

COMPANY PROFILE: VAUX POPULAR

Courtenay Sport is one of the country's leading Griffin tuning companies, so we headed over to the firm's Norfolk HQ to see how it's built itself a cast-iron brand name in the industry

Words: Matt Robinson Photos: David Wigmore



Customer waiting area (right, top) is a relaxed and comfortable place, with racks of tuning bits and their prices displayed on the walls; Mark Watts mans the front desk (right, centre); Vauxhall parts stored on the mezzanine floor at Courtenay Sport (right, bottom)

suppose I could start with some patronising cliché about Courtenay being in the back end of beyond, a sneering put down for a company which is staunchly *not* in the M40 corridor. But as I'm from what some journalists would call 'the sticks' in the first place, I don't want to, thank you very much. This fabulous Vauxhall tuner – based in North Walsham, a town north of Norwich on the road to Cromer – is not some two-bit operation with a customer base solely in East Anglia. It's an international player, and one of the first places Vauxhall owners go to when modifying becomes an essential.

The premises have a Vauxhall main dealer feel about them when we arrive on a blustery but sunny day in late April. As you walk in, you're greeted with a very clean and hugely impressive array of Vauxhall modifying components displayed on racks around the reception area, all of which have their prices clearly displayed so you can budget your project. Mark Watts, Courtenay's general manager and a friend of the magazine (we featured his supercharged Astra in PT12), is a senior bod here but he's running round,





The team (far left, big picture) at Courtenay are a happy bunch - co-owners Sarah Hunter and Jon Shield (front row, far right and second right) are hugely enthusiastic about their company, while general manager Mark Watts (front row, second left) works tirelessly for the team; the rest of the guys pictured are technicians Dick (front row, far left), Mark (back row, left) and David (back row, right)

making people teas and coffees and checking customers waiting for their cars are happy, while answering the phones and dealing with technical tuning queries. There's a big window behind reception which looks into the bustling workshop area, a four-ramp set-up that's a hive of activity all the time. The mix of cars in here – and outside in Courtenay's car park – represents all that's good and popular about Griffin tuning. In the workshop a Vectra sits up on one ramp while a Zafira GSi in trademark blue is being serviced on the far side. There's a VXT in the middle, having major upgrades done over a few days, while Courtenay's own Corsa VXR development car is covered in one corner. None of the customer cars are sitting idle – there's a technician at each, busily beavering away. Outside, VXTs and 220s sit alongside Astras, Corsas and even a MkII Cavalier... be in no doubt, this place is Vauxhall, Vauxhall, Vauxhall.

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Eventually, while Mr Wigmore gets snapping this friendly but highly professional outfit, I manage to chat to the co-owners of Courtenay Sport, Jon Shield and his partner Sarah Hunter. Living and working together can often put a strain on a relationship but Jon and Sarah are so keen to tell me everything about the past, present and future of Courtenay, that you know this isn't one of those situations where they're at each other's throats. Jon explains that Courtenay started as a Vauxhall main dealer in the centre of North Walsham in 1984, under eponymous boss Chris Courtenay. Chris was a man who was into tuning at the time, but actually worked on the Griffins' arch-nemeses, Fords. The main focus was parts and servicing, with a bit of sales and admin on the side, but it wasn't long before Courtenay started to diversify.

"We were turbocharging MkI Astras as we were very close with Pace Products," says Jon. "By the time the MkII Astra appeared in 1985, we boasted that we had a conversion for every car in the model range." That included even doing work on a Bedford Rascal, among the usual Novas, Astras, Cavaliers and Carltons. But in 1990 things took a turn for the worst. "The Chancellor dropped his bombshell about interest rates, a lot of Vauxhall dealers went bust and so Courtenay's sport and turbo conversion side of things went to the old bodyshop, where it began to carve out a niche as a Vauxhall tuning company, rather than a main dealer."

Courtenay was now all about turbo conversions, new brakes, better suspension and so on – in fact, all the tuning ethics that we take for granted nowadays at PT. Jon had been

with the company some time, but it was also becoming clear that Chris was thinking about his future as the boss of Courtenay Sport. "In about 1998, Chris had been dropping hints about his plans for the business and he caught me off guard one day by suggesting I might like to take over," explains Jon. "The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea and one day I was having a chat with him and said we would look at taking the business off his hands if he decided to sell it. And he literally shut his diary, said 'there's no time like the present' and a few days later we owned the company!" Sarah joined in 1999, because – by Jon's own admission – he doesn't like finance and accounting, and that's her speciality, so she left a good job to come and be a major part of the Courtenay adventure.

It would appear to have paid off. Courtenay moved into its current premises in November 2006, as Jon always liked the layout of the place – there's plenty of parking, it's got the spacious reception area to impress customers and the dyno room is separate to the workshop at the back of the building. "That's a major plus – in the old premises, the workshop may have been bigger but there was a lot of dead space and the rolling road was in there with it, so every time we used it the mechanics ended up deaf and choking on the fumes!" laughs Jon.

The idea at Courtenay is to present the company as something more than a "greasy garage", a feat I think they've

accomplished. "A lot of our customers come here and it's a long way for them to get to us," says Sarah. "We therefore want them to be really happy coming here and spending time – and money! – with us." Jon adds: "There is a market here in East Anglia, we've always been in Norfolk and we wouldn't be doing this if there wasn't demand, but people are coming from much further afield anyway. I would say 90 per cent of our business is now from people outside the county, and from abroad." Courtenay is very big in Scandinavia: "People from Norway and Sweden bring their cars over here by ferry at Newcastle, drive all the way down here and then either stay in the UK while the car is being worked on, or they fly home, fly back about two weeks later and then do the return journey in their cars," explains Jon. That customer dedication speaks volumes about the quality of Courtenay's work.

Open weekdays and Saturday mornings, Courtenay's business involves selling tuning parts for all manner of Vauxhalls, servicing them and doing more bespoke engine conversions and big 'Stage' upgrades to cars. The explosion of the VXR brand has been a blessing for Courtenay, with the Corsa and Astra variants hugely popular for modifying. "We primarily do new car tuning now on these VXRs, for a long time people would wait until their cars were two or three years old and out of warranty before modifying them, but now we see these VXRs being run in and then modified straight away," says Sarah. Over the years, though, they've seen all the big Vauxhall performance names, like GTE, GSi and SRi; and while those are still very welcome at Courtenay, both Jon and Sarah say the VXR brand is a "phenomenon".

Courtenay also works with some big brand names in the tuning industry, such as Milltek Exhausts, Bilstein, Magnex, Whiteline and Remus, to name but a few; the company develops these to work the best for any model of Vauxhall. In fact, the Triple Eight race team used Courtenay's intercooler on its version of the Astra. A big part of this is mail order; last year, Courtenay launched an online shop and that side of the business is absolutely blossoming. "The performance panel filter, for example, sells brilliantly," adds Sarah.



CONTACT
Courtenay Sport,
14 Folgate Road,
North Walsham,
Norfolk NR28 0AJ,
01692 404313,
mail order 01692
404060,
www.courtenay
sport.co.uk. Also
go to
www.z22se.co.uk

Jon explains Courtenay's ethos: "It's all about performance over style for us. We want to make these Vauxhalls dynamically better. Of course, there were a lot of bodykits and big wheels on cars some years ago, but now it's much more subtle and we like that. People want cars that look standard but are much quicker, and we can accommodate them. The first stage of modding for our customers is often just software for more bhp but we try and get them to look at the whole picture and recommend things like better brakes or suspension to make the car faster."

Currently, the seven man operation at Courtenay can work on around five cars per day, depending on the involvement of each job (eg Stage Three for a VX220 is a five-day project), and is currently booking up to three weeks in advance it is so busy. All the software maps come from Courtenay's expert engineer in Germany, Stefan, and in return he gets a lot of Vauxhall/Opel hardware from Courtenay.

All the work is guaranteed for 12 months but Courtenay is thinking of extending that to three years. Even so, if you've got the one-year warranty, don't despair. Jon says: "We had one customer with a 3-litre engine in a Vectra B and after a year and a half the idler pulleys snapped and disintegrated the top end. He was out of warranty and we investigated why it had happened and we didn't have to repair it, but we did the work for him." Sarah adds: "If a customer had a problem with our work after 18 months, we wouldn't shut the door on them. It's a negotiation – we try and find out why the car has failed, and then we look at the circumstances to see if it's our work that has caused it. Customer service is hugely important to us, we want each and every one of our customers to make the effort to come back out to see us."

With forum feedback extremely positive for Courtenay – word of mouth is the best possible advertising for an independent company like this – it's clear that warranty claims are an absolute rarity for this excellent business; the work done here is ultra-reliable. If you've got a Vauxhall and you're thinking of modifying, don't be put off by the location; Courtenay Sport is at the very heart of the Griffin tuning scene. **PT**

Four-ramp workshop (main pic, left) is tidy but always busy; rolling road (far left, top) is now separate to the workshop, much to the joy of the technicians!