hit the spot. We can’t wait to see what’s next.

S660

The most up to date of the Honda S series also takes its inspiration from the past. But where the S2000 drew on the concepts espoused by the S800, the S660 harks back instead to the diminutive mid-engined Honda Beat of the 1990s.

It was the brainchild of Ryo Mukumoto, Honda’s youngest ever lead engineer. Mukumoto had won an internal competition against 400 other entrants in order to win his post – and at the time he took office, his previous experience had been in creating research mock-ups. Aged just 22 at the time and with no direct engineering experience, he was given five years to create a new kei-class sports car. Mukumoto wanted to challenge the stereotype among his generation that believed cars were solely for transportation – creating a head turning small sportscar that he felt would bring the joy back to motoring. By putting him in charge, Honda hoped to rekindle some of the spirit that led Soichiro Honda in the early days of the company – a man with no formal education.

Mukumuto was inspired by his own Honda S2000, and developed the S660 to speak to kei-car buyers who might otherwise have considered the front wheel drive Daihatsu Copen. Traditional Honda buyers who had fond memories of the Beat would also approve of the new car, with its mid engined, rear wheel drive layout and 660cc engine. The latter, which produces just 63bhp, was taken from its existing N-box kei car. Rumours of a 1.0 turbocharged version for export never came to fruition, though contemporary reports suggest the chassis was stiff enough to take it – stiffer even than that of the S2000. Handling was direct, with no understeer or oversteer tendencies, and while there was only so much what could be done with the drivetrain without violating kei-car regulations Honda modified the turbo mapping to provide improved acceleration.

Production of the diminutive S660 ended in March 2022, 12 months after Honda announced that production would cease.

CONCLUSION

Each and every Honda S-car has had one primary objective; driver enjoyment above all else. And while they may have been built in different decades for different types of customer and to meet different needs, you can feel the familial strand which links each design to its predecessor and successor in turn. Every S-car has the same DNA at its heart, DNA which gives them a unqiue feel. Few Japanese manufacturers have this ability to consistently please their audience. The Honda S-cars all hit the spot. We can’t wait to see what’s next. ■

THE POWER OF DREAMS

Honda's S2000 was a technological tour de force but what's it like to live with as it ages? You might be surprised. WORDS PAUL WAGER

It's become the accepted version of automotive history that the 1990s roadster resurgence was kick-started by Mazda's MX-5 which then saw all the major makers scrambling to produce their own modern sports car, from Barchetta and MR2 to Boxster and SLK. Honda was there too, releasing its own roadster in 1999 but always the maverick among the Japanese makers, it took a very different approach.

Instead of the MX-5's mildly stimulating performance, the S2000 dialled it up to 11 with a VTEC-equipped engine revving like a sports bike and providing 240bhp without a turbocharger in sight.

The styling was as sharp and modern as the running gear too, without so much as a nod to retro and the S2000 served as a very appropriate present to itself on Honda's 50th anniversary.

The heart of the S2000 was the engine: a 2-litre twin-cam four-cylinder into which the firm threw the total of its accumulated knowledge over its half-century of existence, with many of the design team taken from the F1 engine programme. The result was a power output of 240bhp which was achieved without forced induction but by adding the firm's trick VTEC variable cam timing and letting it spin to a heady 9000rpm.

You could be forgiven for expecting the result to be a lumpy, awkward unit to drive but in reality it was as docile in everyday use as a basic Civic and was also able to meet the strict California emissions regulations. Keep your foot in it until the needle hit 6500 rpm though and the change in character was startling as the VTEC did its thing and the needle leapt to the 9000rpm redline. At this point, the short-shifting six-speed box came into its own and the grip afforded by the double wishbone chassis was much appreciated.

The body was designed to achieve class-leading rigidity but the S2000 also weighed in at just 1260kg, meaning performance was lively: 0-62 mph in just 6.2 seconds and a top speed of 150mph. Not bad going from a 2-litre four-pot.

All of which means there's nothing quite like the S2000. Yes, there are open two-seaters which provide similar performance but none of them manage it with such elegance of engineering and without using either much larger engines or at least one turbo. For that reason alone, it deserves the status of modern classic.

As launched in 1999, the S2000 was off ered in UK-market form as just a single 240bhp model. Standard spec was generous, including an electric roof, leather seats, HID lights and air conditioning. For the 2002 model year, the car received revised spring and damper settings to make it less twitchy, a heated glass rear window in the convertible top and minor cosmetic details: a new leather and alloy gearknob, silver stereo cover, darker alloy wheels, chrome rings around the tail lights and larger Honda badges. In 2004 the car received more major modifications, among them more significant suspension changes Including a softer rear end, revised bumper design and 17-inch wheels, while the VTEC 'switchover' was made smoother, with many owners reporting that these revised engines use less oil. A welcome change for the 2006 model year was the change to a drive-by-wire throttle instead of a mechanical cable, which permitted the option of traction control.

LIVING WITH HONDA S2000

Many owners pushing too hard in the wet had discovered just how easy it was to spin a rear-drive car like the S2000 and this saved many from embarrassing spins. You can recognise these cars at a glance by the lack of a hole in the centre of the headrests.

The final change came with the 2008 model year, which introduced traction control as a standard feature and brought more changes to springs and dampers as well as different alloy wheels with a wider spoke design. Production of the S2000 finally ended in 2009 after more than 110,000 had been sold.

Today, the youngest S2000 is over a decade old, while the oldest will have seen 20 years on our roads, but you'll rarely see a tatty one, which is credit both to the high quality of the car and the enthusiasm they generate with owners. Much like the Mk1 MX-5, the cars have got to the point now where the Fast & Furious modified cars have fallen by the wayside and a clean standard car is now a sought-after thing.

LIVING WITH THE S2000

Here at Kelsey Media, we've had an S2000 on the scene for the last eight years but rather than a magazine

project car it's the personal property of publishing boss Phil Weeden. The fact that he's held on to the car through successive house moves and a growing family tells you all you need to know about the appeal of these cars.

"I've always liked something a bit left-field," admits Phil and that explains why it was the S2000 which took his fancy rather than a Boxster, SLK or MX-5 at similar money – which at the time was £5500 from an independent dealer.

A 2003 car, it comes with the benefit of the glass rear window but predates the larger wheels and suspension revisions introduced the following year. Phil recalls that the car was originally off ered with a hardtop for an extra £500, an off er he now regrets taking up. One of the few criticisms he makes of the car over his ownership is that the convertible top is a basic single-skinned item and so is easily damaged as well as making the car a chilly prospect for regular winter use.

The hardtop makes the car a much more useable year-round proposition, he reckons and of course the scarce used ones on the market now go for more than the £500 the dealer was originally asking.

During eight years and 35,000 miles of ownership, the S2000 has lived up to Honda's reputation for quality and

"The S2000 has lived up to Honda's reputation for quality and expenditure on parts has been minimal

expenditure on parts has been minimal, while the paint and interior still look great.

A period of little use resulted in the seized rear callipers recently needing replacement, while the rear dampers were replaced a couple of years ago by Koni parts. Interestingly, Phil reports that the Konis are very slightly softer than the originals and as such mirror the 2004 suspension changes, making the car easier to drive hard – without the brittle ride, it's less easily unsettled especially in the wet.

“ As for servicing, it's no secret that a car like the S2000 needs proper maintenance by someone who knows what they're doing

On the subject of which, most S2000 owners will agree that the right tyres are crucial on these cars and Phil agrees. “It had Uniroyals on it when I got it, which were awful,” he recalls. “I changed them for a set of Bridgestones and they transformed it.”

Other issues over the years have been of the niggling variety rather than major issues: a sticking bonnet catch and a lazy driver's door lock are about the only things that spring to mind, which isn't bad for a specialist performance car like this.

As for servicing, it's no secret that a car like the S2000 needs proper maintenance by someone who knows what they're doing, especially when it comes to the three-year valve clearance service.

Initially Phil used the local Honda main dealer and was pleasantly surprised at the cost and levels of service, appreciating their sensible advice when expensive items were looming on the horizon.

The car was later looked after by a more general local garage which saw a few S2000s, with the most recent service being performed by Honda specialist TGM Sport in Hampshire. The 'big' service including the valve clearances and rear diff erential fluid came in at about the cost of an interim service for something like a Boxster – the car's natural competitor as a modern classic – which makes the S2000 look reasonable. Throw in the cost of new tyres and having all four wheels refurbished and the total bill was still only £1300.

As for the practicalities, the Honda's boot space is certainly on a par with the MX-5 or Boxster and the car's easily up to long distances. It's at its best on cross-country B-roads though, since long motorway journeys can get tiring with the wind noise from the roof. What was that about hard tops again..? ■

MILLENNIUM BUG

Honda's famous sports car was so good, our Paul bought one. WORDS PAUL WAGER

As I type this, my driveway is home to an incongruous pairing in the shape of a Honda S2000 and a V12-engined Aston Martin and although any comparison between the two would be tenuous at best, they do illustrate rather neatly the appeal of the S2000.

Yes, the British car is faster but not by as big a margin as you might think given that it deploys three times as many cylinders as the Honda and indeed triple the capacity. It's also vastly larger on the outside than the S2000 yet offers less usable space inside, while its handling is best described as nautical next to the Japanese roadster.

It's comparisons like this which throw into perspective the steely focus of Honda's engineers in creating a clean-sheet design which capitalised on the late '90s popularity of the reborn roadster but did so very much by ploughing its own furrow when it came to the engineering philosophy.

The S2000 is one of those cars in which all the design elements are interlinked and as such it stands up next to other landmark cars as diverse as the Citroën 2CV and McLaren F1 – both

designed to one job and do it better than anything else.

It's this which means that although road testers inevitably alight upon the F20C engine's fabled 9000rpm redline as their introduction, that's slightly missing the point in many ways: there's so much else in the S2000 to fascinate anyone with an interest in automotive engineering.

Perhaps the most obvious part of this is evident before you even thumb that red 'Engine start' button and it's the structure itself. As the door swings shut, there's a very precise click falling somewhere between the plasticky clatter of an MX-5 and the heavy thump of a Boxster, but resonant of a perfectly judged structure: light enough, but not too light and a mechanism which being Honda will click open and shut this precisely for the next million times.

At this point you'll also notice the lack of storage space which may be a bit of a What Car? observation but can be an irritation in daily use. Modern smartphones always end up vying for space with house keys in the ashtray/cup holder, while anything larger goes into the fold-down cubby between the

seats or the upper glovebox-sized bin dubbed the 'secret compartment' by S2000 enthusiasts on account of its hidden catch.

The high rear bulkhead and prominent centre console are to blame, but both are part of what Honda terms the 'X-Bone' construction – essentially a high centre tunnel creating an forked backbone structure not dissimilar to that once used to good effect by Lotus and paired with tall sills connected by rigid floor sections. Test data revealed the concept to provide torsional strength identical to an equivalent saloon and the lack of scuttle shudder is something which really sets the S2000 apart from its rivals.

“ It's also surprisingly comfortable for a small open-topped sports car, this being a key part of the original brief,

It's also surprisingly comfortable for a small open-topped sports car, this being a key part of the original brief, with the seats being designed specifically for the car and offering a 'hip point' only very slightly higher than the NSX.

As for the ergonomics, Honda's press material from the time boasted of the layout being inspired by an F1 car and although this may seem an extreme leap, the reality was a driver-focused layout with the digital dashboard display apparently derived from the type preferred by Ayrton Senna.

Turning a key and pressing a start button will always seem like going back to the '50s and in some ways is rather unlike the elegant engineering which pervades the rest of the car, but gimmicky thought it may be, it pointed at the car's sense of occasion and kick-started a trend which saw 'start' buttons fitted to every self-respecting Max Power contender.

Press it though and you may well be underwhelmed initially. Back in 1999, most cars offering this kind of performance did it with a at least six and generally eight cylinders, making the S2000's four-pot exhaust note sound rather anonymous.

The fact that it does though is another illustration of the engineering excellence of the F20C engine. There's no hunting idle to hint at wild cam profiles, no barking exhaust or induction hiss, just a sewing machine purr which wouldn't be out of place in a basic Civic.

Ease the short-shift (just 23 mm across the gate) into gear, give it some gas and the sharp response lets you know there's something special on offer.

Like most Japanese cars of the period, the S2000 is notoriously short geared, so newcomers to the car will discover just how free-revving the engine is before they've managed to snatch second gear.

Naturally this helps to offset the engine's relative lack of torque, although this is something which has been exaggerated by urban rumour. The truth is that a maximum of 153 lb.ft is respectable for a 1240kg car, but that maximum isn't reached until 7500rpm. In practice though, the torque curve flattens from around 2500rpm and in everyday use the car feels lively enough without constantly stirring the gearbox. Indeed, there will be countless owners who in their entire period of ownership have never troubled the VTEC yet still find the car enjoyably brisk.

“ Most S2000 and Type R owners will be agreed that there's an unwritten law of ownership which means you've got to use the VTEC at least once in every journey...

To get the best out of the car requires

commitment... and also requires that you forget all the mechanical sympathy you may have acquired in life thus far. And I mean all of it. There are countless cars which have been marketed with an optimistically heady redline on their tacho but in the majority of cases frequently troubling the governer will result in disaster.

Not so with Honda though, which is justifiably proud of the reliability record of its VTEC-equipped engines. Few owners will be comfortable with the idea of hitting the full 9000rpm every day, but a well-maintained F20C will be happy to take the punishment.

In practice, it's not so much the outright rev limit which is the key to the car's appeal but the abrupt change in character when the VTEC comes on song. It doesn't happen until there's at least 4000rpm wound on to the digital rainbow, but when it does, the surge in power will be familiar to anyone who has owned an '80s turbo car. Unlike a laggy old-school turbo though, the power doesn't drop off as soon as the throttle is closed, with the six closely-spaced ratios beautifully judged to ensure an uninterrupted surge of power.

Most S2000 and Type R owners will be agreed that there's an unwritten law of ownership which means you've got to use the VTEC at least once in every journey and I speak from experience when I admit to being slightly disappointed in myself whenever I don't manage it.

At full chat the S2000's anonymous

exhaust note disappears, replaced by a scream which shouts race engineering just as loudly as any V8 bellow, especially with an aftermarket exhaust and is closer to a big sports bike than any other production car.

It's addictive stuff, but you don't need full VTEC and hair on fire to appreciate the S2000's delicate handling. With the engine up against the scuttle and the occupants sited suitably far back, it's beautifully balanced and offers a lightness of feel you simply don't get in bigger competitors, even the Boxster.

Back in 1999, electric power steering was still a relatively new technology and early systems were criticised for a lack of feel, but unsurprisingly Honda managed to make it work and the S2000 has a nicely weighted wheel with just 2.25 turns lock to lock.

Turn-in is crisper even than the much-vaunted 205 GTI and the entire car has an alive feel which is reminiscent of the best of the hot hatch era – which on early examples gained it a reputation for twitchiness.

For the 2002 model year Honda revised the spring and damper rates

SPECS: HONDA S2000	
ENGINE:	1997cc
POWER: (bhp/rpm)	240/8300
TOP SPEED:	150 mph
0-60 mph:	6.2 secs
CONSUMPTION:	29 mpg
GEARBOX:	6sp man
LENGTH:	4135 mm
WIDTH:	1750 mm
WEIGHT:	1260 kg

which made the car less lively, but although ABS was standard-fit, the car didn't gain traction control until the adoption of fly-by-wire throttle in the AP2 generation made it possible.

This gives it a delightful touch of the old-school which is a complete contrast to the rest of its behaviour and which coupled with the 9000rpm redline hints at the real passion among the development team.

Yes, it demands respect in the wet but at least the modest low-speed torque makes it unlikely for you to exit roundabouts backwards TVR-style… unless, that is you're already half-expecting it after pushing your luck.

In more sedate use though, it does mean there's the possibility of provoking an easily-controlled squirrelly moment which brings a smile to your face in the daily commute.

And bringing a smile to your face is what the S2000 is all about. My verdict after living with one for a year? Sorry, it may be the best-selling sports car of the modern era but after sampling the S2000, any appeal the MX-5 once had has simply evaporated. As for that V12 Aston… I really must use it more often. ■

BOXING CLEVER

We try to decide between two very different ways of creating a 150mph modern classic roadster.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL WAGER

On the face of it, here we have two very similar propositions: both two-seater sports cars, both packing over 200bhp and with the potential to crack 150mph.

The practical reality though is that in many ways they couldn't be more different both in their background and in the way they go about getting to that magical ton-and-a-half: one was a calculated attempt to extend the appeal of the Porsche brand downwards into a more affordable market, while the other was Honda's single-minded celebration of its engineering prowess.

Despite that though, it's a fair bet that anyone looking for a credible modern classic roadster with sufficient pace to make it a step up from the likes of the MX-5 may well have both of these on their shopping list. We try to make the decision.

PORSCHE BOXSTER

For many readers, this comparison is over before it's even begun: for anyone suddenly priced out of the 911 the Boxster represents an affordable way to achieve a dream. Growing up with air-cooled VWs as I did myself, a six-cylinder Porsche was always an ultimate goal and to discover that it was a realistic proposition was a delight.

It was this thinking which informed Porsche's decision to produce the car in the first place: declining sales in the crucial US market combined during the mid 1990s with financial pressures back home generated by the newly reunified German economy to see profits falling and workers being laid off.

Porsche's position wasn't helped by the 911 looking increasingly antiquated. Despite an extensive update into the 993 generation in 1994, the car's bodywork was still based largely on the structure of the 1964 original and although the air-cooled six gave the car its signature soundtrack, it was coming to the limits of its development.

At the other end of the slender range, the entry-level Porsche of the time was the 944, itself descended from the VW/Porsche 924 of 1976. Alongside these, the 928 was still plugging along, expensive both to make and to buy and never a big seller despite its capability.

Heads were duly scratched in Stuttgart and a two-part survival plan was worked up. Firstly the 944 would

be updated into the 968, Porsche claiming the car to be 80 per cent new, which would hold the fort while a new generation of affordable Porsche would be developed.

Secondly, a new 911 would be developed, but would share as much as possible with the new entry-level car – specifically, its front end structure. After all, this would be the first time in Porsche's history that its cheaper model hadn't been developed in conjunction with the Volkswagen group and so resources were correspondingly tighter.

Given project name 986, the new car was envisaged as being smaller than the 911 and since it had been decided that it would be a strict two-seater, the opportunity was there to retain a rearwards engine position and so give the new car a selling point setting it apart from the likes of the MX-5 or SLK.

The clever bit was in deciding to rotate the engine and transaxle through 180 degrees to make the car mid-engined as opposed to rear-engined, which gave the design the required touch of the exotic, yet avoided the 911's tricky handling.

Early prototypes used a four-cylinder powerplant but as the project neared completion it was decided to go for a six-cylinder unit both to give the car a clear Porsche character and also to lift it further above the lesser-branded competition. It also made sound financial sense, since the engine was to be shared with the 911 being developed in parallel.

This was a big job, since even Porsche had been forced to admit that ducting ambient air over the cylinders could no longer cut it from a noise and emissions point of view and so the Porsche flat six was to become water-cooled for the first time. Using the same engine in both models offered production economies and avoided the prospect of the four-pot motor being compared to a Subaru. The Boxster would initially use a 2.5-litre version of the new engine, good for 204bhp and would also be offered with Porsche's newly developed Tiptronic automatic as an option. Although hyped as revolutionary, the Tiptronic was in fact a conventional torque converter automatic with switches on gearlever and steering wheel to command the unit's ECU to change gear manually. In fact it was nothing new – BMW tuner Hartge had been offering a similar system for years – but it did capture the imagination and the availability of a self-shifting box did extend the appeal of the car. In fact the automatic was a £2500 option.

So much so in fact that there's something of an urban rumour developed suggesting that all early Boxster were Tiptronic cars which isn't the case:

Styled by in-house Porsche designer Grant Larson with clever echoes of the 550 Spyder and 718RSK, the concept was given the name Boxster – combining 'roadster' and 'boxer' – and was displayed as a concept at the Detroit show in January 1993.

Like the Audi TT, the design was very little altered in the journey from concept to production, although just like the Audi it did gain a stubby rear spoiler to compensate for its lack of downforce at high speed.

The body itself used a front-end structure which was almost identical to the 911 which would be unveiled later the same year, with high-strength steel used in critical areas, the panels provided by BMW's Eisenach plant which had the ability to press the high-strength metal.

The Boxster was offered only as an

TWIN TEST

S2000 VS BOXTER

open car and its body engineering used the roll hoops as an integral part of the structure, while the roof itself was engineered to fold to a very compact size – necessary to fold flush above the high rear deck above the engine. With no fewer than 12 motors, it could be raised in just 12 seconds and needed no fiddly cover to make it look neat.

This kind of engineering was perhaps nothing less than was expected from Porsche, but the masterstroke was in its pricing. In the US market, it was positioned at a shade under $40,000 – $39,950 to be precise – and it would go on to outsell the 911 comprehensively. Here in the UK where the car was launched in October 1996, it wasn't quite the affordable car American buyers enjoyed, but it still put a 'proper' Porsche within reach of many. At £39,210 it was a massive £10,000 cheaper than the £49,965 Jaguar XK8 and even undercut the BMW M3 coupe at £40,130. Its nearest competitor was perhaps the £31,601 Mercedes SLK, offered initially only in four-cylinder SLK230 form and with automatic box.

The Boxster also had the build quality to back up the brand, with the car finished to the usual Porsche standards which put it far ahead of both Mercedes and Jaguars of the era.

In manual form, the Boxster had the pace to keep up with the competition, too: its 0-60mph time was just half a second adrift of the Jaguar and a second ahead of the Mercedes, although the M3 'Evo' did have it beaten. Either way, it was in a different world from the likes of the Mazda and the four-cylinder BMW Z3, although the six-pot Z3 2.8i launched a year later would offer a fairer alternative.

It's a manual car we have here and one of the nicer early Boxsters out there, too. Regular readers will no doubt be aware that you can pick up a road-legal example for as little as £3000 these days, but popular opinion suggests that you really shouldn't, unless you want a project and have a well-equipped workshop to hand. Indeed, as Paiul Watkins of Freewheeler who brought this car along to our photo shoot suggests, it will cost the difference to bring a really cheap example up to the standards of a nicer example and possibly more.

In fact, sampling a well presented Boxster like this, you start wondering why anyone would have chosen to splash the extra £10,200 on the entry-level 911 Carrera. To my mind the styling is better proportioned than the rear-engined car, the Boxster's interior is more spacious in some ways and the

twin luggage boots of the mid-engined car make it generally more practical. Yes the 911 is in theory a four-seater, but in reality the back seats are for occasional lift-home-from-the-pub use for anyone larger than toddler-sized.

Let's be honest though, boot space isn't going to be uppermost in your mind when you've already decided on a two-seat sports car and when it comes to the driving experience, the Boxster is real deal Porsche. From the moment you turn the key and hear the gruff flat-six beat you know you're in something special and the view from the driver's seat reinforces that. The overlapping dials with their script font scream 911, as does the overall design of the dashboard which is all but identical to the 996-generation 911. High quality materials mean even the earliest examples have worn the years well and the plastics and leather still look presentable.

Mindful of the fact that the supposedly entry-level car would be overlapping the bottom end of the 911 market, Porsche offered the chance to spend the difference on options and this example is more lavishly trimmed than many, featuring the extended Savannah leather, electric seats and factory air conditioning.

TWIN TEST

S2000 VS BOXTER

As expected from a car which was supposed to extend the brand's appeal, the Boxster is a much easier car to drive than a classic 911, with a light clutch action and an easy cable-operated gearshift to the Audi-sourced five-speed. Together with a longish throttle pedal travel, it makes the manual car easy to drive in traffic and for a car with its exotic looks and high performance, it didn't present an intimidating prospect to those trading up from the likes of a Golf GTI.

The 2.5 offers a useful 240lb.ft at a lowish 4500rpm which together with the manual car's 1290kg kerb weight translates to a muscular feel. it's happy to pull 30mph in fifth gear, while extending it towards the 6500rpm redline will release that 911 soundtrack despite the quietening effects of water cooling.

Without an engine over the front wheels, the steering is wonderfully communicative and despite the mid-engined layout the Boxster is easy to drive hard. It feels reassuringly stable at speed and its compact size makes it easy to place on the road, while the suspension tuning is largely benign. Really push hard in a Boxster and you'll find it nicely balanced, tending towards gradually building understeer rather than the snappy behaviour of many mid-engined cars.

And when the red mist has subsided, you can polish the Porsche crest you

never thought you'd be able to afford at MX-5 money. Does that make it the ultimate sensible exotic... or perhaps too sensible?

HONDA S2000

It's not often you get a car this side of a Ferrari which could be said to make a Porsche look staid, but the Honda S2000 is one of them. Conceived by Honda as a celebration of its engineering prowess to celebrate half a century in the car business, its development took a very different path from the Boxster.

Rather than a means of extending a brand downwards and achieving economies by component sharing, the S2000 was driven by the engineers rather than the market or production accountants and shares virtually nothing with other Hondas.

It was this steely focus on performance, weight-saving and efficiency which meant a six-cylinder engine was out of the question, Honda employing its traditional recipe of a multi-valve four-cylinder instead. Honda had traditionally rejected forced induction in favour of its trick VTEC variable cam timing set-up which meant that its 240 bhp would be achieved without the use of a turbocharger.

Achieving that kind of power from a normally aspirated 2-litre which could be driven comfortably on the road was a tall order and it's the engine which is the heart of the S2000.

Many of the design team were plucked from Honda's F1 programme and since the route to increased power without resorting to turbocharging required correspondingly higher engine speeds, much work concentrated on friction reduction and reduced inertial weight.

A relatively short-stroke design running 11:1 compression, the engine uses low-friction valve gear with roller rockers, a special low-friction coating on certain surfaces and of course the VTEC system to permit an astonishing 9000rpm redline. Motorsport-inspired detail touches are evident throughout the design, from the straight-port inlet manifold to the low-friction oil pump and stiffening ladder bolted between block and sump.

The result feels like a race engine and although it's docile enough to be happy trundling around in urban traffic, it doesn't show its talents until there's at least 5800rpm showing on the

digital dials, since that's when the VTEC changeover happens.

Driving through a six-speed box with a Torsen LSD in the rear axle, the F20C engine is mounted well back in the chassis, the rear of the block almost under the screen and Honda claiming a 50:50 weight distribution. The body structure is designed as a 'high X-bone frame' which translates to it being designed from scratch as an open car using a deep centre tunnel and sills, with all the rigidity benefits that confers. Like the Porsche, the roll hoops behind the seats are built in as part of the structure.

Its styling meanwhile couldn't be more Japanese, the thrusting shape ignoring the Porsche's retro touches in favour of a very modern aggression. As soon as you climb abord the Honda it feels smaller than the Porsche, more focused sports car and less of a tourer, something reinforced by the racy 'engine start' button, its glamour rather diminished by needing to turn a conventional ignition key lock first.

The sound which greets you is a world away from the Porsche's muscular six-cylinder idle but the hard-edged buzz still hints at its potential. Throttle response is razor sharp compared to the bigger Porsche engine and although it's as easy to drive as a basic Civic, the S2000 feels like a proper sports car of the old school. The gearlever is mounted high on the tunnel and there's just 40mm movement between ratios, which is just as well considering how often you'll be stirring the six speeds.

Newcomers to the S2000 could be forgiven for wondering that all the fuss is about, but to get the best from the car you really need to throw away a lifetime's worth of mechanical sympathy. At engine speeds where the Boxster driver is already thinking about an upshift, the Honda engine is just getting into its stride and there must be many owners who have ever experienced its full potential. "Drive it like you stole it" was the instruction I was given on my first acquaintance with a Honda VTEC and it applies to the S2000 more than any other: wind it out to 8000rpm and the surge as the VTEC does its stuff is as sudden as a turbo coming on boost.

And the thing is with these engines, you can do that time and time again without it breaking, such is Honda's reputation for reliability. Popular opinion suggests that cars driven in the VTEC zone constantly will use a touch of oil but it's addictive stuff.

TWIN TEST

S2000 VS BOXTER

Of course, driving the car as if you've a pair of committed blue lights flashing in the mirror might be the way to get the best from the peaky engine, it's also the best way to end up the wrong side of the hedge. The S2000's fiery nature has won it a reputation for being tricky to master in the handling stakes, although that's to some extent exaggerated. The chassis is pure Honda, with double wishbones throughout and is beautifully balanced with it, but there's no getting away from the fact that these cars can be twitchy, especially in the wet. The handling revisions for the 2003-onwards cars did tame things to some extent with revised suspension settings, but traction control wasn't offered until the car was facelifted in 2007 into the AP2 model.

The upshot is that the S2000 does need to be treated with respect, especially in the wet, even if you do fancy yourself as an opposite-lock hero. Drive sensibly though and it's a rewarding prospect with only the odd moment on a wet roundabout to keep you awake.

The rest of the ownership prospect is the equal of the Porsche, with a powerful heater, a nicely screwed together interior and a roof which motors up and down just as quickly. And that doesn't make it at all easy to choose between them.

"The S2000 isn't for everybody and it's fair to say that the Porsche's talents are more evenly spread, making it the more practical choice in pretty much every respect.

THE FACTS	PORSCHE BOXSTER	HONDA S2000
ENGINE:	2480cc	1997cc
TRANSMISSION:	5-spd man	6-spd man
MAX POWER:	204bhp	240bhp
MAX SPEED:	149mph	150mph
0-60 MPH:	6.9secs	6.2secs
LENGTH:	4.3m	4.1m
WEIGHT:	1250kg	1260kg

VERDICT

For those with their heart set on a Porsche, the more relevant choice is perhaps between buying from the top-end of the Boxster market or taking a chance on a cheaper 996 generation 911, but for others it's not so clear-cut. Nobody ever expected a Porsche to be rendered the sensible choice without involving anything big-budget and Italian, but the S2000 makes it seem like the safe bet... and after the high-revving, single-minded Honda it can even seem a touch, well, boring.

But the S2000 isn't for everybody and it's fair to say that the Porsche's talents are more evenly spread, making it the more practical choice in pretty much every respect.

So my advice is to go for the Boxster then, the surprisingly affordable way to get yourself into a proper flat-six Porsche... or is it? Having grown up with air-cooled Beetles, it was after setting out shopping for a Boxster that I came home with the Honda in our photos and it's not a decision I've regretted. Sometimes it pays to break out of your comfort zone.

BUYING AND OWNING

You can buy a Boxster for as little as £3000 but you might not want to. Typically cars at the bottom of the price barrel will have sketchy history and any

Porsche of this era with the M96 engine can be an unknown quantity, thanks to the bearing on the intermediate main shaft (IMS) which drives the oil pump and camshafts. It's been known for the supposedly sealed-for-life bearing to fail with predictably catastrophic results, but like most things it's largely exaggerated by urban rumour. It's often said not to affect the earlier engines and less common on cars which are driven harder; indeed, many cars are quite happily running the original bearing. It's common to have an uprated part fitted to solve the problem though, which is why a good history is peace of mind... unless the car is cheap enough to simply have the work done.

The S2000 doesn't suffer any particular Achilles' Heel but any 9000rpm engine needs regular servicing so again history is crucial, particularly for evidence of the valve clearance service and oil changes.

The Honda in particular attracts modifiers of the Fast and Furious kind, so cheap cars can often get expensive when putting parts back to standard, but the big issue is bodywork condition. Honda's rust protection wasn't the best and there are plenty of tatty cars out there. It goes without question that the S2000 is one car which also needs checking carefully for evidence of off-roading of the unintentional kind. The convertible roof is also fairly basic and can be easily damaged, although higher-quality replacements are easily sourced.

Values for the S2000 are all over the place, with early cars showing 150,000 miles for as little as £4500 and dealers asking £10,000 and more for late-model AP2 facelift cars. The sweet spot is the 2003-on model with the glass rear window and revised suspension, which runs anywhere from £7000 to £8500 depending on mileage and condition, with the factory hardtop (standard on the GT model) commanding some £500 extra.

Boxster prices are similarly varied, with cars available from just £3500 which look like usable prospects but can easily become money pits if you don't tread carefully, and plenty of better historied examples at the £5000-£8000 mark. Nicer cars run up to the £9000-£10,000 mark for which you can expect a car needing nothing spending on it for some time. ■

RACE BRED

Honda's answer to the MX-5 wasn't to join it but beat it into submission with its astonishing S2000, offering 240 bhp from a race-bred four-cylinder engine without a turbo in sight.

WORDS: PAUL WAGER

When a company like Honda decides to build something special to shout about its 50 years in business then you know the result is going to be impressive and so it was when the wraps came off the S2000 in 1999.

Fresh on the heels of the technology showcase which was the NSX, the S2000 was in concept a kind of grown-up Mazda MX-5, taking that car's back-to-basics approach but adding significantly more sophistication and nearly double the power output.

The heart of the S2000 was its engine: a 2-litre twin-cam four-cylinder into which the firm threw the total of its accumulated knowledge over its half-century of existence, with many of the design team taken from the F1 engine programe. The result was a power output of 240 bhp which was achieved without turbocharger or supercharger but by adding the firm's trick VTEC variable cam timing and letting it spin to a heady 9000rpm.

You could be forgiven for expecting the result to be a lumpy, awkward unit to drive but in reality it was as docile in everyday use as a basic Civic and was also able to meet the strict California emissions regulations. Keep your foot in it until the needle hit 6500 rpm though and the change in character was starting as the VTEC did its thing and the needle leapt to the 9000rpm redline. At this

point, the short-shifting six-speed box came into its own and the grip afforded by the double wishbone chassis was much appreciated.

The body was designed to achieve class-leading rigidity but the S2000 also weighed in at just 1260 kg, meaning performance was lively: 0-62 mph in just 6.2 seconds and a top speed of 150 mph. Not bad going from a 2-litre four-pot.

All of which means there's nothing quite like the S2000. Yes, there are open two-seaters which provide similar performance but none of them manage it with such elegance of engineering and without using either much larger engines or at least one turbo. For that reason alone, it deserves the status of modern classic and that's before you factor in the superb Honda build quality and the neat styling which successfully updated the traditional roadster shape without resorting to clumsy retro.

What's more, they're currently startling value but you'd best be quick: these cars have always had a strong enthusiast following and the demand for standard, unmodified cars will shortly see values climbing.

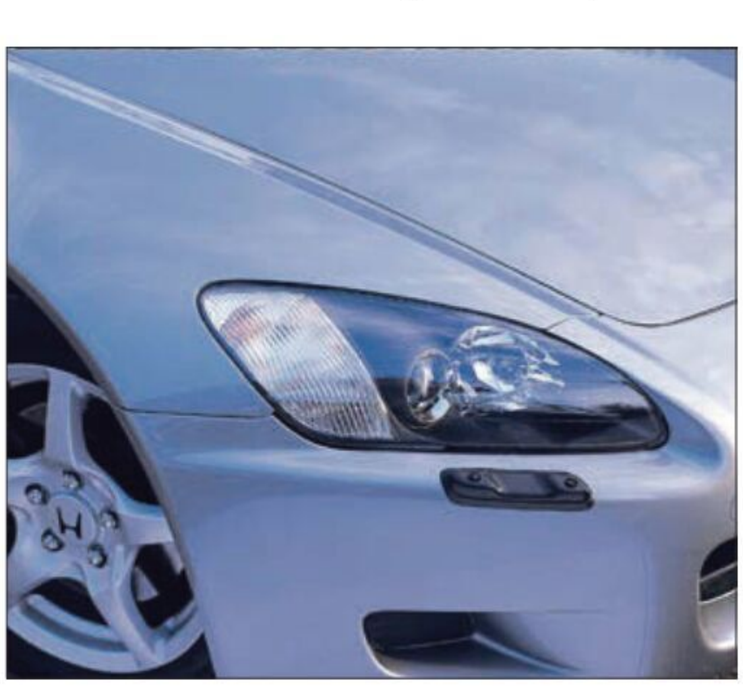
HISTORY

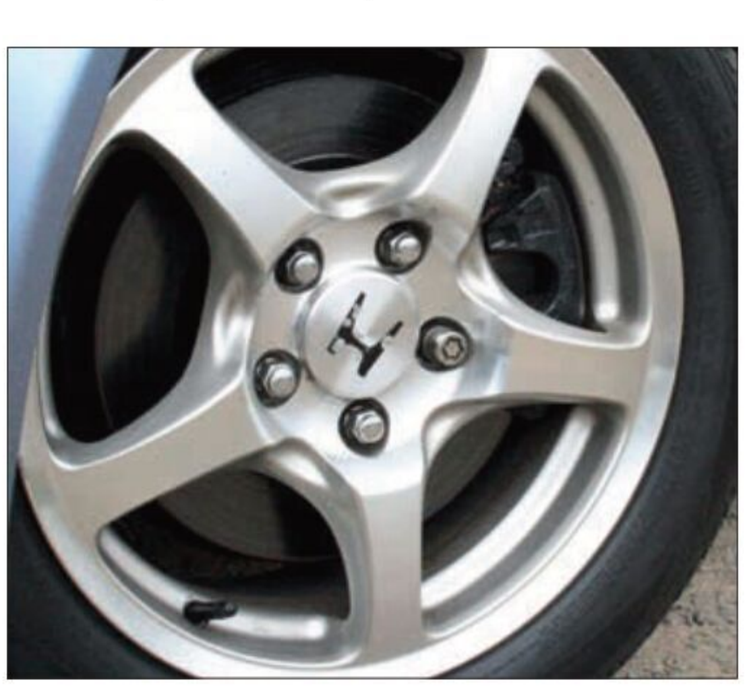
Launched in 1999, the S2000 was offered in UK-market form as just a single 240 PS model. Standard spec was generous, including an electric

roof, leather seats, HID lights and air conditioning. For the 2002 model year, the car received revised spring and damper settings to make it less twitchy, a heated glass rear window in the convertible top and minor cosmetic details: a new leather and alloy gearknob, silver stereo cover, darker alloy wheels, chrome rings around the tail lights and larger Honda badges.

In 2004 the car received more major modifications, including more major suspension changes Including a softer rear end), revised bumper design and 17-inch wheels, while the VTEC 'switchover' was made smoother, with many owners reporting that these revised engines use less oil. A welcome change for the 2006 model year was the change to a drive-by-wire throttle instead of a mechanical cable, which permitted the option of traction control. Many owners pushing too hard in the wet had discovered just how easy it was to spin a rear-drive car like the S2000 and this saved many from embarrassing spins. You can recognise these cars at a glance by the lack of a hole in the centre of the headrests.

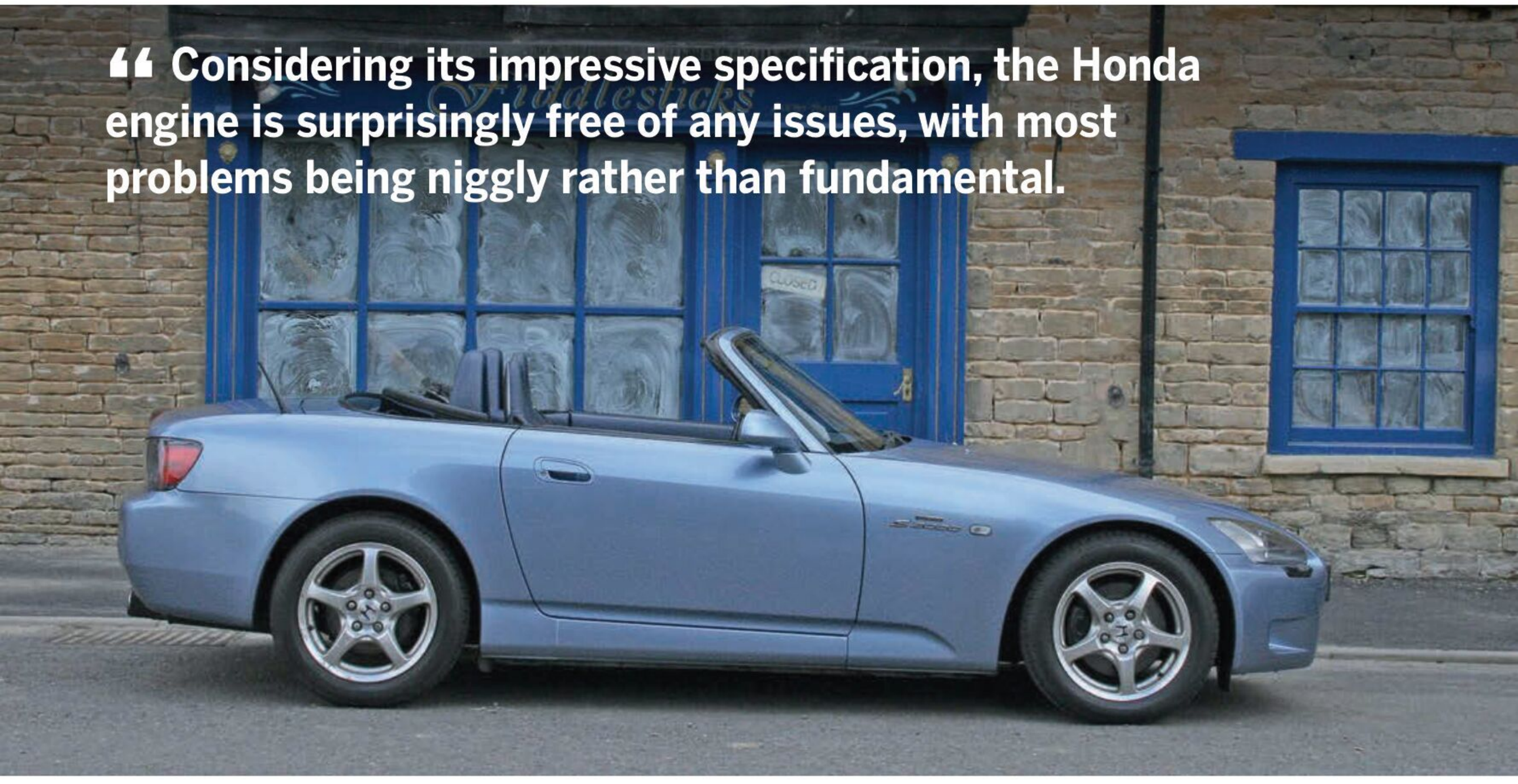
The final change came with the 2008 model year, which introduced traction control as a standard feature and brought more changes to spring and dampers as well as different alloy wheels with a wider spoke design. Production of the S2000 finally ended in 2009 after more than 110,000 had been sold.





S2000 offers 237bhp from just two litres courtesy of VTEC acting on both cams.

“ Considering its impressive specification, the Honda engine is surprisingly free of any issues, with most problems being niggly rather than fundamental.



BUYING
HONDA S2000

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

BODY

For once, we won't be advising you to grovel under the car looking for structural rust, but instead be on your guard for accident damage. It's a powerful, lightweight car driven by its rear wheels and with pre-2006 models not coming with electronic traction control they're notoriously easy to spin, especially in the wet on less than perfect tyres. For that reason it pays to make the usual checks of panel gaps, overspray and paint mismatch.

The electric roof is generally reliable too, although many don't sit flush with the bodywork when lowered as the elasticated tensioning straps tend to weaken with age. Aftermarket replacements are available which will make the hood fold neatly again. If the roof catches at the screen rattle at

“ For once, we won't be advising you to grovel under the car looking for structural rust, but instead be on your guard for accident damage.

speed, this can be down to worn striker plates which are easily replaced with later parts which are thought to be made from harder metal.

ENGINE

Considering its impressive specification, the Honda engine is surprisingly free of any issues, with most problems being niggly rather than fundamental. A faulty MAP (Manifold Absolute Pressure) sensor can cause intermittent rough running, 'kangarooing' at slower speeds and misfires in the VTEC rev range but is easily cleaned or replaced. Corroded wiring to the ECU can cause rough running problems which can be tricky to diagnose. Other problems can include failed oxygen sensors, intake air temperature sensors and injectors but all are easily sorted and are simple DIY fixes too. A noisy cam chain can be caused by a failing tensioner.

TRANSMISSION

The gearbox in the S2000 was developed specially for the car with the aim of making it light and also as narrow as possible in order for the engine and box to sit as far back as possible in the bodyshell. The design

features lightweight gears working with a similarly lightweight engine flywheel and is generally a reliable unit although some hard-driven cars have shown problems with the synchro in higher gears. Some owners have reported that heavy clutch action has been cured by carefully greasing the release fork through the aperture in the bellhousing using grease on the end of a piece of wire.

BRAKES

You're looking at 11.8 inch vented discs on the front with 11 inch solid discs at the rear and they're well up to the car's performance. If a car has uprated brakes, ask yourself why: it could have seen a fair few track days. Service parts aren't too expensive for a car of this calibre: a set of front pads is £47, although the front discs are costly at around £90 each.

TYRES

The S2000 is very sensitive to the correct tyres and the original Bridgestone ES02JZ were specially developed for the car. These were later replaced for the 2004 model by Bridgestone RE050s which are a well regarded tyre and a good replacement for the originals which are no longer available.

STEERING & SUSPENSION

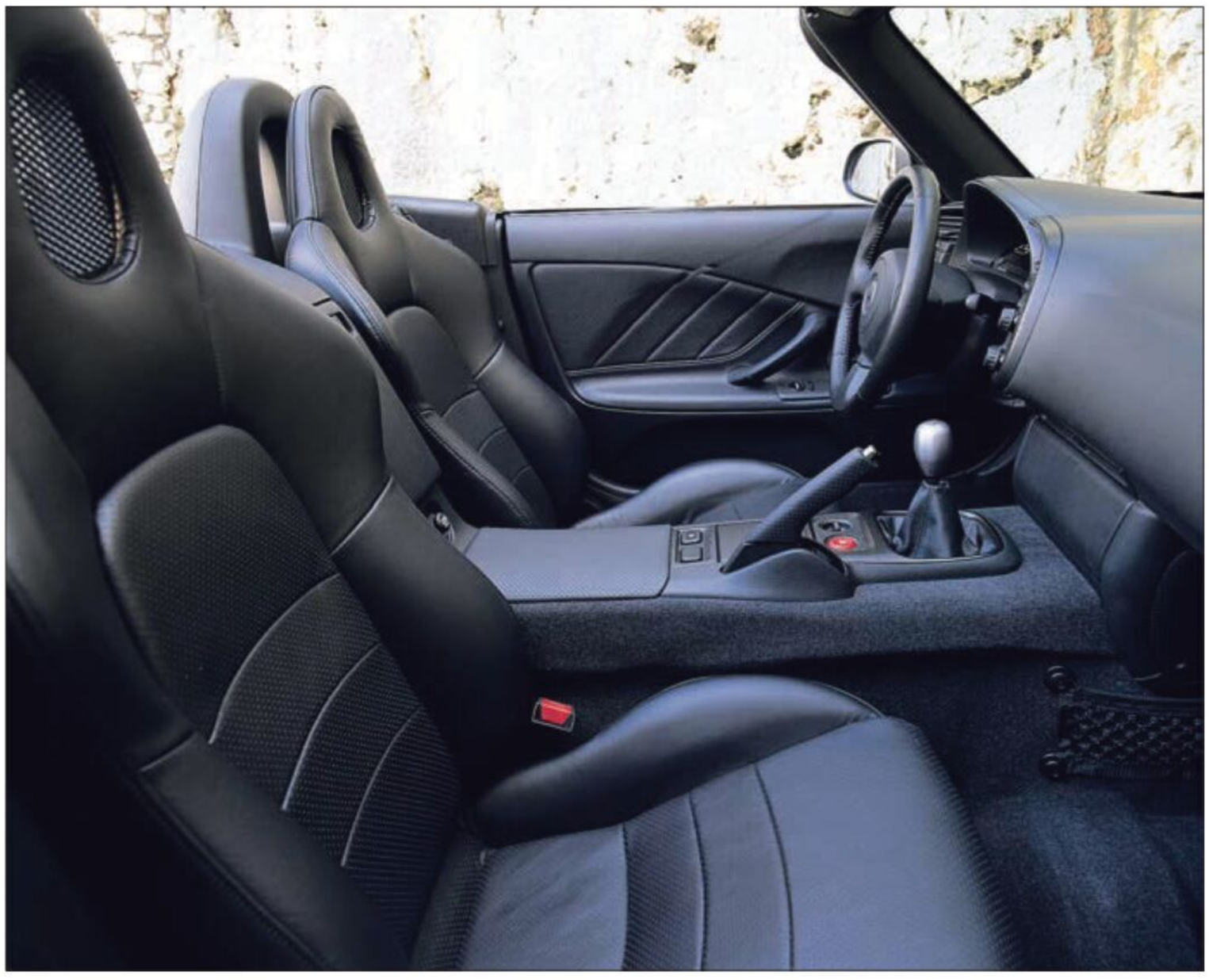
In order to reduce the parasitic drag from an engine-driven hydraulic pump, Honda went for electric power steering on the S2000. Derived from the NSX setup, it varies the level of assistance according to road speed and also uses a variable gearing ratio to provide progressively quicker steering as the wheel is turned further. It's a reliable system and a dashboard warning light will tell you if something's wrong.

The suspension is one of the car's few Achilles' Heels though. It's described as an 'in-wheel' design by Honda on account of the componentry being shaped so that most of the structure can be accommodated inside the standard 16-inch wheel, in turn allowing a lower bonnet and rear deck.

"The suspension is one of the car's few Achilles' Heels though. It's described as an 'in-wheel' design by Honda...

In standard form with everything working properly, the result is superbly balanced handling and a lovely taut feel, but sadly many cars are suffering from seized wishbone bolts where they pass through the centre of the metalastic bushes connecting them to the bodyshell. This isn't a problem until a wheel alignment is needed – and these cars are sensitive to the correct alignment. At this point you'll discover that the bolts can't be moved and that Honda will supply only a complete arm and not the bush separately. Many keen owners and specialists will grease the bolts with anti-seize to prevent this happening.

At the front end, the castor or 'compliance' bushes can split which becomes an MoT failure. Again, Honda doesn't sell the bush by itself, but aftermarket parts are available.



INTERIOR

Really? It's a Honda you're talking about so if you find any loose or rattly trim then it means someone has been in here fitting aftermarket stereos or alarms. If you do see an upgraded stereo, check that it works with the original remote controls. What seems to be a squeaking dashboard can often be the bonnet release catch or the rear view mirror mounting.

If you find a puddle of water in the passenger footwell, don't assume the roof is leaking – it's quite likely the condensation drain from the A/C unit which has been kicked off - simple to slip it back into place.

“ For those less brave, the starting price is closer to the £8500 mark, for which you should pick up a well cared- for example from an enthusiast owner...

VALUES

Fancy taking a chance? At the time of writing we found an S2000 for an enticingly low £5989. Yes, it's showing 162,000 miles... but Honda proudly boasts it's never had a warranty failure on its VTEC system.

For those less brave, the starting price is closer to the £8500 mark, for which you should pick up a well cared- for example from an enthusiast owner. Expect to see anything from 80,000 to 120,000 miles but buy on condition rather than mileage.

Move up to the £12,000 mark and you have a big selection of facelifted cars around the 60-70,000-mile mark, with the very last low-mileage examples advertised by traders at anywhere from £15,000 to £18,000. ■

SPECS:	HONDA S2000
ENGINE	1997cc
POWER (BHP/RPM)	240/8300
TOP SPEED	150 mph
0-60 MPH	6.2 secs
CONSUMPTION	29 mpg
GEARBOX	6sp man
LENGTH	4135 mm
WIDTH	1750 mm
WEIGHT	1260 kg


S200 0UK

HONDA S2000 V

Early 2000s sports cars battle for top spot.

WORDS: SAM SKELTON

The Audi TT changed the way we viewed sports cars. Svelte, affordable, and marketed to within an inch of its life, it soon became the in-car among the in-crowd. But in 1.8 Turbo guise, many felt it to be a shade on the wet side, even with the 225bhp option. And against rivals such as Honda's S2000 or Porsche's Boxster, the small Audi did seem to be a little more show than go.

But when it fitted the 3.2 litre V6 from its S3, all that changed. Now it had almost 250bhp to play with, and its all wheel drive Quattro chassis meant that it could handle it in all conditions. But while it was an undoubted improvement on the original, many still argued that it was less of a sports car than Honda's well-considered, revvy S2000. Both cars have a long list of fanatics today, and to argue to the enthusiasts of one that the other is a better car can amount to heresy.

But which one makes the better modern classic sports car today?

AHEAD THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Launched in 2003, the Audi TT 3.2 was a useful boost to the range. Launched at the same time as the 150bhp front wheel drive entry level model, its place at the top of the TT tree meant that it was intended as a true rival to cars like the Porsche Boxster, BMW Z4 3.0 and Honda S2000. Gone was the Golf GTi's 1.8 litre turbocharged four in favour of a 3.2 V6 borrowed from the Audi S3, hooked up to a six speed version of Audi's dual clutch DSG gearbox. This allowed the car to be driven as an automatic, but for the driver to select his own ratios should they be required. The dual clutch system ensured that changes could be made as quickly as possible, by effectively priming the gear above and below the current choice ready to be changed.

Initially seen as a concept car in 1994, public reaction to the TT concept was so strong that Audi pledged to productionise the car – and it was launched in 1.8T form in 1998. A convertible would follow for 1999. The TT used the same underpinnings as many of VW's other mid sized offerings from the Golf to the Skoda Octavia, its A4 platform first seen under the first Audi A3 of 1996. Married to this was the 1.8 litre Turbo engine seen in the Octavia VRS, the A3 and the Golf GTi among others, through a six speed manual gearbox and Quattro all wheel drive. Later models included the front wheel drive entry level TT Roadster, and the lightweight TT Quattro Sport. Early

AUDI TT 3.2

concerns of stability were addressed by Audi in one of the most famous automotive recalls of all time, with changes made to the stability control system and a spoiler fitted to the tail of cars which had been corrected.

Audi replaced the TT in 2006 with a new model, this time bodied with a mixture of aluminium front panels and steel rear panels to enhance its weight distribution, and based on the VW Groups' new A5 platform. Four cylinder and V6 models continued to be made available. Over 275000 Mk1 TTs were built, though no figures exist to state how many of these came with the V6 engine.

BIRTHDAY PRESENT

Honda created the S2000 as a fiftieth birthday present to itself. Honda had begun producing motorcycles in 1949,

S2000 V AUDI TT

and to commemorate its half century it returned to its passenger car roots. Its first passenger design had been a sportscar, the S360 – which would be productionised as the larger-engined S500 of 1963. The SSM concept car of 1995 hinted at what Honda wanted to do next, and the S2000 was the result. It broke with mid sized sports car thinking by retaining a four cylinder engine of just two litres, albeit one which used Honda's VTEC system on both inlet and exhaust camshafts in order to maximise power to 237bhp. Molybdenum disulphide coated pistons and fibre-reinforced-metal liners ensured contact surfaces with minimal friction, while an aluminium block kept things light.

It was a car that didn't flatter its driver, rather one which rewarded driving talent. An edgy and slightly twitchy chassis on the early cars with power delivery more like a bike than a car meant that it could, in the wrong hands, be quite a handful. Anything deviating from a straight line could catch you out if you put your foot down, but the flip side was a car as manoeuvrable as an F16 jet if you treated it with the

respect it deserved. Later "AP2" second generation cars were tweaked to be softer and more forgiving, but retained the raw driver enjoyment that those early cars had in spades.

Updated as the AP2 for 2004, there were cosmetic changes. New front and rear bumpers were married with new front and rear lights, there were oval shaped exhaust pipes, and under the skin suspension settings were altered to tame what many found to be a very raw experience. There were bigger wheels, with Bridgestone RE050 tyres, the geometry was changed to reduce toe-in under cornering load, and the subframe was stiffened. Two years earlier, the GT pack was launched in the UK offering a hard top and external temperature sensor for £550 over list, and this was continued into the AP2. Production would cease in 2009, with the sale of 100 GT Edition 100 models in Britain marking the end of production. These were finished in Grand Prix White, with graphite grey wheels, a red leather interior, and minor trim improvements. Each was numbered. Today, all S2000s are collectible, but this final batch are especially desirable to collectors.

“...When you point the nose down your favourite B road very few cars can come close to offering the same amount of driver enjoyment as the S2000

VERDICT

The Audi is the better car for everyday use, if you don’t want to have to drive hard all the time. The coupe option adds practicality, while the torque on offer from that V6 makes it a more practical proposition for regular high speed motorway runs and cruising about at low revs.

But if you’re cruising, or on a motorway, a sports car isn’t the right car. And that’s the primary reason why the Audi won’t be winning here. It’s an excellent car, but it’s more of a grand tourer than an out and out sports car. Its V6 may be sonorous, but it cannot compete with the raucous howl as the S2000 heads past the point at which other engines would be begging for mercy. The Honda’s revvy nature, its sharp gearbox and its tight cabin might not be the ideal package for popping to Tesco, but when you point the nose down your favourite B road very few cars can come close to offering the same amount of driver enjoyment as the S2000 car. We would understand if you felt that the TT offered a better compromise for everyday living. But why should a sports car be about compromise? ■

	HONDA S2000	AUDI TT 3.2
ENGINE	1997cc I4	3189cc V6
TRANSMISSION	Six-speed manual	Six-speed DSG
MAX POWER	237bhp	247bhp
MAX SPEED	150mph	155mph
0-60	6.2 seconds	6.3 seconds
LENGTH	4135mm	4040mm
WEIGHT	1260kg	1490kg

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HONDA S2000 V TVR TAMORA

Two left field sportscars. There can only be one winner.

WORDS: SAM SKELTON

Far from being the typical small 2.0 sports car, the Honda S2000 took the fight to the big boys. Its revvy, powerful engine meant performance figures that could shame Porsches, and the whole thing was wrapped up in one of the prettiest bodies of the early 2000s. Understandably, it became a modern classic the day it was launched, and has become one of the clever-money choices for those looking to avoid the BMW/Porsche/Audi band of obvious big sportscars.

But there was already a company whose raison d'etre was to provide big, left field sports cars. And when TVR launched its Tamora in 2002 as a replacement for the long-lived Chimaera, it was clear that here was a car that could challenge the S2000 at its own game. More power, more exclusivity, but a smaller network of dealers to support the car and a far smaller development budget meant that the TVR was unquestionably a choice for enthusiasts, but many of the S2000's target customers were tempted.

But which approach is better? Honda's technically led, revvy banshee, or TVR's torquey and brutal rocketship?

THE POWER AND THE GLORY

Unveiled at the 2000 Birmingham Motor Show, the TVR Tamora was launched in 2002. Intended as a Chimaera replacement, the Tamora was supposed to be a softer, more urban-friendly TVR model. This meant it got power steering and a lighter clutch than TVRs of old, but still did without traction control or ABS. Smaller 16" wheels were fitted to improve the ride, and there was a healthy amount of pedal travel to the throttle to counteract snap oversteer. Under the bonnet was a short stroke version of the Speed Six straight six engine used in TVR's existing Tuscan, on whose chassis the Tamora was also based. In the Tamora, this engine displaced just 3.6 litres – but developed 345bhp and 290lb.ft of torque. This made for an astoundingly quick car – 0-60 in 4.5 seconds and 174mph flat out decimated just about every single one of the Tamora's rivals when new, and is still fast for the market sector twenty years on.

Magazines loved the way it drove, with Evo commenting that it was the most sorted TVR that its staff had driven to date. Autocar described it in retrospect as one of the nicest TVRs to drive owing to almost sensible suspension and power that the chassis could actually handle. Here was a TVR that could theoretically bring new blood into the TVR fold – if it could get the rest of the package right.

The Tamora, however, didn't enjoy the Honda's shining reputation for reliability. In truth, it was more like TVRs of old than the company would be comfortable admitting. Early examples suffered valvetrain issues, with cam lobes causing premature wear to the followers. Clutches barely lasted 25000 miles, while servicing intervals of 6000 miles had to be rigidly observed if you didn't want to find swarf in the sump.

S2000 VS 350 TAMORA

The Tamora wasn't tweaked much during its life, though its architecture underpinned the T350c coupe and T350t targa models. Its awkward looks and strong price of just over £36000 made it difficult to justify when that would not only have bought you a BMW M Roadster, but also the wild Griffith during the brief period when the two models overlapped. As a result, Tamora simple didn't sell. By the end of production in 2006 just 350 Tamoras had been built, though the architecture would prove more successful in T350 and Sagaris forms.

“ By the end of production in 2006 just 350 Tamoras had been built, though the architecture would prove more successful in T350 and Sagaris forms.

MILLENNIUM BUG

The biggest fly in the ointment for the TVR was the Honda S2000 – at ten grand less, it offered far better value, and while the power output on paper was lower than way that that engine can rev right round to 9000rpm made it feel every bit as insane as the TVR, but in a different way.

When you first drive an S2000, it doesn't feel especially quick. But that's because changing gear when your ears tell you to, at about 4500rpm, is only half the story. It'll rev all the way round to 9000, and if you ignore your ears

and obey the tachometer you'll find that it's a different story to the one you first thought it would be. It's fast. Not as fast as the TVR, but it feels like it's faster still.

The S2000 was an anniversary gift from Honda to its clients – commemorating fifty years of vehicle production, Honda returned to its roots by developing a compact and revvy sports car in the manner of the S500 with which it established itself as a car builder. The SSM concept of 1995 established the concept, and by 1999 the concept had become a production reality. Just two litres, but with a clever engine employing VTEC technology on both the inlet and exhaust camshafts, and 237bhp if you made full use of them. It used an aluminium block to reduce weight, fibre reinforced liners and coated pistons to reduce friction.

Early cars were reported to be slightly twitchy, though chassis settings were updated for the later AP2 model. Unveiled in 2004, it employed revised suspension to reduce toe in while cornering, and a stiffer subframe. That revision would also incorporate a facelift; new bumpers at the front and the rear, new tail lamps, new headlamps, and oval shaped exhaust pipes. Most sold in Britain were fitted with the GT pack – which comprised an external temperature sensor and a hard top. The last 100 UK cars were sold as the GT Edition 100 – all were white, with grey wheels and a red leather interior. Honda has retained one for its heritage fleet. These are the most collectible examples but any S2000 makes an excellent modern classic.

VERDICT

This was always going to be a one horse race, and it's not the horse you might expect if you're simply looking at the numbers. Because as brutally quick as the TVR is, is simply isn't as polished a package as the Honda. An S2000 could conceivably be used every day, whereas if you used the TVR regularly it would be a question of whether you or the car suffered the breakdown first. It's too highly strung, too specialised, for regular use.

And if that were the only problem it would be difficult to justify, but there's more. The Tamora isn't as pretty as the Honda, nor is it as well made, nor will it be as easy to find a specialist as it will for the S2000. If all you care about is power then it's the car for you, but as a package the Honda has it licked. That's before we mention price. When new the TVR was £10,000 more expensive than the Honda, and today there's a similar premium. If you're spending that much money it's reasonable to expect £10,000 more car, and we're not convinced that the TVR can enjoy that accolade. Rare it may well be, but that doesn't mean it's any more deserving of driveway space.

"The Tamora isn't as pretty as the Honda, nor is it as well made, nor will it be as easy to find a specialist as it will for the S2000.

There can be no question for us. The Honda is by far the more competent modern classic here. ■

S2000 VS 350 TAMORA

THE POWER OF DREAMS

Honda has always been arguably the most charismatic of the Japanese manufacturers. We've chosen the best from their back catalogue.

WORDS: SAM SKELTON

Where many Far Eastern car manufacturers are the result of conglomerates taking sound business decisions, Soichiro Honda had a singular vision for his company. The first car it built was the rev-hapy, sporting S500, and from then the company had been careful to ensure that each and every one of its models has been imbued with a character of its own. Entertaining to drive and a pleasure to own, all true motoring enthusiasts acknowledge the impact that the company has had upon the automotive world.

Whether you love or hate the brand, it can't be denied that every single model on this list is a true classic icon – and Honda is one of few marques to ahve created to many. We've chosen our favourites – Honda's most magnificent seven.

"The Honda S500 was the first car built by Honda, fourteen years after it had built is first complete motorbike..."

HONDA S500

The Honda S500 was the first car built by Honda, fourteen years after it had built is first complete motorbike and just four years after becoming the world's largest motorbike manufacturer. Honda dealers had impressed upon the company that the sports car it exhibited as a concept in 1962 would be the ideal machine to sell during the winter months, when motorbike sales traditionally slumped. It wasn't the company's first four wheeled vehicle; that was the T360 pickup truck launched four months earlier. But the S500 – a small sportscar

– was Honda's first toe in the water for private car design, and set the tone for a manufacturer focused on driver enjoyment. It was a larger engined variant of the S360 prototype of 1962, using a 531cc twin overhead cam four cylinder with four Keihin carburettors, that was not only smaller than European alternatives, but more advanced and more powerful. Its 44bhp might sound small, but with a total length of just under 10'10" and weighing just 725kg, 44bhp was enough to make the S500 enjoyable. The Austin Healey Sprite, with twice the cubic capacity, mustered similar power and carried similar weight. A four speed manual gearbox and fully independent suspension were seen as advanced at the time; torsion bars at the front with trailing arms at the rear.

The S500 was never exported during its production life, its low scale production only becoming true mass production by the time of its larger engined, more powerful successor, the S600 – which would be the first Honda to be produced with left hand drive. Just 1363 were made before Honda replaced the car with the S600 in 1964, and subsequently the more famous S800 of 1966. Each took what was brilliant in the S500 and improved upon it, adding power to a light and compact roadster to turn it into a world beater.

HONDA NSX

Honda's first attempt at a mid engined supercar was also Japan's first supercar to reach production. It dates back in concept to 1984, and the Honda HP-X concept. Honda intended to

productionise it as a rival to the entry level Ferrari 328 models – one which could meet or exceed their performance while offering better reliability at a lower cost. The name evolved to NS-X – as a contraction of New Sportscar eXperimental. Designed by a team which included Masahito Nakano and Shigeru Uehara, both of whom would go on to develop the S2000, it used Honda's new C-series V6 in 3.0 form with VTEC variable valve timing. With styling inspired by the F16 fighter jet, the NSX (without a hyphen) was launched in 1989 at the Chicago Auto Show to universal acclaim. Here was a supercar that could be driven by anybody and maintained by a local dealership, with handling input by Ayrton Senna and a lightweight semi aluminium monocoque, the first in an automotive application.

With developments including a targa roof option for 1995, performance upgrades for 1997 and a facelift in 2002 which saw off the retractable headlamps, the NSX continued in production until 2005. While it was not immediately replaced, a second generation NSX was unveiled in 2016 and remains in production today. The

Honda NSX stands as a modern classic not only as a supercar, but also as the car which made supercars attainable by the masses. It was always more affordable than the Italian competition, and was a genuinely viable supercar for everyday use.

“The Honda Accord Type R was the ideal car for the performance motorist for whom the Integra was just a smidge too small

HONDA ACCORD TYPE R

The Honda Accord Type R was the ideal car for the performance motorist for whom the Integra was just a smidge too small. With 2.2 litres of VTEC equipped ower and a spacious four door shell, it was the sports saloon that made sense as a practical proposition. Like the Integra, it lost out on sound deadening as part of a crash diet to rid it of unnecessary weight. The chassis was strengthened, with lower and stiffer suspension and stiffer bushing to ensure a more direct feel. Thicker anti roll bars were fitted, along with uprated wheel bearings, 17” alloys, and brakes borrowed from the NSX supercar. A strengthened rar bulkhead gave the car extra stiffness, though it came at the cost of folding rear seats.

Under the bonnet was a 2.2 litre engine derived from that of the Prelude, able to rev round past 7000rpm and produce nearly 210bhp as a result. A limited slip differential was fitted. Lighter by some 100kg than rivals including the Mondeo ST200 and Vectra GSi, the Honda was both faster in a straight line and sharper in the corners despite a deficit in cylinder comared to the above V6-engined rivals. Produced for four years from 1998 to 2002, it was discontinued along with the rest of the Accord range in preparation for the launch of a new Accord for that year.

HONDA S2000

Honda’s 50th birthday present to itself, the S2000 was a return in concept to the small sportscars upon which the company had initially built its name beyond the motorbike. And true to form, the S2000 had to be entertaining, small, pretty and revvy. Not only that,

but it was powerful – its specific output of 124bhp/litre means that it still holds the record for most powerful naturally aspirated car by cubic capacity. Developed from the Honda SSM concept car of 1995, the S2000 design was finalised in 1996 and launched for 1999. Double wishbone suspension, electric power steering and a 50/50 weight distribution all help the S2000 to be one of the most advanced small sports cars of its era, while a six speed gearbox and Torsen diff allow it to make the most of what it has.

From 2002, Honda offered a GT pack in the UK. This consisted of an external temperature gauge and a removable aluminium hard top, for a premium of £550 at launch. From 2004, Honda facelifted the S2000, with larger 17" wheels, retuned suspension to minimise oversteer, and geometry modified to reduce toe-in changes during hard cornering. There were new bumpers and lights front and rear, and oval tipped exhaust pipes. At the end of production, Honda released 100 GT Edition 100 models to the UK. All were finished in Grand Prix White, with removable hard top, graphite grey wheels, an aluminium gearknob, black badging, and a red leather interior with contrast stitching to the gear lever gaiter. Each car was numbered with a plaque on the kick plate.

S2000s have always remained

desirable, and so prices have never really bottomed out in the UK. If you want one of these modern classics, you'll be paying more than for many of its rivals. But because of the way that Honda engineers its cars, you'l be getting a far more entertaining package to boot.

"The Insight enjoys the accolade of being the first hybrid drive car to be exported outside of Japan – beaten to market in its homeland by the Toyota Prius by two years...

HONDA INSIGHT

The Insight enjoys the accolade of being the first hybrid drive car to be exported outside of Japan – beaten to market in its homeland by the Toyota Prius by two years, Toyota's unwillingness to export until the concept had been proven meant that to most of the world the Insight is seen to have been the first example. It uses its hybrid system differently to the Toyota – with no pure electric mode, but using the electric motor as a performance aid and regenerative system to reduce overall fuel consumption. Honda wrapped the whole thing up in a slippery shell evocative of the old CR-X, and used a lightweight aluminium structure to further boost its green credentials. A drag coefficient of 0.25 puts it on par with today's electric cars in terms of slipperiness, and could only be beaten in period by concept cars such as the GM EV1 and VW XL1. Almost twenty years on from its introduction, the first generation Insight still ranked as the most fuel efficient vehicle ever to be sold in the USA.

It was good to drive, too – almost evocative of the traditional British sportscar in the sense of limited power but entertaining handling, all aided by a wind cheating shape and the knowledge that nothing on the road offered better value for fuel money. The manual gearbox, rare in a hybrid, helps this feeling of futuristic sportiness – unlike many electric vehicles you feel an integral part of the driving process, and even the electric power steering is well weighted. The first generation Insight was that rare thing – a car that was a classic the day it was launched.

HONDA INTEGRA TYPE R

On sale in Britain for just three years, the Honda integra Type R nonetheless made a strong impression on the motoring public. With a 1.8 litre four pot redlined at nearly 9000rpm, the small two door coupe gave driving enthusiasts one of the best front wheel drive chassis of its era, and a pin sharp five speed gearbox. The DC2 Integra Tye R was the only Integra we got in Britain, and its halo effect only served to highlight just how good the car was.

Originally launched in Japan in 1993, it took until 1998 for the car to come to Britain. By then, it had received a facelift to rid it of the four headalmps deemed controversial in its home land – though British buyers got the car in its original and more characterful format. Just 500 were initially imported, though many more came in as grey imports. Not that they were grey – just black, red, or white were made available for the Type R model – and all the first batch sent to the UK were white. Just 25 per day were made, courtesy of touches like the hand-polished inlet ports and bespoke valves.

Its bodykit wasn't just for show, either. The rear wing reduced lift by 30%, while the front air dam also contributed to the car's stability. The chassis received additional spot welds, and there were aluminium strut braces to strengthen it further. Lightweight touches included a

windscreen 10% thinner than standard, lighter wheels, less sound deadening and very few electrical gizmos. 40kg were removed from the already light Integra GSR.

With a fanatical following, you'd do well to find an Integra Type R for sale today. But if you can afford it, it's one of the most entertaining models of its era and a true Honda through and through.

"Without Honda, the roads would be just a little bit less interesting – and for that alone each and every one of these choices is a bona fide classic today.

HONDA CRX

Derived from the Honda Ballade, the first CRX brought aerodynamic sportiness to the lower end of the Honda range. But in Britain, the second generation coupe was the most popular and well-respected. Available with a choice of Honda D series 1.6 or B series with VTEC, it gained double wishbone suspension over its predecessor, andits twin cam engine developed 130bhp. This unit, shared with the Rover 216GTi and the Honda Concerto 1.6i-16 in Britain, was enough to propel the sub-1000kg car to 60 in under eight seconds, and on to a top speed of 121mph. VTEC models offered up to 150bhp – just in case the times above were too pedestrian.

The CRX gained traction in the market by behaving like a thoroughbred hot hatchback, but marrying these impeccable manners to a small coupe shell which owed nothing to the Civic that Honda would sell to small families. This exclusivity made it a more desirable car among younger motorists than rivals such as the Peugeot 205GTi, the Rover 216GTi and the Ford Escort XR3i, which married their performance with more sedate trimmings. Today the CRX is a desirable modern classic, offering the predictable safety of front wheel drive with the entertaining chassis dynamics that in the previous decade would have been the preserve of cars like the MG Midget.

CONCLUSION

Whichever of these models you might prefer, it's undeniable that Honda's influence over the motoring world has been wide reaching and has offered the consumer some of the most entertaining classics ever to come out of Japan. Without Honda, the roads would be just a little bit less interesting – and for that alone each and every one of these choices is a bona fide classic today. ■


96 NRX


H996 NRX
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CRX
VTEC
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CLASS WARS

How does the 987 Boxster S stack up against its class rivals, the Honda S2000 AP2 and the BMW E85 Z4?

WORDS DAN FURR PHOTOGRAPHY DAN SHERWOOD

Making life difficult for ourselves isn't something any of us like to make a habit of, yet our editorial team is running with the genius idea of photographing a trio of convertibles for a GT porsche magazine feature the middle of winter, when the sky is dark grey, rain is falling and the ground is covered in wet mud. Oh, and one of the cars is white, requiring constant attention with quick detailer and a microfibre cloth to tackle dirt determined to stick to bodywork. "A black car is just as bad at highlighting muck," we hear you cry. Yep, we've arranged for one of those to turn up, too. But wait! While we concede playing with roof-down sports cars in the middle of a particularly sodden cold snap might sound daft, this is, in many respects, the perfect setting for demonstrating how easy (or not) the roadsters we've selected are to live with in all driving conditions.

Chief among the inductees into our world of wet is the 987 Boxster. Making its debut alongside the 997-generation 911 at the 2004 Paris Motor Show (a slightly more glamorous backdrop than the working farm in Cambridgeshire we've picked for our photo shoot location), the gloriously styled, mid-engined, water-cooled two-seater looked light years ahead of its predecessor, the 986 Boxster. In fact, Porsche was keen to stress how much distance there was between 986 and 987, announcing the newer model making use of only twenty percent of the older car's components.

Penned by Porsche factory stylist, Pinky Lai, the 987 waved goodbye to the outgoing Boxster's 996-aping front end, welcoming Carrera GT-esque headlights, accommodation for bigger wheels and more pronounced air intakes. Sure, Porsche's desire to continue promoting a 'family' of products meant a cursory glance was all that was required to determine the new Boxster and 911 were from the same stable, but despite obvious shared design cues, the 987 managed to carry an identity of its own. To the delight of Porsche purists, and just like the aesthetic of the fresh Boxster's rear-engined big brother, it was a look more closely aligned to the appearance of our favourite manufacturer's air-cooled models.

TIME MACHINE

A step inside the 987's cockpit also impressed. Where 986 and 996 interiors are regarded as suffering from Porsche's necessary penny pinching in period, the newer Boxster's twin-seated living space was a different ball game. Simple in its design and employing a 'circular' theme throughout, it felt modern then and it feels modern now, even if the quality of the centre console switchgear could be better. In fact, where the 986 looks very much of its time, remove the age-identifying registration plates of a 987 and those less familiar with Porsche products would be hard pressed to tell they were staring at a design rapidly approaching its twentieth anniversary.

Initially offered with a 2.7-litre naturally aspirated flat-six chucking out close to 240bhp, the 987 line-up was expanded with the addition of a 3.2-litre powerplant developing almost forty more ponies and 236lb-ft torque for the Boxster S. A choice of six-speed manual or five-speed Tiptronic transmissions were available, the former allowing the S to complete the quarter-mile sprint in 13.4 seconds, top out at 167mph and sprint to 62mph from rest in a swift 5.5 seconds. Eighteen-inch 'lobster claw' five-spokes were a standard S fit — though the car's enlarged wheel arches allowed buyers feeling flush to option nineteens — along with Porsche Stability Management (PSM) and the choice of Porsche Active Suspension Management (PASM), Porsche Ceramic Composite Brakes (PCCB) and the popular Sport Chrono package, firming up suspension, altering throttle response and limiting the sensitivity of anti-lock

S2000 VS Z4 VS BOXSTER

brakes at the touch of a button.

The 987 Boxster might be regarded as far more desirable than its immediate ancestor, but one shouldn't lose sight of how important the 986 was in reversing Porsche's fortunes and ensuring the survival of the brand. The mid-engined layout, though not new to the Stuttgart marque's output, proved astonishingly popular, not least thanks to sublime chassis balance, a characteristic allowing novice sports car drivers to engage in aggressive attacks of the asphalt with a level of confidence they'd have to earn if trying the same in a rear-weight biased 911. The 987 Boxster (and the later 987 Cayman) built on this rock solid foundation, presenting near 50:50 weight distribution, supreme agility and, with its brilliantly focused steering, allowing average drivers the opportunity to tap into the model's excellent roadholding abilities without fear of losing the back end. It was significantly cheaper than a 911, too.

BARGAIN BUY

As regular readers will remember from the February issue of GT Porsche (order a copy at bit.ly/issuesgtp), we included the 987 as one of the Porsches we consider to be a star buy in 2020, but let's say, as difficult as this might be for some of you to believe, that not every prospective Boxster buyer is a brand loyalist. Perhaps — shock, horror — there are other cars, cheaper cars, in the same class offering excellent value for money. What would they be and how would they stack up

SPECS	987 BOXSTER S
ENGINE	3.2-litre mid-mounted flat-six
TRANSMISSION	Six-speed manual \ or five-speed Tiptronic S
POWER	276bhp
TORQUE	236lb-ft
TOP SPEED	167mph (manual)
0-62MPH	5.5 seconds (manual)
ASSEMBLY	Germany

“ Built on this rock solid foundation, presenting near 50:50 weight distribution and supreme agility

against what we’ve previously described as a far better buy than the 911 you might be able to acquire for the same asking price?

Enter the second-generation Honda S2000. Launched for the 2004 model year and offered with a front-midmounted two-litre inline-four (increased to 2.2-litres for the North American domestic market and, later, Japan) producing close to 240bhp and 153lb-ft torque, the revised roadster came hot on the heels of the original S2000, launched in 1999 to mark Honda’s fiftieth anniversary. Intended to reflect the firm’s racing heritage whilst showcasing its passion for innovation, the car was designed with input from Formula One engineers, resulting in a totally unique powerplant bringing true race track performance to the road. With a redline set at 9,000rpm, the twin-cam VTEC-equipped engine won four international Engine of the Year awards almost as soon as the first units rolled off the production line.

Unsurprisingly, wind tunnel testing had a huge influence in striking the right balance between the S2000’s looks and aerodynamics. The rising front-torear bodyline encourages a classic, wedge-shaped appearance, but also reduces lift and optimises balance between the front and rear ends. New technologies included in-wheel double wishbone suspension and Honda’s now famous High X-Bone chassis frame, enabling the creation of a lightweight open-body

S2000 VS Z4 VS BOXSTER

SPECS	BMW E85 Z4
ENGINE	2.5-litre front-mounted inline-six
TRANSMISSION	Six or five-speed manual or automatic
POWER	189bhp
TORQUE	181lb-ft
TOP SPEED	155mph
0-62MPH	7.0 seconds
ASSEMBLY	United States

structure with the rigidity and collision protection qualities of a closed-body. In the S2000's 1995 prototype, the Sport Study Model, the High X-Bone setup helped to achieve a Boxster-baiting 50:50 weight distribution. Honda went on to add double walled, steel pipe reinforced front pillars, highly rigid roll bars and twin door beams to deliver an ultra-strong protective cell — not only did the S2000 promise to be fast, it coupled amazing performance with superior safety.

Named in recognition of its two-litre swept capacity, the S2000 went through many changes during its tenyear production cycle, though most of the alterations were focused on mechanical equipment. The second- generation model, like the Grand Prix White example pictured alongside the Basalt Black Boxster S on the pages before you, featured retuned suspension to limit oversteer, altered spring rates, uprated dampers, revised geometry and an update to the subframe, all designed to further improve stability during cornering at speed. A limited-slip differential remained standard equipment.

With top speed of 150mph and a 0-62mph time of 6.2 seconds, you'd be forgiven for thinking the S2000 can't hold a candle to the 987 Boxster S when it comes to performance, but numbers alone tell only half the story. The second-generation S2000 is an astonishing car, though needs to be driven in the manner Honda intended. VTEC variable valve timing kicks in high up the rev range, with all 240 horses released at 8,300rpm. Maximum torque is achieved at 7,500rpm, meaning to get the very best out of the S2000 you need to drive it hard. Really hard.

NEIL FURBER

I bought my second-gen S2000 in 2010 after enjoyable time spent in an MX-5. The Honda had always excited me and ownership has been everything I'd hoped for and much more. I also own a 981 Boxster Spyder with a howling Sports Exhaust, but no matter the Porsches that might come and go from my driveway over the coming years, the S2000 will remain my forever car. I honestly believe it offers all the performance you'd ever need from a roadgoing sports car, but you need to learn how to extract the best from the VTEC-equipped engine, which involves driving in the upper rev range and not being afraid to go close to the redline. That's what the S2000's inline-four is designed to do, but the model also impresses with its superb gear shifting and is happy to be used in

S2000 VS Z4 VS BOXTER

calmer driving conditions. The Honda is certainly less forgiving than an MX-5, but it's far more rewarding. There's been no other Japanese car quite like it in recent years.

Our test car is an Edition 100, a UK-only super-special commemorative model to mark the end of S2000 production in 2009. Supplied new with a removable hard top, wheels painted graphite grey, black badges, uniquely numbered sill covers (our car is number thirty-six in a series of 100 and is cherished as part of Honda UK's superb heritage fleet) and a twin-tone red and black leather interior, the car also is also equipped with a model-specific aluminium shift knob. Ah, yes — the S2000's famous cog swapper. Described by Clarkson and his chums as producing "the world's greatest gear change", it's the polar opposite of the super-slick paddle shift transmissions in today's class-leading sports cars. It's a short, direct, metal-on-metal, almost agricultural feeling shifter, and one drivers unfamiliar with Honda performance cars will be tempted to operate sooner than they should. Indeed, they may find the S2000 underwhelming if accelerating and shifting in the same way as they might in the Porsche or a modern turbocharged sports machine, but keep that accelerator pedal planted to the floor, let the revs rise to the point where you'd think any other car's engine might blow up, and as soon as VTEC kicks in around 6,000rpm, you'll understand why so many petrolheads are utterly captivated by what the S2000 has to offer. Boom! You're flying fast towards that 9,000rpm redline.

"Honda's genius was to create the sensation of a riding a superbike from within the confines of a car," smiles Neil Furber, GT Porsche's resident driving coach and the owner of an S2000 for more than ten years. "The S2000 is what the MX-5 wants to be, if only Mazda could get away with charging more!" he grins. "You need to spend time with a VTEC-kitted Honda, be it an S2000 or an older Civic Type R, getting comfortable pushing the engine at high revs, which is at odds with the behaviour of most drivers, including many S2000 owners. I've encountered many who simply don't realise how capable their cars are," he adds, referencing the Honda's maximum torque coming in a whopping 3,000rpm higher than that of the 987 Boxster S, not to mention the S2000's 'flick of the wrist' steering response and superb gear changing qualities from the close ratio 'box.

S2000 VS Z4 VS BOXTER

SPECS	HONDA S2000 AP2
ENGINE	2.0-litre front-mid-mounted inline-four
TRANSMISSION	Six-speed manual
POWER	240bhp
TORQUE	153lb-ft
TOP SPEED	150mph
0-62MPH	6.2 seconds
ASSEMBLY	Japan

NANCY DAVIES

I came to my Z4 from a Fiat Barchetta, though I tested an Alfa Romeo Spider before buying the BMW. The Alfa was great, but I'm not the kind of driver who wants to keep her car in a garage all year round. To me, the Z4 is the perfect blend of performance, style and comfort, but wrapped in a totally accessible package I can make use of every day, no matter the weather. The seating position is low, which suits me, and there's a decent amount of luggage space in the boot for weekend getaways, as well as for daily commuting to the office and back. I bought the car from its first owner in 2006 and, touch wood, it has served me incredibly well. I'm aware of the quality of Porsche sports cars, not least because my husband drives a 996, but other than tyres and regular servicing, my Z4 hasn't wanted for anything in fourteen years of ownership. Roof down, open road and the purr of that inline-six. It's an exciting car to drive!

Early S2000s earned a reputation for being twitchy at the back, despite excellent balance brought by an engine positioned behind the front axle. These concerns were largely eliminated with the second-gen model, but what wasn't heavily revised was the car's interior. If first impressions are your thing, you're likely to be underwhelmed by what even the newest S2000 has to offer inside. The seats, for example, aren't the most comfortable you're ever likely to sit in and offer limited adjustment. The dash is plasticky and, though perfectly functional, typical of late 1990s Japanese automotive production. The digital speedo and rev counter is the

main event here, but providing you keep in mind you're sitting in a cabin designed in the last century for a Honda built purely for playful fast driving (with little regard for luxury), you won't be disappointed. As far as the sports car brief is concerned, the S2000 delivers in spades and offers the excitement of a truly involving speed machine begging you to adapt your driving behaviour to unleash the full potential of what's waiting to be discovered up front. Being in charge of this car is a journey in more ways than one!

BAVARIAN BRUISER

Where does all this leave the Z4, the final drop-top in our line-up? Well, as you can probably guess, if the S2000 sits at the sportier end of the 987 Boxster S's character, the BMW heads the other way, our test car oozing comfort and the super-smooth operation of a front-mounted 2.5-litre inline-six perfectly suited to cruising at steady speed. Introduced at the Paris Motor Show two years before the 987 and given the factory designation E85, the Z4 roadster was in production for six years and was manufactured exclusively in the United States. Both 2.5-litre and three-litre engines were offered at launch, with transmission options of five or six speed manual or automatic gearboxes. Hot on the heels of the near 300,000-selling Z3, a model noted for being the first BMW solely manufactured outside of Germany, as well as for its shark-like design and appearance in the James Bond movie, GoldenEye, the Z4 was blessed with a larger and stiffer chassis than its forebear. The newer Bimmer also made use of a multi-link suspension

design in place of the Z3's semi-trailing setup, though contemporary reviewers criticised the resulting ride quality.

In terms of overall size, the Z4 is a bigger car than the Z3. The appointment of extra suspension equipment also risked adding unwanted weight, which is one of the reasons BMW introduced lightweight aluminium body panels and a magnesium roof frame to the Z4 assembly line. The men in Munich also demanded an electronic power assisted steering system (EPAS) in place of the Z3's hydraulic steering. The appointed EPAS setup is speed sensitive, making turning in tight spaces much easier for drivers travelling at low speed, though it's telling that for the all-conquering M-badged Z4 (a phenomenal car powered by the E46 M3's 3.2-litre S54 inline-six, an engine widely regarded as the greatest naturally aspirated powerplant of all time) BMW returned to a hydraulic setup.

INNER SPACE

Settling into the cabin of the car, it's clear to see the standard Z4 was built with comfort and luxury high on the agenda. There's a huge amount of legroom, the seats are less firm than that of the S2000 and offer a wide range of adjustability. The dash layout is classy and clean, with the opulence of brushed metal visible in every direction. The switchgear is simple and elegant, though the positioning of the fuel-draining Sport button atop the transmission tunnel seems like something of an afterthought; the Z4's optional Sport Package added firmer suspension, a lowered ride height, eighteen-inch multi-spokes and access to altered throttle and steering response.

THEN AND NOW

In stock trim, the 2.5-litre Z4 develops 190bhp at 6,250rpm, with 181lb-ft achieved at 3,500rpm. The slowest of the bunch before us, it hits 62mph from a standing start in dead-on seven seconds. The look of the car was a welcome move away from the Z3's design, which though much celebrated on launch and responsible for shifting a massive amount of product, soon seemed dated, particularly at the rear, where the Z4 replaces the older BMW's clunky light clusters with Ferrari-esque shapes. Fashion can be fickle, however, as demonstrated by many of those who complained about the Z3's tired looks now seen rushing out to buy caredfor examples of the model, which is once again in vogue, albeit under the banner of 'appreciating modern classic'.

From what we've seen here, if you're after a pure sporting machine that isn't brilliant to live with as a daily driver, but is perfect for booting down twisty B-roads at the weekend, the S2000 is a tempting proposition, whereas the standard Z4 offers the exact opposite: the BMW is ideal as an everyday sports

car, but isn't particularly well suited to being thrown into corners at breakneck speed. It looks great (especially with our test car's combination of gunmetal paintwork and bright red leather) and will deliver an exhilarating rush when travelling at full chat on a straight stretch of open motorway, but its handling isn't as precise as either the Honda or the Porsche and you're left with the sense that BMW has compromised sporty traits to satisfy owners keen to experience comfort. Where the Z4 triumphs, however, is reliability. Let's not forget, the 987 is surrounded by panicked voices crying about intermediate bearing shaft failure, bore scoring, rear main seal leaks and cracked cylinders, whereas owners of Z4s have very little to worry about over and above the expiration of consumables. There's a lot to be said for 'get up and go' driving without fear of mechanical failure, which also happens to be a plus point for the S2000 — an engine designed to be used near or at the redline for extended periods without the threat of self-destruction is something to be celebrated, which is why the VTEC unit is consistently voted one of the top ten best engines ever produced and why the S2000 was ranked among the top three premium sports cars following dependability tests during every year of model production. Top honours were awarded in 2004, 2006 and 2008, with the coveted International Engine of the Year awarded handed to Honda every year between 2000 and 2004 in recognition of the two-litre unit's engineering excellence.

Interestingly, every one of the owners we spoke to told us they'd migrated to either a 987 Boxster, S2000 or Z4 from an MX-5 (or Miata, if you're one of our North American readers). On the face of it, the Porsche, Honda and BMW are all logical next steps from Mazda roadster ownership, but it was the style of driving each enthusiast engaged in that determined which car they ended up with. Neil, for example, is a professional driving coach, making the S2000 the perfect tool for him to use as a means to hone his craft and exercise expert driving behaviour. After all, save for minor electronic stability assistance and that digidash, the hot Honda is a raw, analogue sports machine desperate to be punished. The BMW, on the other hand, is heavy on high-tech driver assistance, invites you to be enveloped in plush comfort and impresses with smooth delivery of power from that sublime inline-six, making everything from commuting to continent cruising an absolute pleasure. You wouldn't really want to take it to a track, though.

And so, we're back where we started, on muddy farmland with the 987 Boxster. Admittedly, an S in good order might cost more than either of the models we've pitched it against, but based on the evidence before us, there's an argument you're getting two cars for the price of one: the Z4 can't do what the S2000 does so well and vice versa, yet the Porsche overlaps somewhere in the middle, managing to achieve ninety percent of what both the Honda and BMW promise, with the added bonus of wearing the famous Stuttgart crest. It really is an amazing package and is currently available at a surprisingly reasonable price point. Buy one before it's too late.

CHRIS PAGE

I fancied a change of drop-top after MX-5 ownership. A mate of mine owns a Porsche and suggested I consider a Boxster. A local car dealer had this 2005 Basalt Black 987 S on display in his showroom and I was blown away by just how much car I could get for my money. As someone who regularly spends weekends away, luggage space was a key concern, but the Boxster's mid-engine layout affords me decent boot space at the rear as well as at the front. I don't use the car daily, but I have covered more than 18,000 miles in seven years. The manual gearbox and sharp handling have made every one of those miles a joy. It's not a car you need to drive fast to experience its quality, either. B-roads and tight turns are all that's required to demonstrate the car's excellent handling abilities. Additionally, I'm pleased to report that other than a water pump, brake pads, a set of discs and servicing, the car has wanted for nothing. ■

CLASSIC RIVALS

HONDA S2000 V LOTUS ELISE

Unique when first launched, the Lotus Elise remains a significant engineering marvel, but it's when behind the wheel that you appreciate its incomparable dynamic abilities

WORDS NIGEL FRYATT AND IAN SEABROOK

The Lotus Elise was never designed to be a sales success – the original production target was about 2700 vehicles to be sold over three years. Yet its arrival was nothing short of a motoring revolution and not just in its forward-thinking engineering, dynamic behaviour and stunningly original design. It also sold 25,000 models in its first 10 years making it comfortably the fastest selling and best-selling Lotus ever.

It was launched when Lotus was going through one of its seemingly regular financially turbulent periods, when then owner Bugatti International's parent company went into receivership (the lasting impact of this period was Bugatti International's boss Romano Artioli naming the new Lotus after his granddaughter, Elise). Its success effectively saved the company.

The original Elise S1 was revealed in Frankfurt in 1995 and it typified the Colin Chapman 'less-is-more' lightweight Lotus concept, with its glued and riveted aluminium tub chassis, mid-engine and rear drive, all topped with a small, light and fabulously good-looking body.

Its objective was to highlight the work of Lotus Engineering, the company's specialist consultancy department that was much in demand from other manufacturers. In an interview published in Complete Car magazine in 1996, executive engineer Tony Shute revealed: "I'd nicked all the engineering research budget to finance the project and Lotus Engineering wanted something in return – to demonstrate Lotus technology to clients worldwide."

It did that and more and, to be honest, that magic 'must have' quality is still with the Elise S1 today. This is not a mass produced, metal monocoque, front engine, rear drive sports car like the Honda S2000. If you want convincing, just go drive one.

The S1 is a delight as a driver's car, nimble to the point of being surgically precise. The often underrated 1796cc Rover K-Series engine is a perfect match to the chassis, with the unit's seemingly modest 118bhp more than capable of ensuring rapid progress. Whereas with the Honda S2000 you'll need to get the engine spinning to over 6000rpm–and more importantly hold it there – in the Elise you have a far better balance, with the chassis dynamics far, far more significant than a screaming high revving power unit.

At speed, it's nowhere near as twitchy as the Honda, although admittedly it can

“ The S1 is a delight as a driver’s car, nimble to the point of being surgically precise. The often underrated 1796cc Rover K-Series engine is a perfect match to the chassis

catch out the inexperienced in certain wet conditions with a tendency to snap oversteer, but you are going some before that becomes an issue. The Elise is better in so many areas and that’s before you compare the looks of the two sports cars. While the unusual chassis design and engineering concept, coupled to the car’s overall looks, might give the impression of this being an exotic sports car, nothing could be further from the truth.

The use of the Rover engine points the way to a model that was built at the time to a specific price – there’s nothing very exotic in Rover Metro door mirrors, Peugeot switchgear and Vauxhall column stalks. In fact, when sitting in the Elise, only the race car-like Stack instrument pod and tiny steering wheel offers any indication that this is a special place to be.

Describing the Elise cockpit as Spartan is almost too comforting. The original seats offer little padding and fitting a radio was a cost option extra (and pointless in my view). Suspension is the classic race car double wishbones front and rear, the original models fitted with Spax shock absorbers, which will probably have been replaced by better options on many S1 models today. All this is packaged under a body made up of a central structure to which a front

and rear 'clam' bodyshell is bolted. These are not easy to remove and are certainly not a one-man job.

Keeping your Elise S1 looked after by a specialist makes more sense. Lakeside Engineering in Surrey, (www.lakesideengineering.com), has a well-earned reputation when it comes to the Elise. The Rover K-Series needs a cambelt change every four years regardless of mileage. Lakeside will do an alternator and cambelt change for £268.48 (plus VAT).

If the Elise has an Achilles' Heel it can be the effects of corrosion. While the aluminium tub obviously doesn't suffer, there can be problems between it and the bolted-on steel sections. Caught early, there are repair options. Buying a Lotus Elise also allows you to join Club Lotus, which will introduce those less aware to the company's fabulous

“ If the Elise has an Achilles' Heel it can be the effects of corrosion. While the aluminium tub obviously doesn't suffer, there can be problems between it and the bolted-on steel sections.

sports car and motor racing history – something that makes this vehicle so special. For instance, part of the original suspension development team for the Elise was former Lotus Formula One Grand Prix driver John Miles.

Values of the Elise S1 have held for a number of years and are beginning to rise. The fact that the Lotus is a perfect track day car can mean a few will have had a hard life. Looked after properly that shouldn't be a problem and will mean there are models that look a little rough around the edges for £6000-£8000. A top quality S1 is probably going to be in the £12,000/£14,000 bracket. Some low mileage models are being offered over the £20,000 mark, which seems excessive, and since this isacar that deserves to be driven, finding a low mileage one seems something of an oxymoron.

HONDA S2000

The Honda S2000 is refined and comfortable compared to the Lotus, but don't let that fool you. Underneath lurks a menacing performance car with truly exciting potential

The Honda S2000 was launched in 1999 and was the company's first move into the lucrative roadster market so well rejuvenated by Mazda's MX-5. Really, this was Honda's first affordable and bespoke sports car since the little S800 of the 1960s, as the company had since made its fortune from family cars. It didn't so much try to rival the MX-5 as obliterate it in a VTEC-laden fury.

As befits Honda, the engine is a super-revvy masterpiece, producing a maximum of 236bhp at an ear-melting 8300rpm. Maximum torque is 155lb/ft at 7500rpm. Such figures are down to Honda's clever VTEC variable valve timing, which boosts engine efficiency at higher speeds, while allowing a tractable nature lower down the rev range. It means a car with peaky power that remains easy to live with around town. In fact, keep the revs down, and you'll wonder what all the fuss is about. Ease off and it's far more refined, almost boringly so. The problem is, the engine is so punchy that unsettling the rear is quite easy to do. This is a car that definitely needs respect.

Honda altered the suspension settings throughout the S2000's run,

trying to tame the oversteer with softer rear springs and anti-roll bar settings from 2004. At the same time, and never confirmed in official figures, the engine was tweaked to boost torque further down the rev range. There are some Japanese imports over here now and these boasted even more power – 250bhp at an even more ridiculous 8600rpm. Oddly, power dropped to 239bhp with the later 2.2-litre engine from 2006, though there are a whole host of aftermarket tune-up options if somehow these power figures seem a bit tame. UK S2000s always used the 2-litre engine.

Against the Lotus, the S2000 feels amazingly plush. It's a comfortable car in which to spend time, with the roof raised at the flick of a switch. The driving compartment is snug and welcoming and the stubby gear lever for the six-speed gearbox falls nicely to hand. You need to stir that a fair bit to keep the revvy engine on the boil. The downside is electric power steering, which does rob you of feel. On the plus side, the S2000 is far more forgiving in regular use. It can be exciting when you want it to be, but it can also be comfortable in a way the Lotus cannot. It may perhaps lack the same sparkle as the Lotus, but it remains stupendously quick as well as surprisingly practical as an everyday proposition.

“ The S2000 can be very Jekyll and Hyde, though, becoming a serious performance machine if you allow it – 60mph comes up in under six seconds.

Ownership today isn't too onerous, with a particularly good UK S2000 Owners' Club (www. s2kuk.com) offering discounts on track days and parts and meetings throughout the year. Genuine parts can be pricey–a set of genuine OEM brake pads from Tegiwa Imports will set you back £120 – but there are aftermarket items that could save you a fair bit. Speaking to club members will help you decide which is best. Hoods can be expensive to replace – £500-£600–but you can specify a glass rear window on earlier S2000s, which had plastic from the factory.

Watch for water leaks, especially around the screen pillars. Damp carpets aren't unusual, but can help the floors rot. Most classic car owners will be in the habit of regularly checking engine oil levels and that experience works well here. Hondas have often had a reputation for burning a fair bit and the S2000 is no exception. Certainly check it after every long trip, but don't be surprised if an S2000 consumes as much as a litre of synthetic oil every 1000 miles.

Overall though, with prices tumbling the S2000 makes a very appealing prospect. The looks are fairly subtle, so this isn't a car that shouts about its remarkable potential. In fact, the vast majority have no idea just how good they are. It's a car that skips under the radar of many. We're prepared to let you into that secret, which has been well tested by our own MD, who has owned his S2000 for several years now. A super-stripped race car for the road is all well and good – if that's your fancy, the Lotus more than delivers. But, if you want a car that's fun when you demand it, yet slips calmly into comfort mode when all you want to do is get somewhere, then it's the Honda S2000 that ticks all of the boxes. There's only one word of warning, really, and it's that you might find that VTEC effect is more addictive than you ever imagined. As a pure example of Honda engineering at its best, the S2000 is nothing short of remarkable.■

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HONDA S2000 V BMW Z3 2.8

BMWs are famed for their engines. But can the S2000's four beat the Z3 2.8's six?

WORDS : SAM SKELTON

While some sports cars are well-regarded for their chassis, some for their weight, some for their uncompromising approach, there are few that are held in high regard for their engines. The Honda S2000 is one of those cars – not only does it have an impressive chassis and appealing shape, but that VTEC equipped engine is a little honey. Revving like a motorcycle, it produces power far in excess of that its size might suggest.

However, it's not the only early 2000s sports car to enjoy an impressive engine. The BMW M52 straight six in the German marque's Z3 was widely acknowledged as one of the silkiest sixes of its era, and in the small chassis of the Z3 it made for an entertaining sporting experience in the right hands. With performance similar to the S2000, and a broadly similar price, it was unsurprising that many peoples' prospective shopping lists might include both models.

With both appealing to collectors today, they are once again on the same shopping lists. But which makes the better choice?

THE ULTIMATE DRIVING MACHINE?

The BMW Z3 enjoys the distinction of being the first BMW to be manufactured entirely outside of Germany. Assembled in Greer, South Carolina, it was built in America to take advantage of what BMW believed would be its primary market. Under the skin, the Z3 was based on the same chassis as the 3-series Compact. Most of the underpinnings were shared with the E36 3-series, but the rear suspension was derived from that of its E30 predecessor – more compact and cheaper to produce than the E36's Z-axle multi link setup. The design was frozen in mid 1992, while the subsequent Coupe model was a skunkworks project and would be unveiled two years after the Roadster.

Launched in 1995 with the 1.9 litre four from the 318iS, the range expanded with the introduction of six cylinder models from the following year. When the 2.8 litre engine was fitted it became a proper sports car, and the launch of the 3.2 litre M Roadster

and M Coupe variants in 1997 only supported that. BMW offered extensive personalisation, adding the Z3 to its Individual programme. A power hood became an option for 1998, while rollover hoops were introduced.

A tight gearbox and silken engine mean that the Z3 is a pleasure to drive, with plenty of power and a chassis that enables easy control at all speeds. There's good steering too, well weighted and sharp, though perhaps a little sharper than it should be on corners that require precision. The car feels bigger and heavier than the Honda – but is still beautifully direct.

It's a thrilling experience, though the throw of the gear lever is perhaps a little longer than it ought to be when compared with the short throw action of the S2000.

A facelift for 1999 saw the 2.0 replaced by the 2.2 and the 2.8 replaced by the 3.0 – both engines from the revised M54 range. The headlamps were redesigned, the rear track widened, and an integrated high

level rear brake light was fitted. Interior changes included a new clock, while the traction control system was revised. Side airbags were fitted for 2000.

The Z3 would be replaced by the Z4 in 2002. Again, BMW opted for a controversially styled car featuring a long bonnet and short tail, this time designed with the flame surfacing favoured by the Chris Bangle school of thought. Unlike its predecessor, multilink rear suspension would be used. Once again, there were entry level models but the main focus was on the 3.0 straight six and the M models. 297088 Z3s were produced; almost 280000 of which were roadster models.

“ A tight gearbox and silken engine mean that the Z3 is a pleasure to drive, with plenty of power and a chassis that enables easy control at all speeds.

CELEBRATION

The Honda S2000 wasn't the company's first pen sports car. Its first car had been a sports car, back in 1963 – the Honda S500. Developed from the S360 concept of the previous year, it proved popular with customers and dealers as an alternative to motorcycles for winter. When Honda wanted to celebrate half a century of producing its own vehicles, a car which met the same basic market as its first seemed obvious. The SSM concept of 1995 showed the world the way Honda was thinking, and when the finished article broke cover in 1999 it attracted an instant and loyal following. Its four cylinder engine used VTEC to boost its power output to 237bhp, and used aluminium for light weight. A GT pack was available, offering hard top and external temperature sensors for an additional £550.

A car which rewarded the talented driver, it was praised and criticised in equal measure for a chassis which wasn't always the most predictable when new. Unless you were very careful, acceleration in corners could result in a loss of traction, but a good driver could catch it with ease. But between that chassis and its 9000rpm redline, the S2000 could raise a Cheshire cat grin on almost any driver's face, and by the time of the second generation AP2 cars, the worst of the chassis had been tamed. New suspension minimised oversteer, while revised geometry softened the tendency to toe-in.

There were cosmetic changes too. From the launch of the AP2 in 2004, there were new headlamps, new taillamps, and new bumpers front and rear. The 16" wheels went, in favour of new 17" items with Bridgestone RE050 tyres and a stiffer subframe. The final 100 examples were sold as the GT Edition 100, all finished in Grand Prix White with red leather, graphite grey wheels, and minor changes to the trim. While all S2000s are desirable to collectors, these are the ones which will always attract the highest level of interest.

RIVALS

S2000 V BMW Z3

	HONDA S2000	BMW Z3 2.8
ENGINE	1997cc I4	2793cc I6
TRANSMISSION	Six-speed manual	Six-speed manual
MAX POWER	237bhp	193bhp
MAX SPEED	150mph	140mph
0-60	6.2 seconds	6.7 seconds
LENGTH	4135mm	4025mm
WEIGHT	1260kg	1360kg

VERDICT

The BMW is a far smoother sounding car, and more closely fits the traditional sports car mould set in stone by the Austin Healey 3000, Triumph TR6 and MGC. But it's hampered by a somewhat awkward shape, a tiny boot and its association with the less powerful 1.8 models. The Z3 also enjoys film credibility owing to the early car's appearance in Goldeneye. But what the BMW has in traditionalism, the Honda can counter with sheer modernity and an alternative outlook.

"What the BMW has in traditionalism, the Honda can counter with sheer modernity and an alternative outlook

And it is this unique outlook that makes the Honda our victor. While the Z3 remains true to tradition, that tradition doesn't make the hairs on the back of your neck stand in quite the same way as they do with the S2000. That high revving engine and that sharp chassis make the model a better drive, while there is little question that the Honda offers a more handsome driveway proposition to boot.

While the BMW is undeniably a great sports car, it cannot compete with the Honda S2000 as a modern classic. ■

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