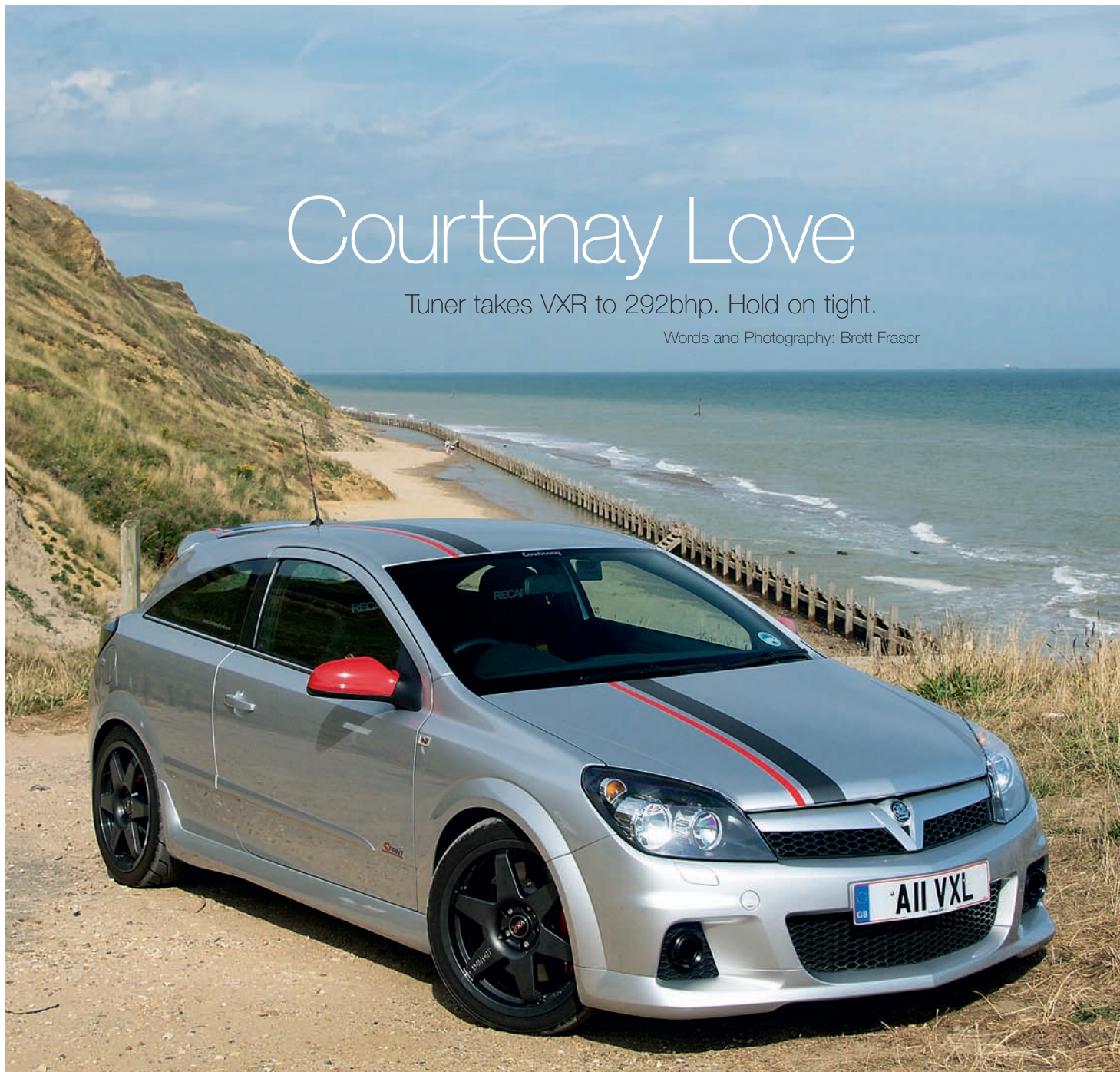


Courtenay Love

Tuner takes VXR to 292bhp. Hold on tight.

Words and Photography: Brett Fraser



With 888 Race Engineering not only supplying Vauxhall with BTCC racing cars but also acting as a semi-official tuning arm for the company, it must be tough for other tuners to get a serious look-in. Tough, but not impossible.

Norfolk-based Courtenay Sport has been doing its thing to Vauxhalls since 1984, with turbocharging its speciality, and is sufficiently well respected to have worked in conjunction with 888 to create performance parts for some VXR models. The company has teamed directly with Vauxhall Special Vehicle Operations, too, as well as with Lotus on a VX220 project, so when Courtenay releases new product it's worth a gander.

For his sins (and they must have been heinous!)

Courtenay's co-owner, Jon Shield, is a big fan of the old Nova Sprint, a stripped-out version of the little Vauxhall hatchback from the 1980s, that was intended as the basis for owners' motorsport ambitions. But while that car inspired the name for the new 292bhp Courtenay Sport Astra VXR Sprint, Shield confesses that the Renaultsport Mégane R26 R was the direction in which he aimed development of the track-biased Astra. Not that he's inviting direct comparison, mind, as Courtenay's budget is probably less than Renaultsport spends annually on loo rolls; it's simply the concept that's the same, the idea of losing weight, increasing power, and setting up the suspension to perform well on track.

While an ECU remap on its own could doubtless have given the standard 237bhp Astra VXR a

sufficiently sizeable kick up the power ladder to look impressive in marketing terms, Courtenay has re-engineered lots of other engine components, too. There's a new inlet tract and airbox, a bigger plenum chamber with larger-bore pipework, a more efficient radiator, an uprated intercooler, modified actuator and a sportier Remus exhaust system. All this raises power by 55bhp and torque by 110lb ft, and to help translate these additions into traction rather than tyre smoke, Courtenay fits a Quaife limited-slip differential and Toyo 888 track day rubber.

No point going faster if you can't also stop quicker, and to that end Courtenay has fitted larger (345mm diameter) front discs with four-pot AP Racing callipers; the 292mm vented rear discs and uprated callipers are a modified version of the setup



THE SPEC SHEET: COURTENAY SPORT VAUXHALL ASTRA VXR SPRINT

ENGINE >> Four-cylinder, 16-valve, petrol, turbocharged **CAPACITY** 1998cc >> **MAX POWER** >> 292bhp @ 5170rpm **MAX TORQUE** >> 346lb ft @ 3600-4000rpm **0-60MPH** >> 5.6 seconds (est.) **TOP SPEED** >> 155mph (est.) **WEIGHT** >> 1343kg (approx.) **PRICE** >> £9500 for conversion, fitted

WE LIKE >> Oodles of power and torque, chassis
WE DISLIKE >> Kinda costly
VERDICT >> Sophisticated grunt

from the Vectra VXR. Suspension mods extend to stiffer and lower-riding springs, an adjustable rear anti-roll bar, and a set of 8x18-inch Revolution Millennium alloys.

And so to the weight-saving part, which mostly involves binning all the standard seats, (together with their associated belts) replacing the front items with grippy Recaro Pole Position lightweight shell-backed buckets, and neglecting to replace the rear bench at all. Originally the air-con was also removed, taking the weight loss to 60kg, but a trip to the Nürburgring in the summer persuaded Courtenay to reinstall the system – heat exhaustion will not make you go faster. Where once rear passengers perched, now sits a Lifeline fire extinguisher system and a Harness bar, to which is attached a pair of Sabelt harnesses.

Those Recaros not only pin you in place, they position you lower to the floorpan, so immediately you feel more in tune with the Astra's chassis. Shame Courtenay hasn't shorn the interior of the standard VXR's overly chunky steering wheel and gearknob, but hey, you can't have everything. So be thankful for some of the stuff you do get; only modestly increased noise levels, despite the absence of a sound-absorbing rear seat; and a distinctly firm yet not overpoweringly harsh low-speed ride quality.

You have to press the VXR's 'Sport' button to get the full hit of Courtenay horsepower, and it's quite

an occasion when the whole herd stampedes; it starts to get excitable at around 2500rpm and from 3000-6000rpm it's utterly manic. As in 'dare I hold full throttle for more than five seconds?' frantic. Hitting 100mph is easy-peasy lemon-squeezy. Except that in the Courtenay Astra VXR it becomes an event – the induction system is bellicose, the exhaust is shrieking as though ripping sail-cloth asunder at a colossal rate, the steering wheel is tugging to-and-fro just enough to encourage a firm grip, and all your senses are on high alert. Lift off the throttle and there's banging and popping from the rear end of the car, and when you're accelerating you can hear the whistle and flutter of the turbocharger. Whether by accident or design, you feel entertained, not overwhelmed.

Courtenay's greatest achievement is to feed all that power and torque through the front wheels

without the Astra choosing its own path down the road. Though improved over standard, the steering remains a tad deficient in feel, but you can't fault the Sprint's ability to follow precisely the direction you've chosen. And the combination of the super-sticky Toyos and Vauxhall's own nicely judged stability control system, means you're not fighting massive understeer through quick corners, nor struggling for traction as you power out of them. Those big brakes work a treat, too.

Use your brain to read the road rather than your right foot to bludgeon it, stick between 3000-5000rpm, and this car is massively and maturely quick. Want to go bonkers, and it'll do that, too. At approximately £9500 for the full conversion the Sprint package ain't cheap, but if you hunt around for a bargain secondhand Astra VXR on which to apply it, the sums become very appealing indeed 