

When Rootes dabbled with Le Mans

by David Blumlein

What is the connection between the old established firm of Armstrong-Siddeley and the Sunbeam Alpine sports car? Read on!

In 1935 the Rootes brothers, Billy and Reg, purchased Talbot and Sunbeam to add to their burgeoning empire of Humber, Hillman and Thrupp and Maberley. Theirs was a reputation for solid, reliable cars rather than any emphasis on performance and Talbot and Sunbeam enthusiasts were to be disappointed with the succeeding badge-engineered cocktails the Rootes Group were to come up with in the years before the Second World War. Rootes did well out of the war, contributing large numbers of Humber staff cars etc. to the overall effort and, like most manufacturers, had to rely initially on warmed-up revisions of pre-war designs in the immediate aftermath.

By 1948 new models started to appear, making the first post-war Earls Court show one of the most memorable and exciting, and, thanks to the drive of Norman Garrad, Rootes were becoming receptive to the idea of competitions, the new Sunbeam-Talbot 80 and 90 models being thrown into rallies, doing especially well in the Alpine and Monte Carlo events. When the Rapier succeeded these models in the mid-fifties, the company pursued its rallying activities with considerable success but had no suitable car to cash in on the lucrative American hunger for sports cars as MG, Jaguar, Triumph and Austin-Healey had been doing to great effect.

Thus did Rootes turn their own thinking that way and the result came to be the Sunbeam Alpine 2-seater that eventually made its debut in July 1959. In typical Rootes fashion it made maximum use of what was in the parts bin at the time: updated Rapier running gear, floorpan and some inner pressings from the Hillman Husky, with a wheelbase some ten inches less than the Rapier and the whole car styled by Ken Howes, with rear fins as was the American fashion at the time. It was an attractive car and boasted such luxuries as proper windows and folding hood –

gone were the markets for cramped cockpits and side-screens etc.!

But the problem was that Rootes engineers were too busy with their run-of-the-mill cars and there was no production space to build such a new model, the Ryton factory too occupied turning out the Minx, Rapier and Gazelle money-earners. Enter neighbours Armstrong-Siddeley, shortly to be renamed Bristol-Siddeley. Armstrongs had space in the Burlington section of their Coventry Parkside factory site and were delighted when Rootes came knocking at their door with requests for help with Alpine development and assembly. The relationship wasn't new – the Sapphire 346 model made use of a Humber Snipe gearbox and steering-column gearchange as a manual option, and the excellent Sapphire six-cylinder engine with its twin-rocker inclined overhead valve design found a valuable basis for Humber to use for their urgently needed replacement engine for the Super Snipe and Imperial models, not to mention Commer commercial applications. Armstrong-Siddeley actually produced Humber's clone of their engine until 1967!

Sunbeam Alpines were thus assembled by Bristol-Siddeley until late 1962 when production was eventually transferred to the Ryton works. The model was developed through to the Mk V series of 1968, but it was the Series II cars that came to be raced at Sebring and Le Mans, these cars having their cubic capacity raised to 1592cc.

We must at this point say something about the Thomas Harrington Coachbuilding Company of Hove near Brighton in Sussex. An old family firm on the Shoreham road, Harrington had made bodies on Ballot, Bugatti and Rolls Royce chassis before the war, as well as producing many coach bodies on various commercial chassis, especially Comers. They were among the pioneers using glass fibre and by the sixties incorporated a chain of Sussex Rootes dealerships. They were commissioned by Rootes to create an attractive GT variant of the Alpine

Pinko 'die-cast' PIN226
Sunbeam Alpine
Le Mans 1962 - 15th



sports cars, the Harrington Alpine, and were to play a part when Rootes turned their attention to Le Mans.

Just how Rootes came to give their attention for the very first time to the great 24-hour race is not exactly clear but, of course, Sunbeams themselves had been there before in 1925 in the period of the Wolverhampton Company's great racing successes: Sammy Davis, later of Bentley fame, and Jean Chassagne had taken a fine second place, splitting the Lorraines in the 3-litre twin overhead cam Sunbeam, one of Britain's fine sporting cars of that era. It seems that the Paris Sunbeam-Talbot distributor dropped the hint to Rootes and Peter Harper and Peter Procter were sent to the MIRA proving ground with a regular-bodied Alpine and told to drive it hard for twelve hours to see if it broke. Averaging around 90mph, it did not break. Billy, now Lord, Rootes was delighted and entries were lined up for Sebring and Le Mans in 1961, the former with an eye on the American market.

Four entries were entered for the Florida race, producing three finishes (and one engine failure), the best being Harper and Procter's 17th overall with a third in class but behind two rival MGAs; Rootes cars tended to be solid but not fast! This lack of speed showed up alarmingly at the Le Mans Test Day and coloured the team's thinking.

For the 24-hour race, two cars were prepared, one of them outwardly standard and the other – registered 3000RW – specially modified by Harringtons. This car, initially prepared at Ryton in the Competition Department, was then dispatched to Hove where doors and bonnet were reskinned in aluminium. The nose section was unique, a low front apron tucked under right below the sump, while the headlights were recessed under covers. Unlike regular Harrington coupes, the glass fibre roof had a vent and weight was saved as side glazing was Perspex. A huge filler cap in the offside rear window fed a 22-gallon fuel tank which filled the rear seat. The engine was a stage III unit, a standard option by George Hartwell of Bournemouth. This car was finished in 'Seacrest Green' and was entrusted to Harper and Procter with the race number 34.

It ran perfectly throughout the race, averaging 91mph and covering

2,181 miles with only nine minutes spent in pit stops over the 24 hours. This yielded 16th position overall and 2nd in its class but, most importantly, it scooped the new Index of Thermal Efficiency award, based on fuel consumption and a formula designed to help the smaller-engined French cars gain some glory. This victory prompted the introduction of the Sunbeam Harrington Le Mans version at the Earls Court show. Its team-mate, 3001RW, driven by Hopkirk and Jopp tried to replenish oil prematurely to avoid bearing failure and got caught – hence disqualification!

Hoping to repeat their success, three cars went to Le Mans in 1962, modified by Harringtons with Kammitype tails, it having been found to be more aerodynamically efficient. The Hove company gave them aluminium doors, bonnets and hardtops but the two cars allowed to run (Ballisat and Lewis were reserves) both ran into problems with those bearings again. Harper and Procter managed to finish 15th overall despite spending some 48 minutes having a bearing changed in the early morning but Hopkirk and Jopp suffered total failure in the 18th hour. The same cars were further lightened for 1963 but they were by now over-stressed, sending Harper and Procter and Lewis and Ballisat into retirement with engine failures.

The success of 1961 was not to be repeated but the cars ran more reliably in the Sebring 12-hour races: in 1962 Harper and Procter finished 15th, gaining a third in class behind two Porsche Abarth Carreras but ahead this time of three MGAs, with other Alpines coming home in 32nd and 33rd positions; similarly two finishes were scored in 1963 while Rosemary Smith, a regular Rootes rally girl, took a 36th place finish as late as 1966 in the Daytona 24-hour race.

The Sunbeam Alpines were among the last of the true production racers at Le Mans and by the mid-sixties the Rootes empire was beginning to crack – Chrysler was waiting to step in and then, after their failure in Europe, Peugeot picked up the pieces. That meant no more Sunbeams at Le Mans; now, didn't Armstrong-Siddeley at one time think about a Le Mans contender?



Pinko 'die-cast' PIN224
Sunbeam Alpine Harrington Coupe
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