

MY CLASSIC & I

ABOUT PEOPLE WHO USE THEIR CLASSICS



SIMON PROPPER

Two trips around the French Dordogne and three years reliable daily travel has confirmed Simon Propper's dedication to his Sunbeam Alpine Series II. 'What else is there?' he wonders...

I bought my be-finned car as a wreck from Alpine West Midlands who rebuilt it. They delivered the car back to me in a matter of months – bang on schedule, and bang on budget, I might add – with a fully-rebuilt body, a part re-trim and the mechanics revived to a suitably useable degree. I did have to compromise on the mechanics because I was running out of money after the major work was done, but the car was basically bought up to Series V mechanical specification using largely secondhand parts (although the brakes were all-new). Series V spec' meant the car was far more easily maintained and handled a good deal better. The larger 1725cc engine came later...

Alpine West Midlands delivered the car back to me at an all-in cost of £4000, including the purchase price of the car. They did a really good job on the body – which was also changed from white to black – and, frankly, their value for money and standards of workmanship really impressed me, even if £4000 was worth rather more in Alpine circles three years ago than it is now.

Not four weeks after the car's completion I took it off to France. Straight away my cost-cutting on the mechanics cost me the inconvenience of a holed

piston. Fortunately I was back in England by that time and, needless to say, the Alpine got me home on three cylinders. It's never ever let me down in that respect – in fact AA membership with this car really is a waste of time. Parts are available everywhere and all repairs seem to be really easy. Even when my starter motor packed up recently I walked down to my nearest motor accessories shop in Finsbury Park and bought a new one for £16, straight off the shelf.

The holed piston prompted me to visit Peugeot/Talbot, who had inherited the Sunbeam parts bin from Chrysler, and they supplied me with a re-con engine. Well, they said it was a re-con, but it became quite clear that it was brand new. Not bad for £400! And that engine really has completed the ideal Alpine package for me: it drives like the top spec' Series V, but looks like the prettiest of them all.

I can appreciate the purists' disgust at my modifications, but frankly I doubt many of them use their early cars as I use mine. It's still the only immaculate finned car that I've seen in London, and in spite of its condition it's never been pampered or kept out of the rain. It's an all-weather car, a daily driver, and that's why it goes as well as it does. And as for the vandalism argument... I've lived in some of the doggiest areas of town and the Alpine's never been so much as joy-ridden in, let alone scratched. It seems to command more respect than jealousy.

The package will be complete only when I've converted the car to unleaded fuel, and I plan to look into catalytic converters too. All this complacency among the old car fraternity that assumes our minority in numbers will exclude us from Brussels legislation is naive, anti-social nonsense and we all ought to be much more environmentally aware if we are to keep our old cars on the road. I certainly will be, as the Alpine will never be sold, or left idle in a garage. After all, what else would offer such style and practicality, at anything like the price?

I've only ever had old cars, and hope I'll never have to own a modern one. I took my driving test in my first car – a Minor four-door – and passed, in spite of the rear seat dislodging during the emergency stop, hitting the tester hard in the back of the head. He gave me my certificate with the words, "How much did you pay for this car?" and that set the style for my future motoring: elderly, charactered, reliable and cheap.

Unfortunately, the Minor was written off, so I bought an MG Midget, which unfortunately was written off, but was replaced with a Riley 1.5 which came to an unhappy end. Undeterred, I thought I'd try my luck with an Alpine.

I'd always wanted an Alpine, probably because my mother had always wanted one, but she never quite got that far, and had to settle for a Herald. We both knew it was a compromise, and so I felt I owed it to the family to get an Alpine eventually.

The Series V was quite a good example, and took me to France and served me faithfully as a daily hack for at least 20,000 miles. It cost me nothing to run during that time. There were no significant mechanical problems and I did all my own maintenance, so there was nothing to spend money on except oil and spark plugs. But although the Series V impressed me enormously, it soon dawned on me that the only Alpine to have was an early finned car.

As a triumph of the individual over the committee, the early Alpine was an extraordinary creation. Faultless and exceptional in its styling and detailing, it was a completely-designed package, right down to the prettiest of hard tops. No other manufacturer could match the style for the price (except Panhard, of course, and I think I may have just bought one of those...). Of course it's a lot less common than the MGB – which must be its obvious rival, but the lumpy B just can't rival the Alpine as a definitive period piece. But then you'd never catch me in a cloth cap either...