Sunbeam Alpine

Built between 1959 and 1968 by the Rootes Group, the two-seater Sunbeam Alpines were always elegant and popular, if not quite as glamorous as an MGB or a Triumph TR. They had individuality and great charm. They were refined and well equipped, yet surprisingly fast when roused. The Ford-engined Tigers which evolved from them were enormously exciting. It was the cost-conscious Chrysler influence which killed off the line, which has never been replaced, even though the model name lives on.

LET'S make things quite clear. There are Alpines and Alpines. To date we make it four distinct varieties – only two of which have a separate pedigree at all. We can discount the watered-down Rapiers of 1969/75, and the latest front-wheel-drive 'Simca' saloons. Only the two-seater open cars of 1953/55 and the sports cars built between 1959 and 1968 qualify as "classics".

In fact, the Alpines of the 1960s should never have qualified as "classics", as they had the worst possible start in life. With a chassis based on Hillman Husky engineering, transplanted Sunbeam Rapier engine and transmission, bodies partly built by Pressed Steel and partly by Sankey, the Alpine should have been a bodge – in fact it was always a surprisingly integrated and compact design.

At birth, too, it was an orphan. In a complicated deal which involved Rootes using a modified Armstrong-Siddeley engine design for their Super Snipes (you didn't know?), the Alpine was at first assembled by Armstrong-Siddeley at their Parkside factory in Coventry. The line was moved back into Ryton in due course, but somehow the car was never a star in the Rootes firmament.

The unit-construction open sports car body used a short wheelbase Hillman Husky floor pan (itself a close relation to that of the Hillman Minx and Sunbeam Rapier – the design was new in 1955), with a stylish finned shape, and massive under-floor cross-bracing to give beam and torsional rigidity. The 78bhp 1494cc engine was the first of that strain to use a light-alloy head, and among the extras were overdrive, wire wheels and a hardtop. Front disc brakes were standard, though the servo was optional until 1963 (when it became standard).

The car was built for more than eight years, during which time the power was increased several times, and the specification progressively improved. The most important junctions were engine enlargements to 1592cc (October 1960), and to 1725cc (September 1965), introduction of an all-synchromesh gearbox (October 1964), the de-finned body shell (January 1964), and of course the off-shoot of the 4·2-litre Ford-engined Tiger (April 1964). Our chart of technical changes makes all this clear.

Through all this, however, the car's basic engineering remained unchanged, and an enormous number of parts can be identified as continuing unchanged throughout. For those not interested in originality, it is also clear that you could fit a 1725cc engine into a Series I car, or the later seats in an early car, but we don't recommend it.

An interesting "semi-official" version of the car was the Harrington Alpine, announced in March 1961. This was based on the current Series II Alpine, but had a fast-back glass-fibre hardtop, and in one version – the Le Mans – had a much-improved and more powerful version of the 1592cc engine.

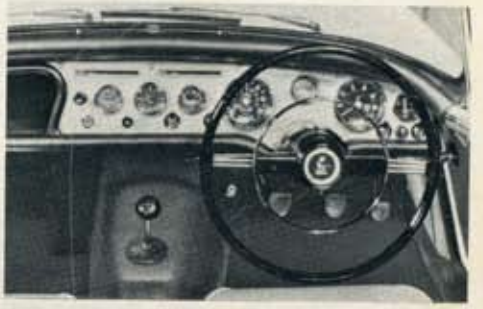
There isn't any doubt in our minds that the Series II and the Series V cars are the most desirable – the Series II because it was faster and better equipped than the SI (and sometimes carried the works-blessed conversion kits to the engine which boosted performance considerably), and the Series V because it had the all-synchromesh gearbox, and the five-bearing 1725cc engine with the twin-Stromberg carburation.

The oddity of the series was the automatic transmission option offered on SIV cars only. It was well engineered and pleasing enough, but really took the edge off performance and made the Alpine into a touring car again.

The problem, always, was that Alpines were quite heavy, and not as powerful as the competing MGBs and Triumphs. That *Autocar* test of the first SI car had a suspiciously good performance, due we think to over-zealous attention at the factory before delivery. The SV is much faster than earlier models, and seemed to handle best of all.

A handful of Alpines were given the full treatment by Norman Garrad's competi-

The Alpine in its original Series I form, with a 1494cc engine.



1961 Sunbeam Harrington Le Mans, with fibre glass top; a good-looking fast back.

The Series II Alpine, fitted with a 1592cc engine. Many of the mechanical components are the same as the SIII Rapier.

Classic Choice - 1959 to 1968

By Graham Robson

tions department – two cars being entered at Le Mans in 1961, 1962 and 1963. Their best placing was in 1962, when Peter Harper and Peter Procter achieved 15th place at 93·2mph, while a year earlier the same team won the rather contrived "Index of Thermal Efficiency" award while finishing 16th overall.

It's only very recently that a special club for Alpine owners has been founded. We thought it only right, therefore, to consult secretary and founder Chris McGovern about the cars. Chris himself has two – an SII and a late-model SIV (the "late model" is important, as we shall see) – both being restored. We think you should look for the following when shopping for an Alpine:

Bodywork

The Alpine has a unit-construction body/chassis unit, and unfortunately you must expect to find a lot of rust. It was a completely conventional shell, with that big cruciform member underneath. It is rare for that cruciform to corrode badly before any other part of the shell, but if you find a car with that section badly gone, then don't buy it. The tell-tale spots are around the headlamps, under the doors at the sills and the sill closing panels, but the serious corrosion-prone spots are in the front wheel arch areas, in the boot area, and where the jacking points pick up main "chassis members" at front and rear.

Rear jacking points are under the rear bumpers, and their fixing to longitudinal members under the boot floor may be suspect. The crude way to test is to jack up a car – if the jacking point creaks or even crumbles then you have found serious trouble! Rear wheel arch rusting is allied to this, and restoration is expensive.

At the front, the big problem is the engine bay valance, otherwise known as the closing panel between the inner wheel arch and the front wing. This rusts badly around the line of the arch, and is an important point to check. The panel behind the front wheels (in front of the toeboard) is also prone to corrosion. Anti-rust treatment, when new, was none too good on Alpines; a car comprehensively undersealed by its first owner will be much better preserved than average.

There could also be trouble around the wheel arch safety belt mounting points. This will not mean structural problems with the car itself, but the belt mounting could tear right out in a shunt, and that wouldn't do much to protect the passengers. This fault can, however, be rectified by plating, if you can first of all get the belt mounting bolts loose.

There are no light-alloy skin panels anywhere on the Alpine. Even the works hardtops were in pressed steel, and only the rare Harrington cars have glass-fibre tops.

The bodies from 1959 to 1968 might look unchanged, but there were two important engineering revisions. From March 1963 (chassis series 9200001 onwards) the shell was extensively revised, with re-profiled door cut-outs, a brand-new hardtop, twin petrol tanks in the wings and many other details.

The other important, but unheralded, change, came in the middle of the Series IV run. From chassis series 94100001 (with the introduction of the all-synchromesh gearbox), the doors were again re-profiled to have squared corners at front *and* rear lower joints, and at the same time the bonnet was given squared, in place of rounded, corners near the windscreen. This might sound minor, but involved shell changes as well, and ensured that late doors and bonnet cannot be integrated with earlier ones.

Don't ask us why Rootes should do this, for at that time in their existence logic was a commodity often lacking from their model policies.

Engine

There were two important engine changes – from 1494cc to 1592cc with the advent of SII, and from 1592cc to five-bearing 1725cc with SV. The engines have aluminium cylinder heads and are remarkably rugged. SIs and SIIs and the first 4717 SIIIs had twin downdraught Zenith carburettors, while the rest of the SIIIs and all SIVs had a single downdraught compound Solex carburettor. All SVs had twin semi-downdraught constant-vacuum Strombergs.

The engines have a reputation as oil leakers – principally from the joint between cylinder block and valve gear closing plate, around the front timing cover, from the edges of the oil filter adaptor, and from the rocker cover/head joint. Loctite or similar sealer is worth using, and is the only feasible palliative. The engines, let us make clear, are oil leakers rather than oil burners.

In use, look for crank thrust bearing wear (when you dip the clutch at engine idle, the engine may stall – a good recognition point), and check for bore wear by looking for oil blow-by through the closed circuit breathing flame trap. There are several overbore kits from the factory – 20thou and 40thou for SIs, 20, 30 and 40thou for SIIs and SIIIs and SIVs, and 20 and 40thou kits for 1725cc SV cars.

Do not be put off by an engine with the factory conversion kit fitted – this merely

Left, Series I dashboard. Note the Talbot crest on the steering column boss, a reminder of past greatness.

Re-styled rear end for the Series IV Alpine; chopped fins and re-shaped tail lamps.

Performance Data

	Sunbeam Alpine					
	Series I	Series II	Harrington Le Mans	Series III	Series IV***	Series V
	1494cc	1592cc	1592cc	1592cc	1592cc	1725cc
Road tested in *Autocar* of:	4/9/59	2/12/60	16/2/62	20/9/63	22/5/64	13/5/66
Maximum speed (mph)	99*	97*	101*	98	92	98*
Acceleration (sec):						
0–30mph	5·1	4·5	4·5	4·5	7·0	4·4
0–40mph	7·1	6·6	6·5	7·0	9·7	6·8
0–50mph	10·6	10·3	9·0	10·1	13·3	9·8
0–60mph	14·0	14·8	13·0	14·9	18·8	13·6
0–70mph	18·4	20·3	17·6	20·8	25·6	18·3
0–80mph	27·5	29·8	24·8	33·0	39·7	26·2
0–90mph	–	50·2	37·4	–	–	42·9
Standing ¼-mile (sec)	19·8	19·7	19·3	19·8	22·5	19·1
Top gear (sec):						
10–30mph	–	–	–	–	–	–
20–40mph	9·9	10·3	–	11·6	11·1	11·0
30–50mph	10·1	10·5	10·9	14·8	13·4	10·0
40–60mph	10·4	10·9	10·9	14·6	15·3	10·1
50–70mph	11·7	12·4	11·3	14·5	17·6	10·5
60–80mph	13·5	15·7	13·1	20·1	23·3	13·1
70–90mph	19·7	31·5	17·2	–	–	24·3
Overall consumption (mpg)	25·5	20·6	20·1	24·9	20·9	25·5
Typical consumption (mpg)	27	24	24	26	23	28
Dimensions:						
Length	All 12ft 11·3in, except Harrington (13ft 2in)					
Width	All 5ft 0·5in					
Height	All 4ft 3·5in, except Harrington (4ft 5·5in)					
Unladen weight (cwt)	19·9	19·8	20·3	20·4	20·1	20·0

* Max achieved in overdrive top.

*** With automatic transmission, and "top gear" figures achieved in direct drive.

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Classic Choice
Alpine

turned a rather ordinary tune (basically common with the Rapier saloons) into a more ambitious set-up, and didn't affect the engine's reliability and life prospects. Hartwell in particular were known for their own conversions, which could even include twin horizontal side-draught Weber carburettors.

Incidentally, even a new Alpine engine sounds rather rough and rattly, so don't despair of an aged example sounding the same. It was characteristic of the unit, and the light-alloy head and rudimentary carburettor air-cleaner arrangements were partly responsible. The original twin downdraught Zenith carburettors were rather tricky to keep in balance, which was one reason for adopting the compound Solex at a later stage. The effort, however, of fine adjustment, pays off in terms of performance *and* economy.

Transmission
All the gearboxes are good and rugged, the all-synchromesh unit fitted from chassis no. 94100001 being the most satisfactory of all. The car should have a smooth and precise change, even when old. Most cars had overdrive, even though it was always an optional extra, and we reckon it is a "must" for economy and general road performance. The overdrive itself is reliable just so long as the oil is clean, up to level, and has electrics in good health. The exposed actuating solenoid suffers from road filth after a time, and should be cleaned and greased up regularly.

The Borg Warner automatic versions are not our cup of tea, because of their sedate performance and behaviour. Paradoxically enough, they are very rare in Britain (more popular, for the usual reasons, in the USA), and might one day become a "collector's piece" but we musn't encourage you in that sort of thing...

Suspension, transmission and brakes
The suspension shares many links with the Rapiers, Minxes and Huskies. Spring and damper settings, however, are unique to the Alpine. The dampers themselves do wear out, and there was once a thriving trade in Konis to replace the originals. SIs and SIIs had lever-arm (Armstrong piston-type) rear dampers, while all later models had telescopic dampers. One type cannot be converted to the other because of body shell differences.

Bushes and bearings in the front suspension seem to last well – they are designed, after all, for use under the heavier saloon car bodies – and in any case they are easy and simple to replace.

Steering boxes appear to last well, and there is no known history of premature wear. The steering box (recirculating ball on all versions) is easy to inspect *after* the removal of the brace between bulkhead and wheel arch.

The most important failing of the brakes is that the self-adjusting rear drums (fitted to all cars prior to summer 1967 – the last 4000 had non-self-adjusting brakes) sometimes developed the habit of adjusting themselves up too much, which led to rapid shoe wear and sometimes dragging brakes. This makes itself more obvious with wear, and after dirt and friction has got into the system.

Look for a handbrake cable which is not up to its job. Eventually the inner gets stuck into the outer cable, and the end (at the rear wheel) will snap off. The cables should be kept well lubricated to eliminate this problem.

Spares
In spite of all the nasty things people say about the Rootes Group (and Chrysler, who have been in charge of their destinies since 1967/68), they do certainly maintain good stocks of spare parts for obsolete models. The Alpine, at the time of writing, is well served, with mechanical, sheet metal and trim items alike. Panels for early (SI and SII) models are now scarce, though, and as far as we know there are no replacement hard-tops available to replace the one you bent when you rolled the car!

The club doesn't recommend glass-fibre panels, which ruin authenticity and also don't seem to fit at all well. Chris McGovern also points out that although some sheet metal from an SIV or an SV will fit an earlier car (or can be made to fit) the already-mentioned square-edge doors and bonnet make all such assumptions dodgy.

Fortunately Workshop Manuals exist (£4·50) and although full parts lists are not available right now, the club is negotiating for the right to reproduce parts lists from examples held by club members with their cars. But even if the lists are not available, club members always seem to know what applies to a particular model.

The factory expert is Mr E. M. Lea-Major in the Service Department at Humber Road, Coventry, who is theoretically in retirement, but who is actually working part-time on all queries regarding obsolete models. When it comes to tuning and competition-car queries there is little hope for the enthusiast; however, Gerry Spencer is chief mechanic in the Chrysler Dealer Team department at Humber Road, and was an active mechanic when the Rapiers and Alpines were being used by the factory team.

Incidentally, *T&CC* can supply Mini-Manuals of the Series I and II Alpines, for only 50p, post-free. Send a cheque in favour of IPC Business Press Ltd to June Skilleter, and we will deliver within 14 days.

How much?
Your guess is really as good as our own at this stage. The Alpine has only recently stopped being a run-of-the-mill second-hand car, and is only just launched on a career as a potential classic. We think you should be able to buy a "runner" with an M.o.T. certificate for not much more than £150, and a really well-kept specimen with overdrive and all the bits, and most certainly of the Series V variety, for about £700.

History
Summer 1959: Alpine sports car released. 1494cc engine with twin downdraught Zenith carburettors. 78bhp at 5300rpm. Optional overdrive, option wire spoke wheels, optional hard-top.
Wheelbase 7ft 2in, front track 4ft 3in, rear track 4ft 0·5in, overall length 12ft 11·25in. Unladen weight 2136lb.

October 1960: Series II Alpine introduced, with bored-out 1592cc engine, and 80bhp at 5000rpm. Eight chassis grease points eliminated, wider rear leaf springs. Mechanical details commonised with SIII Rapier. Re-positioned seats and pedals. Smaller (15in) steering wheel.

March 1961: Announcement of privately-developed but works-blessed fast-back Harrington Alpine coupé. Mechanically unchanged, but with fixed glass-fibre roof.

March 1963: Series III Alpine introduced. Tourer now has 82bhp at 5200rpm. New GT version, with new style of permanently-fixed hardtop, and softer-tune engine with 77bhp at 5000rpm. Twin fuel tanks (total of 11·25 gallons) in sides of boot compared with 9 gallons of earlier cars. Revised instruments and switches, adjustable-length steering column, fatter anti-roll bar, telescopic rear dampers (instead of lever-arm type), bigger disc brakes, and vacuum servo assistance. Closer ratio gears but same axle ratios. Reclinable front seats and (GT only) occasional rear seat.

January 1964: Series IV Alpine introduced, with re-styled rear end by chopped fins and re-shaped tail lamps. New cast-iron exhaust manifold replacing original "bunch of bananas" type. Less powerful GT-type dropped, and new GT version had up-dated engine. Single downdraught compound-choke Solex carburettor. Optional Borg Warner Type 35 automatic transmission.

April 1964: Ford V8-engined Sunbeam Tiger introduced.

October 1964: New corporate all-synchromesh gearbox adopted, but all other mechanical specification, and options, retained.

September 1965: Series V Alpine introduced. Mechanical changes limited to new five-bearing 1725cc version of well-known engine, with semi-downdraught Stromberg carburettor and 92·5bhp at 5500rpm. Closer-ratio manual gearbox but automatic transmission option discontinued. Minor trim and equipment improvements including fresh-air footwell vents. On engine, an alternatior now standardised. No sheet metal or styling changes.

January 1968: Sunbeam Alpine finally discontinued (Tiger II had been dropped in 1967). ●

Sunbeam Alpines – cars built*:

Series	Chassis numbers	Total built
SI	B9000001 to B9011904	11,904
SII	B9100001 to B9119956	19,956
SIII	9200001 to 9205863	5,863
SIV	9400001 to 9407936	7,936
(all-synchro)	94100001 to 94104470	4,470
SV	395000001 to 39501912	19,122
	Grand total	69,251

* This ignores a small number of CKD Alpines also produced.

Sunbeam Alpine Owners' Club

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