

Cover: Model, Jo Phillips; photographed by Donald Milne.

# MAYFAIR

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*Pert Patricia, page 59.*



*Alpine sports, page 68.*



*The Sunbeam Alpine name was revived in 1959, with a design based on the Hillman Husky, with Rapiers mechanics. Clockwise, from main picture, opposite: a 1961 Alpine, Series 11. This model could do 0-50 mph in 9.9 seconds. Above, left: a trio of Series 1 Alpines. Above, right: rear view of the 1961 Series 11. Centre, above: spare wheel neatly stowed in this 1961 Series 11 Alpine. Top: various Alpine sports were built until 1968, like this Harrington Alpine.*

Twenty-five years ago, the Rootes group re-introduced the Sunbeam Alpine. Despite its racing heritage, it was not so much a full-blooded sports car as a fast and attractive tourer, but it soon became an intrinsic part of the sixties' scene.

# SUNBEAMS ON AN ALPINE PEAK

Motoring with William Boddy/Photographed by Andrew Morland

Sunbeam – what a once-illustrious name in motoring history! It was a make that originated in the town of Wolverhampton, centre of engineering skill and craftsmanship in the Midlands. Through the pioneering and developing years the Sunbeam embraced most things motoring, on two wheels as well as four. From the early primitives to the odd

little Sunbeam Maberly, shaped like a Victorian sofa with a wheel at each point of a diamond, to fine six-cylindered motor-carriages used by many of the top-ranking British nobility. The Sunbeam from Wolverhampton ruled supreme. It was even close to Rolls-Royce in terms of quality and dignity. Its engineers, led by French-born Louis

Coatalen, tried many things, from twin-overhead-camshafts to straight-eights, from supercharging to independent suspension. In these earlier years it added up magnificently. First car to exceed 150mph, first car to pass the 200mph barrier and first British car to win the prestigious French Grand Prix (Henry Segrave at Tours in 1923). All these



notable Sunbeam achievements, never to be erased. However, they say all good things have to end, sooner or later. So it was with the Wolverhampton Sunbeams.

As motoring became more and more popular, the old methods gave way to new ones. Once, massive crankshafts were machined from solid and costly billets of highest quality steel; engines were hand fitted with laborious scraping-in of white metal

bearings; and lengthy road tests of the finished product were taken for granted. It was the correct, indeed the only way, to make good motor cars. Eventually all this was overtaken by mass-production, in varying degrees. The flourishing Rootes Group took over the old name of Sunbeam, along with those of Humber, Hillman and Singer. They found it more expedient to make use of machine-created standardised





*Clockwise, from main picture, top: a 1725 cc, 1967 Sunbeam Alpine in GT form. Above: a gleaming example of the last Sunbeam Alpine, a Series V model, resplendent with white-walled tyres. Immediate left: a front-on view of the badge-decorated Series V model (above). Far left: the classically stylish dashboard of the Alpine sports, with Rootes Group badge, but with a very up-to-date cassette player, also. Left, centre: a lovely metallic red 1966 Alpine sports model. Left, top: a GT version of the Alpine Series 111. This immaculate model was made during 1963.*

components in their cars, intended for various purposes. Among these on relatively sporting cars, the Sunbeam name was continued.

They were, however, different animals, consistent with the changing face of the motor-car, its manufacturing methods, and the thinking behind the engineering and sales departments of the Coventry-based Rootes Group. Die-hard fanatics, whom we should now term 'vintagents', advocates of vintage-type cars, may have squirmed, yet this new breed of Sunbeam did very nicely thank you, even in the tough field of international rallying, under the skilled control of gentlemen of the grade of Stirling Moss.

There had been a Sunbeam Alpine for Moss and his associates to play with, and win important rally cups. But let's not get confused. We are here concerned with the next generation of these Rootesmobiles, which surfaced from the Ryton-in-Dunsmore factory outside Coventry in 1959. That is to say, six years after the aforesaid Sunbeam Alpines had been weaned.

The object was to offer to the livelier elements among the 1960's motoring public a

quick, attractive and nice-handling fast touring motor, rather than a full-blooded sports car. The idea was attractive, and so was this later Sunbeam Alpine. Full blooded sports Sunbeams may have been an altogether different matter but at least the owner of a 1960's Alpine did not have to lift the entire cylinder block and combined twin-cam cylinder head for servicing, as was the case, with the 1925-29 3-litre Sunbeam of revered memory.

The later Sunbeam Alpines were also much less expensive to buy, using as they did already well-tried series-production Rootes components. The 1959 Alpine used the 1½-litre engine and gearbox from the Sunbeam Rapier saloon, while its floorpan came from the self-same pressings as served the contemporary Hillman Husky. In the same way, the Alpine's suspension was also derived from well-tested and freely available Rootes parts. This method kept the price and servicing costs down. And by making the Sunbeam Alpine a compact car, its performance was also impressive.

The wheelbase measured seven feet two inches, and as the 1,494 cc engine with its

push-rod-prodded overhead valves poked out 83½ bhp at 5,300 rpm, the little two-door coupé was good for around 100mph. The weight was on the heavy side, so that acceleration called for a modicum of patience. However, the lines were right, for the day and age with a low frontal profile, and tail fins beside the boot. It was offered in several versions. By 1960 came the Series II, the engine of which was enlarged to a capacity of 1,592 cc, upping the power output on the test bed by a couple of gee-gees. Although the Alpine was occasionally used for competition junkets, its true purpose was as a useful, sporty road motor. So perhaps it didn't matter too much that the Series III Alpine was down on power, when it arrived on the scene in 1963. A hard-top was the attraction then, for snug winter motoring, as well as hooded driving when you and your chosen bird felt like a blow. By 1964 the Rootes stylists had opted for smaller tail fins and mildly changed lines, but power was up to 82bhp, in this Series IV. Maybe this increase in power output over previous models was to allow the adventurous aunts, who liked to cut a dash in a sporting Alpine but who disliked changing gear, to have a three-speed automatic transmission. There had always been the legless-children's bench behind the two bucket seats in the Sunbeam Alpines, until this appendage, useless except for small canines or the odd parcels, was dispensed with in 1965 on the Alpine Series V.

This model was a better attempt by the Rootes empire to offer a car of truer sporting merits, because this two-seater had a 1,725 cc engine giving 92½ bhp. But the change that really and truly heralded sports image of the Sunbeam of nineteen-sixties was the installation of Ford's V8 4.2-litre power pack. This splendid confection was dubbed the Sunbeam Tiger. It retained that compact wheelbase, so was an inevitable 'goer'. Especially when the Sunbeam Tiger II was endowed with the 4.7-litre version of this Ford V8 motor.

I much enjoyed driving these Sunbeams. To refresh my memory of them I have turned up what I wrote of them in *Motor Sport*. I see that, driving to Oulton Park race circuit in an Alpine hard-top in 1959, I liked the gear change, its lines, the metal instrument panel, and the reassuring front disc brakes, but found the steering disappointing and the controls on the heavy side. I nearly got 'the ton' in speed, and almost 25mpg. The Mk IV, was quoted as a good if not quite outstanding sports car, with a good driving position and excellent brakes, but oddly-spaced gear ratios. That one returned 25.7 mpg. The Series II GT I tried in 1965 was a trifle thirstier, and was overwhelmed by the sheer top-gear fun of the Ford powered Sunbeam Tiger 260, which I see gave me a petrol deal of 20.6mpg in spite of its impressive pick-up. I rate these Alpines as quite a good way for the great Sunbeam name to have been carried on. When Chrysler took over the Rootes conglomeration in 1970, the dubious smell of a Ford V8 engine assailed their nostrils, and that was the end of a highly-likeable big-engined sports car. The Tiger never lived to see Chrysler power. 🐾

