THE HARRINGTON Le Mans ALPINE

A famous coachbuilder has given Rootes' sports car a genuine GT flavour with the aid of a stylish glass-fibre body conversion, and a lively engine prepared by George Hartwell.

by John Blunsden

LAST year's announcement by Thomas Harrington Limited, of Hove, Sussex, of a hardtop body conversion for the Sunbeam Alpine, brought back memories of an earlier era in British car design. Before the 1939/1945 war it was common practice for specialist coachbuilders to offer alternative body styles on production chassis, thereby catering for the customer who required something of distinction and quality, and who was prepared to pay for it.

Harrington's long association with the automobile industry has been concentrated mainly in the motor coach field, in which they have rightly earned a solid reputation for high-quality, stylish products. It is good to see that in their recent essays into the private car market, a similar standard is evident, and that the Harrington Alpines are worthy examples of British coachbuilding craft.

Last year a Harrington Alpine, equipped with a suitably tuned engine, was taken to Le Mans, and it carried off the Index of Thermal Efficiency award—the second most valuable prize in this 24-hour classic. The publicity value of this success was considerable, both for the Rootes Group, and for Harringtons themselves, and it prompted the decision shortly afterwards to market a production version of the Le Mans car. The result is the Harrington Le Mans, selling in this country for £1,495.

The car is said to be turned out in a similar state of tune to that of the Index winner, with the engine giving 104 horsepower (SAE) at 6,000 rpm, or some 19 horsepower more than the normal production Alpine turns out at 5,000 rpm. The Harrington Le Man's torque, at 105 pounds feet, is 11 pounds feet above that of the standard car, and is produced at 4,500 rpm instead of at 3,800 rpm.

The engine modifications involved are considerable, and include raising the compression ratio from 9.0 to 1 to 9.5 to 1. A special lightweight flywheel and competition clutch are fitted, and these are balanced as a unit with the crankshaft. Valve operation is controlled from a high-lift camshaft, and assisted by stronger valve springs, while the breathing has been altered by opening out and polishing the inlet and exhaust ports.

Other mechanical features include a brake booster by Clayton Dewandre, and an oil cooler, while a heater-demister unit and screen washers are standardised. The car supplied for test was also fitted with a Laycock de Normanville overdrive unit, operative on all the forward gears, but this is an extra beyond the normal specification.

The 'teardrop' treatment of the Harrington glass-fibre body balances well with the unchanged frontal aspect of the Alpine. The styling line helps to remove any threat of heaviness in the lower body panels.

Apart from the obvious body alterations, the Harrington Le Mans is equipped with a spring-loaded arm to operate the horn, mounted to the right of the steering column, and a wood-rim Carlotti steering wheel of the type marketed by Les Leston; the facia is capped in walnut and has a lockable compartment on the left

The Harrington body conversion dispenses with the entire tail section of the standard Alpine, and does away with the now dated sharp fins. The overall effect is well balanced and the car is given a classic GT line.

Essentially it remains a two-seater, although an 'emergency' seat is provided behind the main compartment, and forms part of the generous luggage space when not in use. A flat, unobstructed floor space, almost four feet

Cockpit of the Harrington Le Mans is distinguishable by a pair of Microcell seats and a Carlotti wood-rim steering wheel. Combined arm and knee rests are built into the door trim.

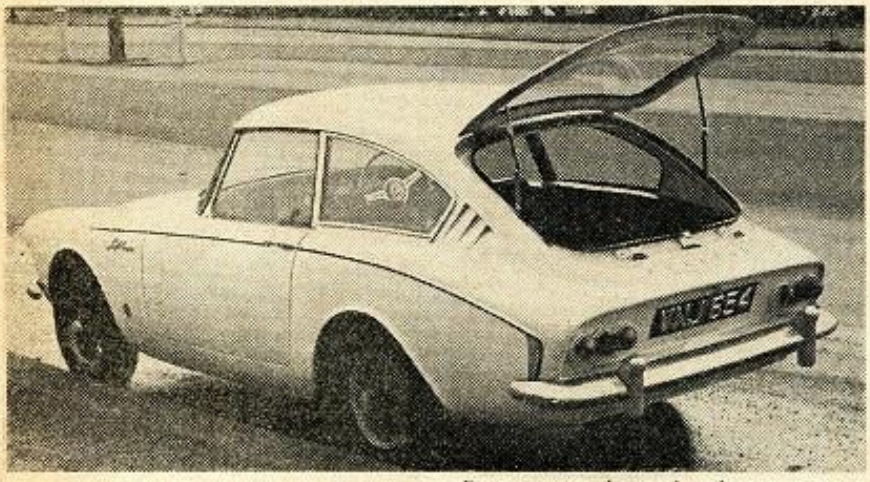
in length, and running for the full width of the car between the completely boxed-in wheel arches, simply swallows up bulky cases and grips. The main access is through a top-hinged one-piece window-door, which is self-supporting on two straps. The luggage floor is fully carpeted, and being smooth, some care is recommended in stowing the contents to prevent them from rolling around during fast motoring.

Although the body is basically standard as far back as the doors, these have been retrimmed, and incorporate long tapering armrests, with the window winders fitting snugly below them. The door handles are mounted right at the leading edge, where they offer minimum leverage and therefore escape from being misused as door pulls.

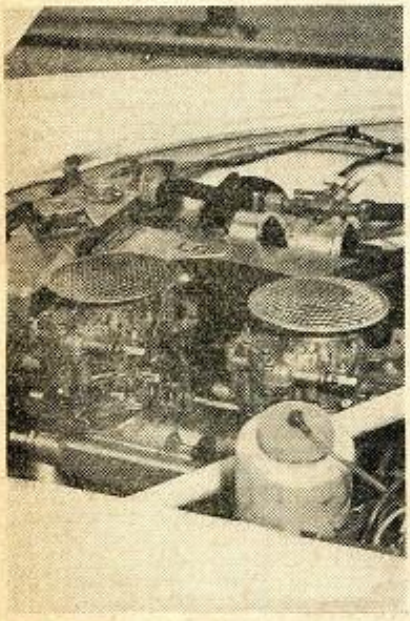
There are no quarter windows in the doors, but air extraction is helped by front-hinged rear quarter windows, and by ventilation slats let into the rear quarter panels of the hardtop. The normal Alpine front seats have been dispensed with and replaced by a pair of Microcell competition bucket seats. These offer adequate lateral support during the not inconsiderable roll which accompanies really hard cornering, and the angle of the backrests allows long journeys to be completed without fatigue. The two-piece cushions offer a modest amount of behind-the-knees support, and tall drivers especially would probably appreciate more generous bolstering along the leading edge.

Although by no means a silent travelling car, the Harrington Le Mans is neither objectionably noisy. The level of wind disturbance varies considerably with adjustment in window height, and the most favourable results were obtained with the windows either two-thirds or more open, or one inch or less open, the intermediate positions producing a considerable increase in side draughts as well as a build up in wind noise. Left out of doors all night, the body did not prove completely water-tight, rain creeping in via rubbers at the top leading edge of the door windows and dropping on to the corners of the seats.

The engine was always an instant starter, and required only slight choking immediately it had fired. Some induction roar was noticeable, particularly when the throttles were opened quickly, while the exhaust note was also 'healthy' under brisk acceleration, although it just missed being objectionable to people outside the car. In the cockpit, the exhaust note was muffled considerably by the lavish carpeting and trimming throughout the body.



Easy access to the spacious luggage compartment is through a top-hinged window-door. With the 'emergency' seats folded 46 inches of carpeted floor space is available.



The use of modest filters on the twin carburettors results in some induction noise from the Hartwell-tuned engine, which revels in high revs.

For normal road use the engine performance was marred by a certain lack of flexibility. A severe flat spot, corresponding to a range of at least a quarter of an inch of pedal travel, had to be allowed for during acceleration, and below 2,000 rpm the power had to be fed in very gradually. Beyond that speed, however, acceleration built up rapidly, and the light flywheel allowed the peak engine speed of 6,000 rpm to be reached surprisingly quickly. Indeed, a close watch on the rev counter was necessary to prevent the needle from passing too far into the red.

Somewhat disconcerting during really hard driving was the tendency for the fuel level in the carburettors to build up during heavy braking, causing partial flooding when a clean pick-up was required for acceleration through a bend.

There was some harshness in the engine note beyond 5,500 rpm, which persisted, but did not increase, up to a maximum reading of 6,500 rpm registered during the test. Yet the engine gave every indication of being fully able to withstand prolonged hard work without harm; there was never any trace of running-on after brisk motoring, and water temperature and oil pressure readings remained well within the safety zone.

The suggested rev limit of 6,000 rpm corresponded to approximately 30, 45 and 70 mph in the indirect gears without overdrive, and 95 mph in top. For progressive acceleration right through the range up to top speed overdrive was best confined to use on fourth gear, although either overdrive second and third, or direct and overdrive third, were useful gear pairings for hill-climbing and fast runs over twisting courses. A long run up and a slight favourable grade was necessary to obtain a speed of 100 mph, and the effective maximum on most British roads away from the motorways would be around 95 mph, with 80 to 85 mph being a comfortable cruising gait in overdrive top. Acceleration from rest to 50, 60 and 80 mph, took 9.0, 12.4 and 24.0 seconds, respectively.

The gearbox, having freed off over nearly 8,000 miles, had a light action and the crispness which one has come to accept as normal on Sunbeams. All but bottom gear are protected by strong synchromesh, while the overdrive could be brought in or released smoothly as long as the lever was tripped while the power was on. The clutch seemed able to transmit all the power available, and a moderately light pedal pressure was needed. Fierce acceleration, however, produced some rear-end axle movement.

The brakes were really superb. The booster unit reduced pedal pressure considerably, yet the brakes remained progressive and could be 'felt' accurately. A pity that all cars of this calibre are not as well provided with stopping power.

The roadholding and steering of the Harrington Le Mans were more than usually affected by changes in tyre pressures, and the tailoring of the car to individual needs must involve something of a compromise. Hard tyres inevitably caused a firm ride, and considerable rear-end pitching over rough surfaces, but at the same time they took a lot of the work out of the steering. On the other hand tyre pressure around the 26 to 28 pounds mark smoothed out the ride considerably, but produced too much sponginess in the steering for brisk motoring. Personal preference resulted in an extra four pounds pressure in the front tyres, with the car lightly laden, but this might not suit all drivers, and some trial and error experiments are to be recommended for anyone taking over one of these cars for the first time.

In view of the percentage of hard driving involved in the test, the overall fuel consumption of 23-24 mpg must be considered very favourable, especially as at no time did the consumption increase beyond 21 mpg, and then only when the car was really hammered through the gears on a cross-country run.

The Harrington Le Mans is not the cheapest Alpine on the market, but when its price is measured against its prestige appeal, its undoubted good looks, its luggage carrying capacity, its high-quality finish and its robustness, it starts to sound most reasonable. And the Harrington order book suggests that a lot of other people think so, too.