



With Carlight's reputation as 'the Rolls-Royce of caravans' it's beyond most of us to find the serious money needed to buy one of its superb new tourers. But how about an 'as good as new' Carlight for as little as £7000?

Jim Fone hears how it's done

light fantastic

AS YOU BROWSE through the Buyers' Guide section of *Caravan* magazine, it's understandable if you take one look at the prices under the name Carlight and simply turn the page. Putting Carlight's famed build quality and reputation as the Rolls-Royce of caravans to one side – £23,000 to £32,000 is a scary amount of money to shell out on a new tourer.

But how about a beautifully built, as good as new Carlight for around £10,000 to £15,000 – and possibly for as little as £7000?

Here's how it works. When an owner trades in a much-loved Carlight for a new

version, the factory takes in this used model and gives it a thorough overhaul, before offering it for sale in tip-top condition at a more affordable price. It may be used, but it's been built to last and thoroughly checked over.

Robert Hodgson, managing director of Carlight, says his company has been turning out a 'factory-warranted' van every one or two weeks for the past 11 years. 'We have a checklist that we work through on each of these caravans. We are not trying to change their character, but to get it so a customer can buy one and know that everything about it is right.

They are buying a van that's been thoroughly overhauled from top to bottom.

'We do an awful lot of work and some of it is under the skin,' he added. 'We make sure that a customer gets a really nice, sound caravan. If you look after it and get it serviced once a year it will go on as long as you want it to.'

Carlight justifiably prides itself on craftsmanship, combining traditionally honed skills with modern materials and techniques. If a new method isn't an improvement, then Carlight won't change simply for the sake of it. 'We do



Left: as good as new! Just look at the quality of the woodwork.

Above: Break out the bubbly; saving a cool ten grand warrants it.

Below: John shows how the seats pull out to make a comfy bed.

Bottom: Classic looks never seem to age. It's a 1991 model, actually.



not go around saying we are perfect, because we're not,' says Robert, 'but if we make a mistake we stand by it. We stand by the products we make.'

The cheapest factory-warranted Carlight ever sold was a 132; a 13ft two-berth, which went for £7000. The most expensive went for a more substantial £27,000, but on average the price is between £10,000 and £15,000.

John and Ann Rudkin, from Grantham, Lincolnshire, are *Caravan* magazine readers who own one of these factory-warranted models. Theirs is a 1991 Carlight Commander 152EK, which they bought for £11,500 just over a year ago. Its price new was £21,975. I visited them at the Caravan Club's popular site at Chatsworth Park located in the Peak District.

In the 1940s and 50s John went to school near the Carlight factory in





Top: beautifully kept – and Carlight will even custom alter to suit individual tastes.



Left: neat kitchen area that hardly looks used includes this concealed oven arrangement.



John and Ann's Commander has the sort of specification you'd expect from a luxury caravan, including hot water, toilet, fridge, a heater with blown-air, four-burner hob, grill, oven, blinds, a TV point, plus 12v and mains electricity.

Working on *Caravan* magazine has given me an anorak ability to tell whether a model was manufactured in the early, mid or late 1990s, but with this Carlight two-berth I really couldn't tell. 'It's 1991 cum 1999,' said John, 'I defy anyone to tell me which is which. It doesn't look much different than the 1980 Carlight. If it's proven, why change it?'

Inside and out, their caravan was immaculate. The interior was light and airy, the fastenings and hinges were strong and secure, the veneer on the light wood was real, not plastic, and the drawers featured dovetailed joints. There were some great details, too, including a fitted step, a double wardrobe with pull-out wire trays, an adjustable support behind the back rests in the lounge, three sets of double sockets and even a bread bin! Seating in the lounge pulls out to make a double bed, there are no slats. Also, the trim had been updated by Carlight when it was refitting this caravan.

Sleaford, Lincs, and thinks this is why its name kept popping into his head when he was deciding on a change of caravan. 'I thought I couldn't afford it,' he said. 'They do not advertise much and you don't see many on pitches, but I rang Robert Hodgson and he told me to come and look at their secondhand vans. This one was available and we decided to take it. If we don't have an accident with our caravan and look after it, it will be as good in ten years time as it is now. To paraphrase a saying 'Old Carlights don't

die, they just go on and on'.

'I wouldn't say Carlights are the be-all and end-all, because it is a personal thing,' John added, 'but we have always liked things of quality. We've always bought the best we could afford. Personally, there is no doubt in my mind that Carlight are the best. Once you are hooked into them, I don't think you would have anything else. You are paying for quality and if it happens to be at £11,500 and not £22,000, does it matter?' A good point.



Carlight's open day impressed our John

Church Lane, in the quiet market town of Sleaford, hasn't changed a great deal since my schooldays in the '40s, '50s and '60s.

Sandwiched between the infants school and a Grammar school is the Carlight factory.

A bright and sunny day saw around two hundred invited guests socialising with Robert and Mandy Hodgson and their staff whilst examining the 'Carlight Collection'.

This comprises of one caravan from each decade of manufacture, commencing with 'Lightfour' produced in 1935. It was regularly used by the same family until 1980.

The 'Coronet', made in 1942, reflected the many difficulties experienced during wartime. Materials had to be gleaned from wherever they could be found, e.g.

timber window frames, rather than the earlier steel and later aluminium ones, plus a mixture of lining boards were indicative of the grim times.



It was interesting to learn Carlight produced mainly 'Type X' models, which were basically small mobile medical centres, which could be towed and set up in remote areas during the wartime period.

Matters improved with the 'Cosmopolitan' in 1950 as materials became more available, while subtle changes culminated in the 'Commander' series first produced during the 1980s.

For me, touring the factory was almost like being in a time warp – the timber buildings are exactly as I remembered 50 years ago. No high-volume production units here!

Instead we saw two of the new 'Commander' 162s in production, these partially built caravans giving one a unique insight into the hand-built quality of these superior products.

Carlight Caravans may have appeared a little conservative in the past – these new designs with rear lockers result in a much more modernistic approach for the year 2000. I found it refreshing to be able to discuss the caravans, and any modifications I might prefer in the future, with skilled craftsmen. Most have been with Carlight for many years and are obviously very proud of their efforts.

Craftsmen through the ages have not been concerned with their surroundings, only finished products. Carlight's reputation as the Rolls-Royce of caravans is in very capable hands.

One only had to look at the range of used and rebuilt caravans, some 10 years old, to realise that this reputation is well-earned.

Being part of the 'Carlight family' of owners brings its own feeling of well being – a sentiment expressed by the visitors to Church Lane.

John Rudkin



Top: roomy washroom has all the mod cons – hot water, naturally.

Left: exceptional Carlight detailing includes wire baskets and even a bread bin!

Although it works to a checklist, if a customer wants to see changes to the layout or specification then Carlight will try to oblige. 'It can be tailor-made to whatever you want,' said John.

John and Ann tow using a 2.9-litre diesel-powered Ssang-Yong Musso 4x4. 'It tows really well. It weighs in the region of 1400 or 1500kg when loaded up so you need something reasonably substantial to pull it. The mass in running order of the van itself is 1150-1200kg and a different caravan of a similar size would be less than 1000kg. It's because with the Carlight you get a build quality I don't think you can get in a mass-produced unit,' he reckons.

John, who's 58, has just retired, so he is looking forward to some happy touring years ahead. 'Carlight has brought out a

162 with a rear locker and I might look at a used one of those when one becomes available, maybe in five years' time.'

All refurbished Carlights come with a one-year warranty, and they seem to hold their value well. 'We monitor private sale ads,' claims Robert Hodgson, 'and you'll notice that they always sell quickly. From an owner's point of view, it is encouraging to know that you always have a sellable product.'

So how will you choose to spend your money – a brand-new caravan or a used but reconditioned Carlight?

The choice, as they say, is yours...

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