

Renault Clio Williams

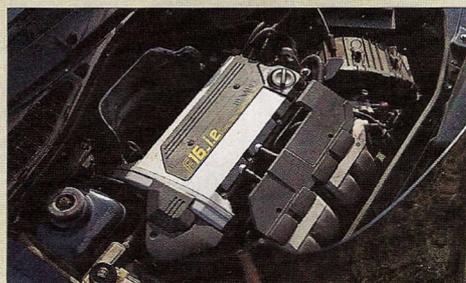
It could have been a badge-engineering special. Renault wanted to make a connection between its road cars and the Williams F1 cars, powered by Renault engines. Hence the Clio Williams. We were sceptical. Blue with gold wheels and Williams decals? Sounds like a shift-'em-quick special. Limited edition? That's a trick you see in the Sunday supplement ads. Williams input no more than its approval? We're not falling for that.

But we did. Hook, line, sinker, rod, reel and boat, because the Williams was brilliant. With the mildest of changes to the OK Clio 16V, Renault Sport's engineers – for it was they – created an outstanding hot hatch. The wheels were spot-on, because its chassis was solid gold: supple but incisive, incisive but not nervous. And how the slightly bigger, 2.0-litre engine exploited it.

Perhaps Renault was surprised by the plaudits. The public snapped up the individually numbered Clios knowing there would never be another. Only there was. Numbers were again limited, there was no plaque on the dashboard, but the Williams 2 and Williams 3 sold out – literally and metaphorically. Our only real gripe is that they don't still make it.



Williams 2 was bad news for the punters who'd forked out for the never-to-be-repeated original 'Limited Edition' Clio Williams, but great news for the rest of us



B660; it's got an answer for every one of its corners, be it bumpy or smooth, fast or slow. The owner of the Clio here hadn't driven the road before, but at one stage he was glued to my back bumper, and at the time I was wringing the neck of the Civic Type-R...

We stopped and I suggested to our Williams owner, Warren, that he ought to experience the 9000rpm frenzy of the Civic. The last five miles before the A1 are my favourite; fast and tricky, a great test. The Golf and 306 are pretty good here, though they're not so keen and pointy in the slow stuff. The Williams is both. Its high-speed poise and body control have a confident, big-car feel, and the Civic is soon a white spec in the mirror.

Size does matter. It's obvious when you climb from the Williams and into our current champion, the 306 GTI 6 – it feels big. And while Peugeot trim and refinement have come a long way in a decade, there's a

weight penalty. However, offsetting the 306's bulk is the most potent engine in the class (until Honda decides to import the Civic) and a six-speed gearbox.

It's a very quick car and there's a stirring soundtrack to enjoy, too – a surprisingly rare hot hatch feature – but after a blast in the lightweights the 306 feels a little blunt. It's got the power but it doesn't have the fizzing throttle response of the 205 or the Clio and you have to rev the 167bhp, 2.0-litre motor hard to stay in touch with them. Having four ratios in the same range that its rivals cover with three helps, and the shift has an excellent, positive, short-throw action that makes the Clio's feel bumpy and unpolished.

The 306 is blessed with fantastic handling, of course. It's not as responsive as the Williams but you can't fault its adjustability or its progression. Underlying its every move is a wonderfully supple ride that

seems to resurface the B660's bumpiest sections, leaving you to concentrate on gliding from apex to apex, inch-perfect. After a few miles, the fact that it's bigger and heavier than the rest seems irrelevant. It's a rounded performer; every bit as comfortable as the Golf and great fun the whole length of a good road. It's only when you swap keys for the 205 that you realise what you're missing.

'It sounds like there's a miniature touring car on the loose,' says photographer David Shepherd as we stand at one of the B660's finest 90-degree corners waiting for Meaden to appear. The four-cylinder bark hits a stunning 8500rpm a second time and he and the Civic Type-R come into view. The engine sounds terrific from the inside but from the outside it's awesome. That's one reason I'm watching; the other is that I'm keen for a second opinion on its handling.

The Type-R is the fastest hot hatch we've





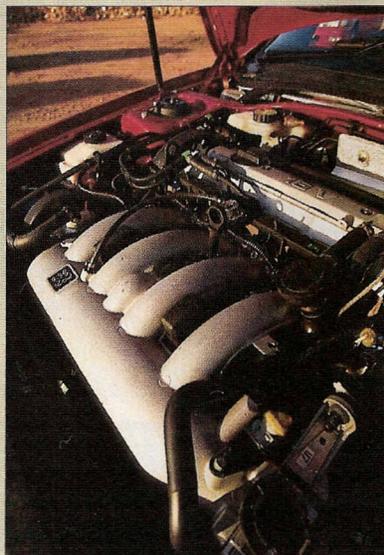
Peugeot 306 GTI 6

Which is better, eight valves or 16 valves? It's a debate that continues to divide Golf drivers and it used to split 306 drivers, too. The S16 had the power – a healthy 155bhp – but the 123bhp XSi was arguably a sweeter, more rounded performer. Sixteen-valvers rev strongly to the red-line while eight-valvers are strongest in the mid-range, which gives the impression they're torquier. It doesn't matter that they're not; they feel it.

There is a way round this, a way to make sure your 16-valver isn't pestered by the piffling eight-valver: give it the most powerful engine in the class and a six-speed gearbox, and call it the GTI 6.

Extracting 167bhp from a straightforward 2.0-litre is a neat trick (don't mention Honda and VTEC) and the tuning frees up its voice as well as more horsepower, giving it a muted twin-cam-on-twin-40s bark. Good as the latest XSi is (now 135bhp 16-valver, incidentally), it can't compete with the GTI 6's intensity... or its flexibility.

2.0-litre 16-valver punches out a potent 167bhp if you keep the revs hard against the red-line. Just as well there's that six-speed gearbox then...



ever tested, no question. The figures show that it blows all the hatches here into the weeds and leaves the far from shabby regular Civic VTi for dead, too. It lops 1.3secs off the VTi's 0-60 time, 3.5secs off its 0-100 and cuts almost half a second off its TED time. It's hard to comprehend that this 182bhp comes from just 1595cc – that's a staggering 114bhp per litre.

It's an impeccably behaved little engine, idling calmly and revving cleanly – all the way to 9000rpm. It hits the VTEC zone, shifting into high-lift cam lobe mode, at 6000rpm and goes bonkers, punching the Civic up the road in a frenzy of noise. At 8000rpm, just when you're wincing in anticipation of sixteen valves exploding

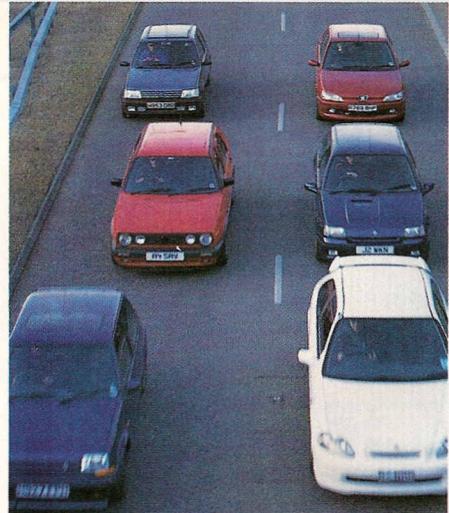
through the bonnet, it kicks again, and tips nervous passengers right over the edge. It's the noise as much as the acceleration, I reckon. Like the Integra Type-R, the Civic is light on sound deadening and other performance-sapping fripperies.

The race car sound isn't for effect. Two versions are sold in Japan and one is intended as a base for a race car, hence the cheap, throwaway seats and plastic steering wheel. The other has the Integra Type-R's red Recaro buckets, titanium gearknob and Momo wheel. The race base does have the Integra's neat Torsen-style limited slip differential, though, which is a worry for the rest because that's one of the reasons why the Type-R Integra is the best handling

front-drive car we've ever driven.

Awesome brake feel gets things off to a good start, corner exit traction is superb and yet... there's something not quite right. It's not the steering, which is direct if a bit lacking in feel compared with the wonderful systems in the others, nor is it the ride, which is firm but not jiggly. Meaden steps out having been unable to coax any visual drama from it. We confer and agree: it's not getting any real bite from its Bridgestones. The front washes out on the entry and the back won't budge, so it just understeers mildly. Most odd.

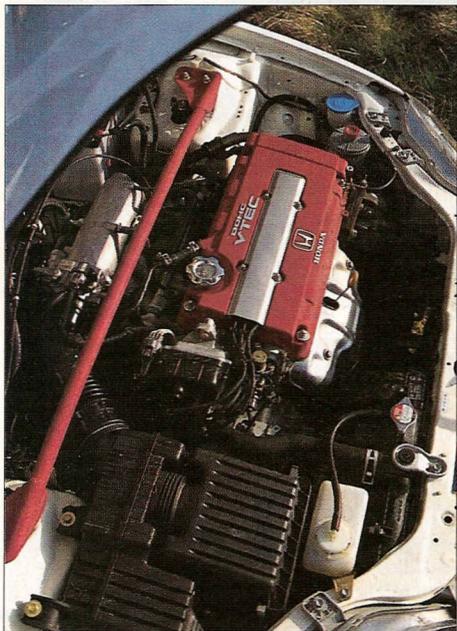
If the Civic had generated the cornering grip of the Integra Type-R, the results would have been different, but it wouldn't



SHOWDOWN!



Take a good look, because you won't see many of these on UK roads. The Civic Type-R is available only as a personal import, but if you want the most powerful hot hatch, this is it. VTEC magic conjures 182bhp from just 1.6 litres



have displaced the top of the hots.

The fact that we have a winner means there are losers, but that's a harsh description. So, sixth runner-up is the Golf. If you were thinking of buying one, do. It has stood the test of time well in terms of integrity, styling and dynamics, no other hatch is as entertaining and secure, and for some it's worth sacrificing a little low-speed alacrity for unflappable poise and high-speed composure.

The Civic could have finished higher up, though we sense that it would take a bit of chassis tweaking to deliver the Integra's exceptional adjustability. Grip notwithstanding, it feels a little inert. But what a thrilling engine – what a rev range, what a kick, what a racket! It demands real concentration and commitment but it's a challenge with a unique reward.

Peugeot's 306 is next up. It's the most powerful GTI on sale, the only one with a six-speed 'box, and it has a chassis that makes the most of them. For involvement and ability, it's the finest on sale today. But when the current champion finishes mid-field, there's a message for today's hot hatch makers. It became obvious early on that a killer hot hatch should be compact, potent and weigh less than a ton. Only three of the 13 in our recent GTI mega-test did, and none has as good a power-to-weight ratio as

PERFORMANCE						
	Civic Type-R	205 GTI 1.9	306 GTI 6	R5 GT Turbo	Clio Williams	Golf GTI 16V
THROUGH THE GEARS (secs)						
0-30mph	1.8	3.0	2.8	2.9	2.5	3.2
0-40mph	2.9	4.3	4.0	4.2	-	4.6
0-50mph	4.2	6.1	5.5	5.9	-	6.4
0-60mph	5.7	7.7	7.2	7.8	7.6	8.0
0-70mph	7.9	10.8	9.5	9.5	-	11.2
0-80mph	10.3	13.8	12.0	12.0	-	14.1
0-90mph	13.0	17.7	15.8	18.7	-	18.2
0-100mph	17.5	22.6	20.1	24.7	22.8	24.5
0-110mph	22.7	--	26.2	--	--	--
Standing 1/4 mile (secs/mph)	15.0/94	16.5/86	15.7/90	16.4/84	15.9/87	16.7/82
3rd/4th/5th GEAR ACCELERATION (secs)						
			(3rd/4th/5th/6th)			
20-40mph	4.9/6.6/9.7	---/---/---	5.0/6.3/8.2/10.6	---/---/---	---/---/---	---/---/---
30-50mph	4.9/6.4/9.6	---/6.4/9.0	4.7/6.0/7.8/10.3	---/7.5/14.4	---/6.1/9.6	---/7.9/10.5
40-60mph	5.2/6.7/9.4	---/6.3/9.3	4.6/5.8/7.8/10.4	---/5.6/10.5	---/---/---	---/8.0/10.7
50-70mph	5.2/7.5/10.0	---/6.5/9.6	4.6/6.0/7.8/10.4	---/6.6/8.5	---/6.3/9.2	---/8.1/11.0
60-80mph	5.0/8.2/12.0	---/7.1/10.0	4.9/6.3/8.0/11.0	---/7.3/10.1	---/---/---	---/9.2/12.7
70-90mph	5.2/8.5/15.4	---/8.8/13.6	---/7.4/8.6/12.3	---/7.5/13.1	---/7.3/11.6	---/10.3/14.9
80-100mph	---/9.0/---	---/10.5/16.3	---/---/9.5/13.7	---/10.2/15.3	---/---/---	---/---/---
90-110mph	---/10.6/---	---/---/---	---/---/10.7/---	---/---/---	---/---/---	---/---/---
Max speed (mph)	125*	124	135†	120	121	124
Mph per 1000rpm in top	18.7	20.8	21.5	21.7	22.7	20.0
* Electronically limited † Manufacturer's claim						

our top three. It seems Peugeot already knows that the 306 is too big and the 106 is too small; there's a new 205 on the way.

And so to that top three. It's a shame that

there are so few unmodified R5 Turbos in existence. The standard car is so well balanced, so beautifully honed that only very careful tuning could improve it. Sure, interior-wise it's as trendy as a cheesecloth shirt, but drive it and you'll love it.

It runs the 205 GTI close, but the Peugeot's scintillating throttle response is the clincher. The rest of the car seems geared to making the most of this simple but effervescent engine; the perfect gearing, the incredibly swift gearshift and most especially the bitingly keen handling. Its successor has a lot to live up to, and if it's as good looking we'll be amazed.

The Clio Williams wins. No surprise, really. It has the looks, the power and quite simply the most inspiring handling of any hot hatch; there isn't another on the planet that makes such light work of tricky corners. It combines the R5's compliance with the 205's crispness, and throws in the Golf's high-speed poise for good measure. It really is the complete item, the Clio: great steering, fine ride, excellent seats, good brakes and handling to die for. It's a great hot hatch and, best of all, it makes its driver feel like a great, too. 🚗

● Many thanks to Warrender for the generous loan of the Civic Type-R (if you fancy owning the fastest hatch around call them on 01204 528800). Thanks also to Warren Newburt (Clio), Sav de Piano (Golf), Don Louth (205) and Mrs Jenny Meaden (R5 Turbo). Sadly, Dickie's mum's immaculate Renault was written-off a week after our test by an under-bonnet fire. Sob.

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The not-so-hot hatches

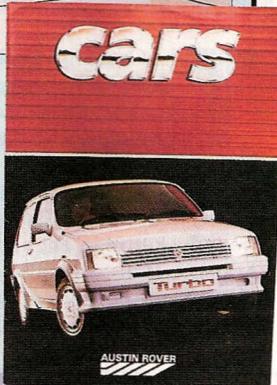
Some 'hot' hatches should have been shoved back in the microwave

There have been plenty of poor hatches. However, it often takes the ill-judged addition of a turbo or supercharger to create a truly dreadful hot hatch. Pity those buyers lured in by fulsome power curves and scanty 0-60mph times only to discover, too late, the rocky reality.

Mitsubishi knew how to make turbos work, and how to make efficient if dull hatchbacks. It put the two together and came up with the Colt Mirage Turbo, which was fast in a straight line and fast in the corners, only it was going straight on there, too. The even more style-free Nissan Cherry Turbo followed faithfully in its



hot hatch maker. But even the most masterful GTI makers can produce cars that feel like they were developed on Friday afternoon. Just the one afternoon. How else do you explain the dynamically inept VW Polo G40? Even the race cars fell over.



wheel tracks.

According to road tests of the time, the tiny Lancia Y10 Turbo wasn't actually that bad. According to one of our staffers, it was a motorised trampoline that wielded its rampant 85bhp with the finesse of a farting balloon. The Metro Turbo was a pea from the same blighted pod, available in all-white and good-looking only after a couple of litres of Diamond White. No wonder MG purists were biting the ends off their pipes.

You don't have to fit a blower to produce a hatch that's on the ragged edge in first gear, as Vauxhall has shown with more consistency, perhaps, than any other

