

Sunbeam Alpine



The Harrington Alpine is a Coastal Conversion, claims Steven Myatt, adding considerably to the original Sunbeam...

The coachbuilding firm of Thomas Harrington and Company was established in the genteel seaside town of Hove in 1897, and from there they made, well ... coaches. Firstly coaches as in horse and coach, but with the coming of the internal combustion engine they began manufacturing charabancs. In the decade after the Second World War they became very expert in the use of glassfibre, and were soon moulding very large coach sections. The company had also worked at odd times with both Rolls-Royce and Talbot, supplying custom-built bodywork, so they had some experience of working on car chassis. Harringtons had worked with Rootes for years, in fact Managing Director Clifford

Harrington also owned a Rootes main dealership, and the coachbuilding firm bought large numbers of their commercial vehicles as rolling chassis, which they then bodied.

Clifford Harrington contacted Rootes soon after the Alpine was introduced and suggested that they modify it with a new and larger roof section to create a 2+2 coupé. This was partly going to be a profit-orientated operation of course, but was also intended to be a broader demonstration of the company's skills with glassfibre.

Rootes man Alec Caine reacted with enthusiasm; doubtless thinking that this was a good way of market testing variants without any financial risk to themselves. The Alpine had come under some criticism because the

boot wasn't big enough for a set of golf clubs.

Clifford Harrington briefed his stylist, Ron Humphries, who came up with a drawing which slid a new roof onto the existing bodywork without ruining the proportions - and no doubt he had a great time doing it.

His design allowed for the cross brace behind the seats to be taken out and re-located further down, and the rear scuttle to be removed completely. The single-moulding roof then dropped into place, with a rubber seal all round. The roof was kept simple, and anyone who didn't know better would ever guess that it hadn't been designed like that in the first place. The car was tested extensively to make sure that the body hadn't been weakened by the surgery, and it passed with flying colours.



The rear seats weren't huge, as you can imagine, but could accommodate children easily. They also folded down to create a very useable deck. Beneath it was space for the spare wheel, a jack and a few tools - and quite a lot of other stuff as well! With large rear side windows visibility was good, and so long as you didn't want the wind in your hair and the bugs in your teeth the Harrington was perhaps an improvement on the factory product.

The conversion was approved by Lord Rootes himself, and the car was offered to the public - based on a Series II Alpine. It wasn't cheap though. The conversion gave it a windscreen price of around £1500, which made it far more expensive than either the MGB GT or the Triumph GT6 when they

came along. I've heard the Harrington Alpine being compared with the Bond Equipe, which isn't too unfair - though the Equipe was considerably slower, was fully glassfibre, and did cost only £829 in 1964; cheaper even than an MGB GT.

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Just before the car was launched the company was sold to the Robins & Day Group of Companies. This conglomerate were actually owned by Lord Rootes' family,

and their man, George Hartwell, was appointed to head up Harringtons. It got even more incestuous, as Desmond Rootes became Sales Director of Harrington, and tuned Alpines were made available via George Hartwell Ltd, based along the coast at Bournemouth - well-known for racing Hillman Imps.

All Harrington Alpines were bought on a 'special order' basis, so that the customer specified exactly the options that he or she wanted. The first model, based on a Series II Alpine, was known as the A model, and just over a hundred were sold. The Harrington didn't have a full-size rear door at first, just a large letter box which gave access to the spare wheel. ➔

HARRINGTON ALPINES



The Harrington conversion changed the whole character of the Alpine in the same way that the Triumph GT6's hardtop transformed the Spitfire. Shame then that Rootes didn't offer a bigger engine to go with the hatchback...



➔ Rootes were interested in competing at Le Mans with an Alpine, and asked Harringtons to do so on their behalf. The firm produced an aluminium-bodied one-off, which acquitted itself very well. Driven by Peter Proctor and Peter Harper, it finished sixteenth overall, second in the 1600cc class behind Porsche-Abarth, and won the Index of Thermal Efficiency award by returning 18mpg at an average speed of 94mph over its 261 laps. Scion of the family, Clive Harrington, still owns the car.

To celebrate their success on the track, the second generation was christened the Harrington Le Mans, and these B series are very different in that they are fin-less - with a chrome strip running along the car's waist from above the front wheels to the rear bumpers. This car also had a full-size rear door, which made it a much more practical vehicle. Almost all the 250 B cars were sold in the USA.

Harrington commenced the C series cars soon after - built alongside the B

models - and gave them both a rear hatch and kept the fins, but just 12 were made. Rootes re-designed the Alpine's windscreen, bringing in side quarter lights, so Harringtons moved on to the D series in 1963, but only a couple of dozen were made in total. The C and D series cars had a distinctive air vent set into the back of the roof - as in the photos here.

A customer could order a Harringtons in one of three stages of Hartwell tune, right up to a 98bhp option fitted with either a competition Zenith carb or 40mm DCOE Webers.

Harringtons were responsible for one other conversion; the coupe-roofed TR4 'Dove' - so named because it was sold exclusively by Standard-Triumph dealers L F Dove of Wimbledon in south-west London. The conversion was introduced in 1961 and was no less than 500lbs heavier than the convertible! Harringtons gave the car a steeply angled fastback, with a rear hatch. The space

for the two rear passengers was tiny, and the car was substantially slower than a standard TR4 - though it did feature a larger petrol tank for touring. It wasn't as pretty as the Alpine conversion, and an unknown number - between fifty and a hundred - were made through until 1965.

The A series Harrington you see in the photos here is owned by Jeff Howarth from Lymm in Cheshire. He's been an Alpine owner since the age of 16, when he acquired his mother's car, and has just about lost count of how many he has owned over the past quarter of a century or so.

No-one really knows why the Harrington bosses decided to axe their Alpine conversion. It had undoubtedly been successful for such a relatively small company, and the supposition is just that they wanted to concentrate on their core business. A great shame; who knows what other models the firm could have produced. ♣