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ALPINE AFFECTION

The Sunbeam Alpine of the 1960s may not have been tremendously powerful or fast, or the best handling car around but it has what it takes to make **Nick Saul**, owner of a Series III, a staunch fan

History and the motoring press have not dealt kindly with the Sunbeam Alpine. During its production from 1957 to 1967 it was slated time and time again for lack of performance and regarded as too smooth and refined to class as a real sports car. Even now it is condescendingly treated as a rediscovered curiosity. But having driven a 1963 example regularly for the past two years I believe this is grossly unfair.

The trouble started back in the '50s when the model appeared. In the days following post-war austerity and petrol rationing it seems sports car drivers were a hardy lot. Basic construction and small engines with modest power outputs were the order of the day for most motorists. All the contemporary MGs and TRs fitted into that category, they were fine vehicles to be sure but with a minimum of creature comforts while the hoods and side-screens were so flimsy they would have disgraced a wild-west stage coach.

It was with an eye to the American market, which had outgrown such crudity, that Rootes' contender emerged as a very different beast. Styled by Ken Howes, an Englishman with experience of American design studios, the new Alpine boasted wind-up windows along with a level of equipment and comfort of ride that had never been seen in a sports car of its price before.

All this was achieved by using as many components as possible from existing products to keep the price down. The main donor was the Hillman Minx with its Husky estate and Sunbeam Rapier derivatives. The result was larger and heavier than most roadsters of the time, still unarguably British but with obvious European and trans-Atlantic influences.

Typified by the sweeping lines of the streamlined body this gentle approach to open-top motoring drew criticism from writers. They suggested there would be buyers, but real men like them would prefer something more rugged. Terrible to their eyes, the adverts showed well-dressed (as opposed to undressed) young ladies not draped over the cars but actually sitting in them sometimes even in the driver's seat.

Whatever the press reception, over the next eight years nearly 70,000 Alpines were produced, many being exported. Other manufacturers were quick to copy much of the styling for their own products — the similarity of the Aston Martin DB4 for instance being quite striking. Several thousand Alpines still remain in use on the British roads, more than a few in the hands of their original owners.

Driving the Alpine today I find it hard to believe drivers of 20 years ago could have had much cause for complaint. My Series III DMH 423A has an uprated 1600cc block but with standard manifolds and carburation — the dreaded Solex twin-choke. Acceleration hardly slams you into the back of the seat but the engine pulls

well from low revs and just keeps on pulling without hesitation up the tachometer, up hill or down dale.

Despite the Series III's synchromesh defying the trade descriptions act, changing gear is rapid if heavy work. Hardly any movement is needed to change from third to fourth in the tight and positive gate. Overtaking is simple — you just slip down a gear and surge past just about anything else on the road, particularly the drivers of modern hot hatches who are left fuming and fumbling with their notchy five-speed transmissions.

The saloon car pedigree endows the Alpine with a splendid ride, the stiffened live axle only betraying its origins on the worst of potholes. Thanks to copious insulation, and a weight of just under a ton the suspension conveys little impression of speed. Cruising at highly illegal speeds presents few problems or distractions.

It's weaving through near stationary traffic or winding country lanes, however, that the car comes into its own, when style and enjoying your surroundings are as important as clocking up the miles. A surprisingly narrow vehicle it will squeeze through gaps other drivers don't realise exist, while its undoubted good looks earn the respect of

most road users.

For those who miss the thrill of neck-wrenching acceleration, having to overcome the modest road holding provides adequate compensation. Although most Alpines have acquired nice fat radials mine still rides on skinny crossply tyres. Final handling is very good but extracting it can be a tight-lipped business of controlled slides and opposite lock. The saving grace is complete predictability, the stiff chassis keeping the rubber firmly on the tarmac under all conditions, allowing the vehicle to be guided around the corners with precision as much by the use of the accelerator as the steering wheel.

The steering is the most vintage feature of the car. At once vague and surprisingly light at speed, it becomes heavy and taut at parking velocity. The best thing is to let its wanderings sort themselves out, they don't affect the line of progress. Just easing the lock on at bends is all that is required.

Braking is good, sharp and well balanced, with servo assisted discs at the front (the first fitted on a Rootes car) and drums at the rear.

As a practical driving machine the Alpine has a lot to offer. From Series III to the final Series V the car was fitted with a boot



Comfortable and civilised, the Series III Alpine of reader Nick Saul

Photographs by Tim Andrews



Alpines were famous for their comprehensive instrumentation



The Series III cars still had the high rear fins

putting many a saloon to shame. Meanwhile, inside, the notional rear seats, although hardly large enough to carry adults any distance, are ideal for children or extra luggage. At high speeds the Alpine is best with the top down or with the detachable hardtop in place. In both cases wind noise is kept to a minimum. With the hood up, the weather is kept firmly at bay but over 50mph the din is incredible.

Comfort is the watchword for the interior. Light and airy, the cockpit is fully trimmed in hard wearing vinyl over generous padding. The seats were designed by aircraft specialists Microcell and are strangely cool even in hot weather. On the upmarket GT the dashboard and steering wheel rim are walnut while there is full carpeting. With the addition of optional ammeter and clock a total of seven dials are spread across the fascia. As a package the layout is traditional but the execution is European at its best and most effective.

Alpine history

The name Alpine was inherited from successful open-top rally conversions of the Talbot 90 saloon pioneered by George Hartwell of Bournemouth. That was never produced in any numbers, however, and when the new model appeared it seemed natural it should take the name already linked with competition glory.

The last generation of Alpines can be divided into those with big fins and those without. Owners of the earlier finned examples consider them to be the only Alpines with any character but those with the straight winged models say the others are old fashioned. At the time it was seen simply as a matter of updating the lines, the modification being made between Series III and IV.

As the fins shrank the engine capacity grew but with little change in performance. The Series I had a 1500cc block rising to just under 1600cc for the II, III and IV. The Series V had a 1725cc engine with improved bearings, but this unit was found to be less amenable to tuning up than previous examples.

The Series III also gained a new square hardtop with opening rear quarterlights as opposed to a curved aluminium style on previous models. With this went a less steeply inclined windshield and a boot redesigned with twin wing petrol tanks and the spare wheel upright behind the rear axle, more than doubling the luggage space.

This and other styling changes had been first introduced by Touring Milan, the Italian company with the franchise to assemble Alpines in Europe. Their activities ranged from the dubious to the inspired and

resulted in a number of really curious Alpines being created as well as encouraging the mainstream development of the car. England too produced a fair number of conversions both official and unofficial. The most famous of the former being the Harrington Alpines, fastback coupés of high quality finish if suspect construction and much in demand today.

These and other Alpines to special order were supplied with engines rebuilt for increased power by George Hartwell's garage on the south coast. But for sheer horsepower the ultimate must be the Sunbeam Tiger which has achieved cult car status. Fitted with small American Ford V8



The simple 1600cc pushrod four

engines these monsters certainly go even if certain compromises were needed — the necessity to change the rear spark plugs through trapdoors in the cockpit being the most eccentric if trivial. All these projects were attempts to boast power squandered by the manufacturers in search of quieter vehicles. The undue concern over noise seems a shame when apart from a healthy growling exhaust the car had never been noisy. If Rootes had elected to boost performance instead the car would have received better treatment from the press.

Nevertheless, I can still see little reason to make excuses for modest acceleration figures when the car is so adept at covering vast distances quickly causing little fatigue while maintaining driver interest. It is no surprise to me the Alpine has been successfully entered in many competitions even taking the vaunted Thermal Efficiency Cup at Le Mans in 1962.

Alpine DHM 423A

DMH 423A came to me from a local garage in excellent condition after several years storage. It was said to be a one-owner car with just 23,000 on the clock. This tallied with the condition which was nearly new with minor rust repairs to the body carried out by the garage, along with a respray and new front wing after a prang. After fitting a new battery, coil and leads the car has gone like a dream. The only other attention to the running gear has been a new set of original

specification tyres, a good tuning session and religious attention to bearing lubrication and the main oil system.

Plenty of Liquid Diamond polymer polish and elbow grease has restored the paintwork to its original sparkling quartz blue metallic finish and made up for the absence of a lacquer coat. The old underseal was stripped to reveal a belly as completely rust free as the rest of the car. Professionally applied thick black gunge over four litres of black Hammerite should keep it that way. All body cavities have been treated with Valvoline rust preventor and new sound installation has been put in the doors. In the cockpit everything has been cleaned, again coming up to near-new condition.

I installed an ammeter and had the faulty clock and oil pressure gauge repaired by Speedograph Richfield off Baker Street in London, a service they performed for less than £25. The original radio still works and takes pride of place in the factory-fitted centre console. Less original is the well concealed anti-theft system to deter vandals and joyriders. This is the best experts recommended by Scotland Yard could devise plus a few little extras only the warped mind of a journalist could dream up.

The only other liberty with originality I have taken is to fit a folding hood and tonneau. As a GT it should have neither but a trip to Car Hood Ltd supplied both in mid blue fitted over a frame salvaged from a wrecked Series IV. This also donated the folding rear seat assembly which conceals the hood when folded. This unit was painted and upholstered to match the GT trim. The option of GT models with better trim, but only a detachable hard top to keep out the rain, was first available on the Series III which is what first attracted me to it. Very few were made so the combination of the long fins but with the newer hard top and usable boot makes mine unique. With fewer than 75 examples surviving, and with only two or three in similar condition, I have a very exclusive car for less than £2500, one which is probably worth twice that but I have no intention of selling for many years.

During the week and winter the car lives in a garage under dust sheets. But out and about it attracts more favourable attention than any car I have driven, which includes quite a few exotics on road test. Spares I can obtain through the excellent Sunbeam Alpine Owners Club which has over a thousand members. In the long run I plan a bare metal respray and de-ripple plus a new late-model all-synchromesh gearbox with the overdrive option my car lacks. At the same time I'll remove and store all remaining original trim to be replaced with leather. But all that will be another story. ■