



ALPINE ASSENT

Best be honest. The Sunbeam Alpine has never done much for me all these years, but that's different now. It's a really pleasing car, better in my opinion than an MGB. I'm now thankful for never having slagged off the Alpine in print, but remain guilty of saying rude things about it to mates without ever having driven one – until now.

Preconceived ideas like mine have held the Alpine back for nearly 40 years and added to this are further mysteries of image that make it the forgotten British sports car. Alpines are girlie cars, some say. Presumably the car's pretty shape and reputation for comfort have given rise to this ridiculous tag, even though Sean

Connery's James Bond was hardly a girlie when he drove one in *Dr No*. A parallel can be drawn with the Triumph Stag, which was labelled a hairdresser's car and, unlike the Alpine, suffered in its early days from horrendous unreliability. Although only 26,000 Stags were built, the Stag Owners' Club today has 5000 members who love their cars to bits. Alpine production totalled nearly 70,000 yet the Sunbeam Alpine Owners' Club, splendid body though it is, cannot muster a membership of more than 1000. Why do these ratios make no sense?

The only answer to this enigma is that too few people realise how this Sunbeam (such an evocative name for those with pre-war interests) is such a good proposition as a practical

sports car, but sadly there aren't that many Alpines left because they've been criticised – and consequently undervalued and neglected – for so long. Alpines rust a bit, but they're no less robust than an MGB. Parts for them are inexpensive, sometimes spectacularly so. But at least those who are disciples seem to have unusually durable loyalty to the breed.

Richard Jones, the owner of the car here, is an example, but there are others like him. He bought his first Alpine, a Series III, in 1964 and since then his passion has never dimmed. He sold that car to fund a house deposit when he had to move from London to a job in Derby with Rolls-Royce, where he was involved in electronic engineering for nuclear submarines.



Touring with the earliest active Sunbeam Alpine in the world gives Mark Hughes new respect for Britain's most underrated sports car

Later he bought a Series V for daily use, and fond memories of it include 1200-mile round trips for work to Dounreay, on Scotland's northernmost coastline. That car went – only to be replaced 20 years ago by a derelict Series I bought for £150. Richard restored it so well that it's still a handsome specimen today.

Conventional advice says that an Alpine buyer should first of all decide whether to go for big tail fins (Series I-III) or little ones (Series IV-V), and then choose a late model of whichever favoured style. The car that Richard owns, which is also the example on which my new Alpine enthusiasm is based, is the one you're supposed to avoid, because Series Is are deemed to be underpowered, uncomfortable

and unsophisticated. So here I am in a glow about the black sheep of the family.

But there's always a certain purity about the first of any breed, whether Jaguar E-type, MGB or Big Healey, although in the Alpine's case that means a supposedly inferior engine. Apart from its condition and beautiful colour scheme of black with red interior, Richard's Series I is a particularly early example, just the 76th built and registered a month before the official launch in August 1959. Two earlier cars are known to survive, but neither runs.

Although most prefer the more discreet Series IV-V tail fin style, the early Alpine is a very attractive car, and a true beauty when seen from the front. The front bumper looks a little

heavy and the headlamp 'eyelids' are slightly too pronounced, but the car's face – happy mouth and bright eyes – is delightful. Clean lines and lack of brightwork enhance the side view. Styling excellence shouldn't be a surprise, however, for the Alpine's designer, Kenneth Howes, came to Rootes as a protégé of Raymond Loewy, one of the post-war masters of automotive and industrial design.

Design skill shows up in details as well as in overall form. The best touch is the way the soft-top is concealed beneath three steel panels that give a flush look to the rear deck. To raise the top, the centre panel has to be folded downwards, then the two side panels are hinged upwards – all very neat. This arrangement was very advanced

for a British sports car, because as 1959 alternatives, the MGA and TR3A, still had assemble-it-yourself soft-tops, just as they made do with sidescreens rather than the winding door glasses found on the Alpine. Cost-saving probably explains why these steel panels were abandoned for the Series IV – a retrograde step.

Even the engine, an aluminium-headed pushrod four-cylinder of Hillman Minx origin, was made to look good. Rocker cover, inlet manifold and radiator header tank all gleam in unpainted alloy, while twin Zenith carburettors look the part with their handsome wire mesh air filters. But appearances aren't everything: the Series I's humble 1494cc unit is one reason why people sneer at the earliest Alpines.

I expected to be underwhelmed by the way this Alpine moves, but performance from the sweet-running engine isn't that sluggish. This isn't a true sports car unit because it doesn't like to rev hard in standard form, but in gentler use today its band of decent torque – roughly between 2500-4000rpm – is perfectly adequate. Response is good through this range, where you spend most of your time in normal driving, even if asking any more than 4500rpm sounds

'I expected an uninspiring blend of lifeless steering and wishy-washy cornering behaviour. It's much better'



cruel, coarseness from under the bonnet drowning the friendly exhaust rasp.

Series I power and torque peak respectively at 78bhp at 5300rpm and 89lb ft at 3400rpm. Vital performance statistics were said to be 0-60mph in 14 secs and a top speed of 98mph. Part of Alpine perception holds that the later engines of 1592cc (Series II-IV) and 1725cc (Series V) are in another performance league, but in fact the 1592cc unit offers only an extra 2bhp and the 1725cc shaves 0.4 sec off the 0-60mph time.

Rather than engine size, overdrive is far more important for usability. An option throughout production, overdrive (on third and fourth gears) was fitted to roughly half of the Alpines made, and it transforms the car's ability to cruise comfortably at motorway speeds – a vital factor when using a classic today. Overdrive is a lovely device, with a flick of the Alpine's right-hand column stalk bringing an instant switch into a more leisurely gait. Unfortunately the four-speed gearbox isn't as pleasurable to use: the change is neither swift nor light, and synchromesh on first didn't arrive until midway through Series IV production. First gear, very much a get-you-rolling ratio, is described in the owner's handbook as an 'emergency low gear', as if it's really meant for hill starts, leaving second gear for moving off normally.

There are elements of myth, too, about the way the Alpine handles. Anticipating this car to be a sort of junior boulevard cruiser, I expected an uninspiring blend of lifeless steering and

CLIVE HARRINGTON

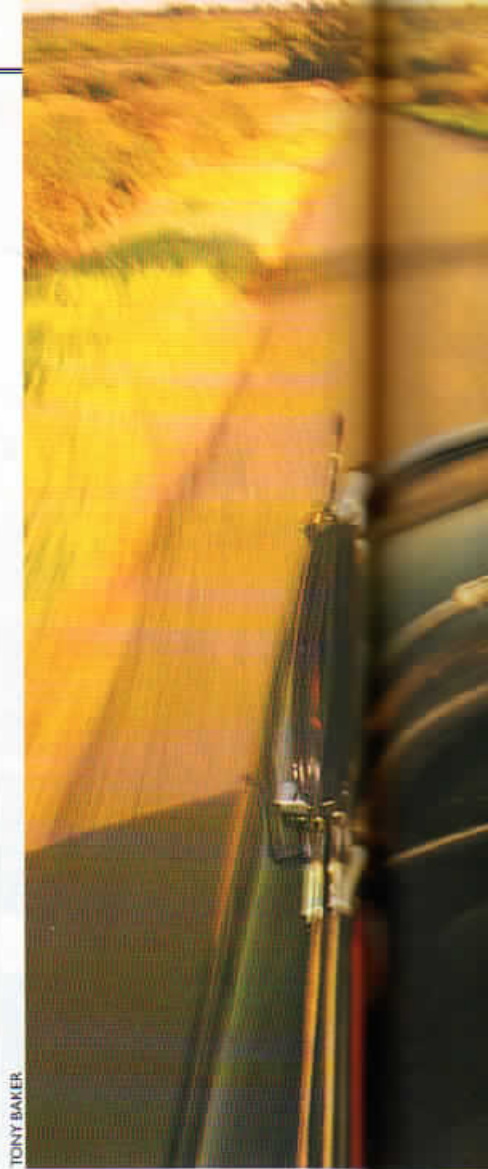
People commonly label the Reliant Scimitar GTE as the first sports hatchback, forgetting another claimant – the Harrington Alpine. Conceived by Brighton-based coachbuilding company Thomas Harrington Ltd, this clever fastback conversion of the Alpine appeared in 1961. It was a great success, with some 250 cars converted in three years. It also inspired a commission for Harrington to do a similar job on the Triumph TR4, creating the Dove version.

Thomas Harrington Ltd dated back to 1897 but it couldn't survive the '60s. In 1964, Clifford Harrington, grandson of Thomas, saw coachbuilding activities end when this family-run business was taken over by a subsidiary of the Rootes Group.

"I was still at school when the takeover occurred," recalls Clive Harrington, Clifford's son. "The news was devastating because I desperately wanted to be the fourth generation to run the business. If only it could have got through those difficult years, I'm certain Harrington would be thriving now. I may have missed my vocation, but at least I'm the owner of two Harrington Alpines."

Clive's road car was found in the USA in 1991 and has been restored to original spec. The conversion was cleverly executed: the rear wings were cut away above the waistline and the whole rear panel removed, leaving neat lines on which to join the one-piece glass-fibre moulding that formed the new roof. The 1592cc pushrod engine was tuned to produce more than 100bhp.

Clive's other car is the most historically significant Alpine in existence. This is the aluminium-panelled Harrington that ran at Le Mans in 1961, where Peter Harper and Peter Proctor averaged 94mph to win the Index of Thermal Efficiency. Clive hopes to have this car, registered 3000 RVV, finished within a year.



TONY BAKER



Rootes' straight body lines

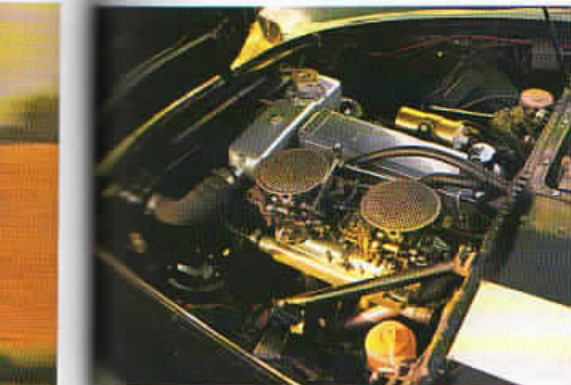


Alpines have been neglected for too long





A marque redolent with pre-war glory



Least powerful Alpine motor, but still perky

STEVE SMITH - RACING PEDIGREE

Steve Smith, competitions secretary of the Sunbeam Alpine Owners' Club, has found that his enthusiasm brushes off on others. For the past two years he's raced a much-developed Series V in the Anglo-American Challenge, successfully flying the Alpine flag alone against under-two-litre rivals such as Lotus Elans and MGs. But now he's finding that other owners are sharing his enthusiasm for building up an Alpine competition pedigree after all these years.

The Manx Classic, that annual event on the Isle of Man, marked the race debut of Steve's Alpine in 1994. Together with a friend, Martin Kingshott, he'd restored the car from a £150 wreck to a serious race car in just 36 days, although the routine was one day a month spread over three years. Since then the Manx has become Steve's highlight, and last time around, in September, 18 like-minded souls brought Alpines to this road-racing ritual. One even travelled from Nevada specially for the occasion, while a further bonus, orchestrated by Steve, was to put famous lady rally driver Rosemary Smith into an ex-works 1962 team car.

It remains to be seen how many of them turn out for the 1999 Anglo-American Challenge, but Steve's car is an example for them all. He has nearly doubled power and torque output of his Series V engine, to around 150bhp and 150lb ft. This is a hobby, although his working life, as an engineer specialising in vibration and balancing on high-speed machine tools and racing engines, gives him suitable aptitude in engine tuning.

"I've developed my Alpine by modifying one thing at a time," says Steve. "Apart from the engine, nothing is substantially changed, but the car has been transformed into a pleasure to drive. With the running gear, I've now got a Tiger back axle with limited slip diff, my own version of a Panhard rod at the back, a stiffer front anti-roll bar, solid-bushed suspension, modified steering geometry and improved shock absorbers. But the brakes and gearbox remain as standard."

Steve also has loads of road experience, having bought his first Alpine in 1981. Later he acquired a better one and remembers a 3500-mile tour to Greece and back, a trip on which the only hitch was the removal of the numberplate by a wayward hen.



SUNBEAM PRICES

	Resto	good	mint
Alpine SI-III	1200	4000	7000
Alpine SIV-V	1200	4000	6500
Harrington	1800	5500	8500
Tiger MkI	3500	10-12,000	14,000+
Tiger MkII	-	15-16,000	20,000+

washy-washy cornering behaviour. It's much better than this: while there's little of a Big Bentley's gung-ho or a TR's liveliness, the Alpine can bring enough driver satisfaction for most people. It handles tidily and predictably, without too much roll. Repeating a particular sequence of bends, I ended up being genuinely impressed with the car's agility.

Understeer can build up strongly if you take a corner on a trailing throttle, but the stance becomes broadly neutral under power. The recirculating ball steering is reasonably light and accurate, although the big plastic-rimmed wheel feels too close to your chest. Severe bumps bring some choppiness from the live axle rear end, but generally the ride is pleasant, with shock absorbers of telescopic rather than

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lever arm variety giving a clear advantage over an MGB in body control.

Messages of comfort, though, come most strongly in the cabin. The driver's seat is a pleasing place to sit, despite its flat and uninspiring appearance, giving good location



Above: minimal chrome for a car of its period. Below: handling is tidy and car can be agile

because you sink so deeply into it. There's even a trimmed rear seat for small children, or one adult reclined sideways. Nice features include an armrest that doubles as a storage compartment, a pleasing array of dials, and padded rolls at top and bottom of the dashboard – these must have seemed a real safety novelty in 1959.

Here, in the driving seat, is where the Alpine's qualities hit you most convincingly. Surely, some day soon, others will go through the same mindset change that I've experienced, and wake up to the fact that the Alpine isn't a duff car at all. If you add value for money to the equation, it actually starts to look irresistible; good cars start at £3500 and £7000 will buy the best. Don't dismiss it. ♦



GEOFF'S ALPINE-CLOTHED WOLF

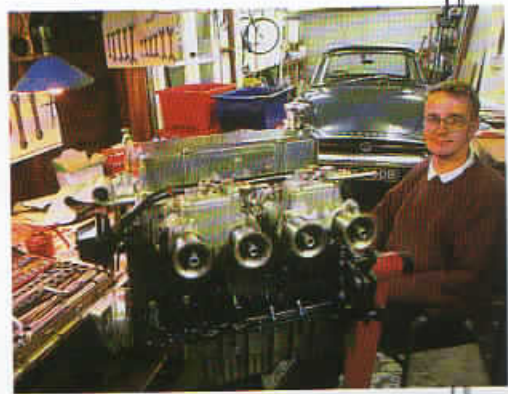
The first car Geoff Woolf ever bought, in 1986, was a Sunbeam Alpine – and he's still got it. A Series IV model, it cost him £400, which was rather less than his annual insurance as a 19-year-old. Pretty quickly he began a total restoration, which included professional bodyshell work to get the structure stiff. He ended up with a concours winner. When the attractions of showing the Alpine faded, he started driving it more, including for several Continental holidays. With all this experience, his opinions about the merits of later Alpines against earlier ones are worth hearing.

"A Series IV or V is more usable and refined," says Geoff. "Doing 300-mile days on holiday is no problem, and my wife and I covered 500 miles across France in one stretch. The bigger boot is a bonus – Series III cars onwards have two petrol tanks in the wings instead of one across the middle of the floor. All we need for a long camping holiday, including spares and a comprehensive tool kit, gets swallowed by the boot or goes on the back seat. When it rains the later soft-top is watertight, whereas water can get in everywhere with an early car.

"Back suspension by live axle and cart springs is never going to be brilliant, but earlier cars have a choppier ride and feel a bit crude and woolly in comparison. Performance is better, especially on mine as I blueprinted the 1592cc engine: on a rolling road it gave 83bhp at the wheels – quoted output was 86bhp at the flywheel.

"But I do prefer the earliest Series I-II style, which combined the big fins with a more elegant 'screen. It's the most elegant mass-produced British sports car ever made, and should have been more successful. I think it was seen as too advanced for its time, the sort of car that only extrovert people and designer types were brave enough to buy – flat-cap enthusiasts would always have preferred the MGA."

Geoff has now gone to a new level. The engine you see here started life in his dad's owned-from-new Hillman Hunter, which was passed to Geoff when he learned to drive. A capacity increase from 1725cc to 1998cc, and much more besides, will turn this Alpine into a sensational Q-car: "I'm expecting 120bhp at the wheels, which means my Alpine should beat a standard Tiger's 0-60mph of 9 secs. It's going to be a lot of fun."



Attractive dash of a worthy sports car



A Series I's for you if wings are your thing