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# Classic Car

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# TIGER TIGER

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# TIGER'S TALE

**This month our cover feature tells the fascinating, often hilarious story of the Sunbeam Tiger's conception, then Julian Matthews gets to road test an example of this very exciting sports car**

**Released in late 1958 to an appreciative audience, the Sunbeam Alpine was a hit from day one. With its all-new convertible body, styled by Englishman Kenneth Howes, and with most mechanical parts sourced from the Rootes spares bins, mainly from Sunbeam Rapiers, the Alpine was a breath of fresh air, both affordable and cheerful, and the motor, whilst not pretending to be in the sports car league, was certainly zippier than most four cylinder saloons of the day.**

A small car on a strong cruciform chassis, its light weight and rugged construction enabled it to campaign the race and rally circuits very successfully, including a class win in the famous Sebring race of 1962. Despite chalking up a string of successes, world-acclaimed race drivers, Jack Brabham and Stirling Moss, pleaded with the Rootes competition manager Norman Garrad for more power.

Back then, there were basically two ways to build 'grunt' into a sports car – there was the Italian way, with multiple camshafts, multiple carburettors and multiple applications of high-tech wizardry ... or there was the American way, with multiple cylinders and multiple inches – cubic inches, that is!

The American V8 was (possibly) more brawn than brain, yet when it came down to delivering raw, gutsy, boot-in-the-back power, it had little difficulty in getting the job done.

Of the practical choices the Italian way would give high horsepower through high revs. The advantage would be low weight, possibly reasonable economy when driven sedately, and a sound and feel that could best be described as symphonic. The down side: high development costs, high maintenance costs, and specialised repair skills that could only be handled by a select few. The second option – Detroit Iron – would also give high horsepower and incredible torque – both achieved at much lower engine speed via sheer displacement capacity. In a small car the economy could be quite reasonable, due to the effortlessness with which the motor can keep the car moving along. Repairs are relatively easy, and can be handled by

most any competent mechanic. The down side is additional weight, and the difficulty in shoe-horning a large piece of metal into a relatively small space.

As we all know, the powers-that-be at Rootes took the second, and obviously smarter choice, but it very nearly wasn't that way at all.

## Quest for a new power plant

Brian Rootes, export manager and son of Lord William Rootes, and Norman Garrad met with Enzo Ferrari in Maranello (Italy) to discuss the prospect of a Ferrari-powered Alpine. It very nearly went ahead. In the end, Enzo pulled the plug, reason unclear. Perhaps he thought it would eat into Ferrari sales.

Locally sourced powerplants were considered, but none proved feasible, and financial problems prohibited in-house development of an all-new engine, leaving Rootes with little choice but to continue with its programme of gradual improvement on the little Sunbeam.

But sales for the little Alpine were declining. The US market, where the car was primarily selling, had a wide choice of sports cars – and most others had considerably more power! Rootes was continually losing sales to Jaguar with its E-type, Austin with the Healey, and Chevrolet's Corvette. Despite the higher price, those three cars had what sports car buyers were looking for – power to match the looks.

After all, what was the point of having a great looking 'sports' car if grandad's old stationwagon would trounce you in the traffic light derby? Nevertheless, Alpines were still being successfully campaigned both in the US and Europe, but with increasing difficulty against far more powerful competition. It was driver skill rather than engineering design that was bringing the cars home.



**Launched in 1964, it was a winner from the start**

## Brabham suggests the V8 solution

In the US, a thought was blossoming: racing car driver Jack Brabham and Ian Garrad (Norman Garrad's son) discussed the possibility of slipping a V8 into the Alpine. That was in October '62, after the 'Times Grand Prix' in Riverside, California, in which Moss and Brabham achieved second overall in the production car class. Ian Garrad was Rootes' West Coast sales manager, and he knew only too well the need for a faster car.

The first thing to do was to find out if an engine transplant was possible, and if so with which engine. Armed with a stick marked to the dimensions of the Alpine engine bay, Garrad and an associate did the rounds of various US dealerships, and by day's end the Ford Fairlane's 260 cubic inch Ford V8, with its revolutionary thin wall casting and distributor up front, was deemed the most suitable choice.

Now someone to fit the darned thing ... It was known that Carroll Shelby was involved in a similar exercise, stuffing Ford V8s into AC Cobras.

That made him the logical choice to carry out the Alpine V8 conversion, despite the possible conflict of interests the end result might have on his own venture. Ian Garrad approached Shelby



who, surprisingly enough, was keen. A budget of US\$10,000 was agreed on. Ian contacted Brian Rootes who happened to be visiting San Francisco and warmed him to the idea. Brian organised back door financing from the advertising account in order to keep the project hidden.

The objective was not just the fitting of a motor, but to carry out all necessary modifications of suspension, steering, braking, and chassis – to make it a suitable prototype on which to base a costing analysis.

With a shake of the hand, Shelby was given eight weeks.

Not long after, Ken Miles, racing driver, was given the job of building a second 'quickie' prototype (by Ian Garrad) with as little modification as possible. After picking up a '62 Alpine MKII demonstrator from Garrad, Miles had the Sunbeam engine out, and a 260 V8 and two speed automatic installed and running, in less than a week for a total cost of just \$1,200, including a full respray in Candy Apple Red, plus the cost of a set of steel wheels after the spoked ones collapsed under 160bhp!

## "By God, this car is going to sell!"

As such, the Ken Miles car, although commissioned later, was the first ever Sunbeam Tiger prototype. After a second test drive in the Miles car, Ian Garrad was heard to proclaim, "By God, this car is going to sell!"

But the Miles car retained the original steering box – as opposed to the rack and pinion that Shelby fitted – and had no significant modifications to body or chassis. As such, the engine had to be mounted way forward, so far in fact that the Ford fan had to be removed and a couple of electric ones mounted in front of the radiator. Needless to say, handling was sacrificed.

The Miles car had whetted the appetite but was soon discarded in favour of the far superior Shelby unit, with near perfect weight distribution which necessitated modification to the front cross member, a rebuilt gearbox tunnel, fitting of rack and pinion steering, and modification to the firewall.

After considerable secretive testing and evaluation in the US, in July of 1963 the white Shelby-built Alpine V8 was shipped to England aboard a Japanese fruit freighter. Brian Rootes still had not informed his father, Lord Rootes, of the car's existence.

Brian's father Norman was the first Englishman to drive it. "You have put Rootes five years ahead of the competition," he told his son, "Let's get it into production!"

Next port of call was the company

engineers – who showed almost no interest at all ... "Where is the blasted thing – I've only got five minutes to spare," one was heard to bellow. He probably rated the thought of someone telling them how to build cars with little more than contempt – then he viewed the motor – 'very impressive' was the catch phrase often uttered.

Then the engineers made the mistake of driving it; they too were hooked!

## Time to tell Lord Rootes!

With the engineers warming to the idea, an arrangement was made for Lord Rootes to view the car. He arrived in a chauffeur-driven Humber limousine.

After spending quite some time looking it over, to the shock of all present, he climbed behind the wheel! (Lord William Rootes did not drive sports cars – in fact he didn't drive anything much. Driving, after all, was the domain of one's chauffeur).

He beckoned his son Brian to accompany him and the two were off, the chauffeur battling to keep up in the Humber limousine, should the V8 Alpine not be to his boss's liking.

The Humber limousine didn't have a hope. Considerable time lapsed before the little white Alpine V8 could be heard screaming down the road. Lord Rootes pulled into the parking space.

After a few moments he turned to Brian and uttered five historic words:

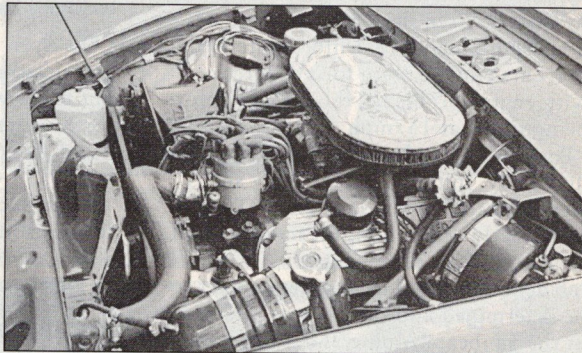
"All right. We'll make it".

(It has often been reported that Lord Rootes completed the whole trip with the handbrake on, but this is unlikely. The man was an ex-motorcycle racer, and besides it is unlikely his son Brian wouldn't have noticed.)

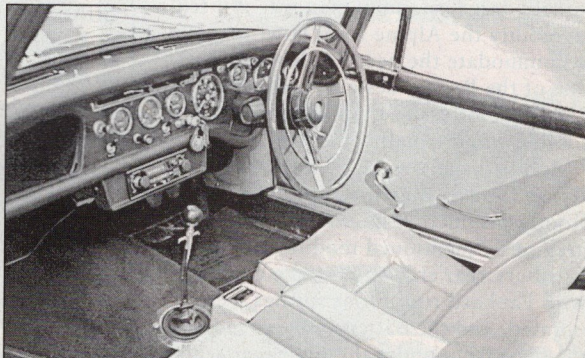
Lord Rootes promptly contacted Henry Ford II, who was vacationing on a yacht in the Mediterranean, and via ship to shore radio, initiated what was, at that time, the largest purchase of engines by one car maker from another.



The Alpine had grace and style but lacked speed



Our test Tiger is the 260 cu.in. Mk 1 version



The gear lever is another Tiger giveaway, with its reverse lockout clasp

## Tiger: Production commences

An initial production run of 100 was organised in order to homologate the model for racing. But first, from December '63 to January '64, ten pre-production copies of Shelby's version were built by Rootes for testing.





**In its three year production span, over 7,000 Tigers were built**

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Carroll Shelby was building three 275 hp V8 motors for three special Alpine-based two door coupes designed by Lister to win the 1964 Le Mans 24 hour endurance race. Unfortunately, the two cars entered were forced to retire with engine problems, though not before being timed at 157mph.

Back in England production was getting underway. Initially, Alpine body shells were sent to Rootes' subsidiary, Thrupp & Maberly of London, for modification to accept Tiger running gear. Incidentally, the 'Tiger' name had yet to be determined and the car was referred to as the Sunbeam Alpine 260 Thunderbolt.

A large sledgehammer wielded by an equally large assembly man was utilised to modify the Alpine front cowl to accommodate the new V8. Royden Axe, one of the Rootes designers, commented, "It was a lot easier than building all new tooling – and equally effective".

Modified shells were then trucked to Ryton for assembly on a specially set up Rootes production line. Along with the previously mentioned modifications, a Salisbury rear end was fitted – complete with Panhard rod. Front springs were uprated, and the battery was moved to the boot from under the right rear seat – where, if it was left, it would have interfered with the second exhaust pipe. A hole was also punched in the firewall for access to number eight spark plug.

In March '64, just prior to the release of the car, Lord Rootes declared, "I would like to have it called Tiger", after the original Sunbeam Tiger of 1925, a V12 racer putting out 306hp timed for the flying kilometre in 1926 at over 152mph. (Another source says the idea originated from John Panks, a director of Rootes Motors Incorporated, America.)

## Public launch, and Jensen gets involved

On April 3 1964, the Sunbeam Tiger premiered at the New York Auto Show, but the newly decided title was too late for the literature to be updated. It was listed as a Sunbeam Alpine 260. The price was US\$3,499.

When success of the Tiger was assured, Rootes shifted production to Jensen

## ◆ Tiger Tales

- ◆ The 'Tiger's' code name was Sunbeam Alpine 260 Thunderbolt.
- ◆ Enzo Ferrari was first approached to power-up the Alpine; he declined.
- ◆ The eventual engine choice was made after a tour by Rootes executives through Los Angeles car dealerships – with a measuring stick!
- ◆ Shelby was the No 1 choice for the modifications on this new model.
- ◆ Racing driver Ken Miles built the other V8 'Tiger' prototype.
- ◆ The prototype was secretly shipped to the UK from the USA aboard a Japanese fruit freighter.
- ◆ Did Lord Rootes really test drive the first model with the handbrake on?
- ◆ The order placed by Rootes for the engines was the largest ever between two rival car manufacturers.
- ◆ Chrysler killed the Tiger after they gained control of Rootes – Ford engines in a Chrysler? Never!

Motors Limited, in West Bromwich, who were better set up for volume production. Having built the Healeys for Austin as well as handling production work for other manufacturers, not to mention fitting American V8 engines to their own CV8 coupes, Jensen were well geared for handling Rootes' requirements for the Tiger. By today's standards Jensen's work was very rough and ready, using angle grinders to cut away panels, and gas welders to affix new ones.

All early cars were left hand drive, destined for the US. It wasn't until March 1965 that the car could be purchased on the home market in Britain. In the meantime the little Sunbeam had chalked up a string of race wins in Europe and the States.

Visually there was little to differentiate the Tiger from the Alpine – some discreet badging, a narrow chrome spear down the side and twin exhaust pipes were about all there was to it – making the Sunbeam Tiger a real 'Q' car.

By all accounts, it handled well; the main gripe was axle tramp from the rear end when taking off briskly. It would corner well; the near equal weight distribution meant high speed corners could be taken in a controlled drift – often done well in excess of 100mph!

Like the Alpine, trim was better than average, seating was comfortable and the ride was good. But most importantly the fitting of the Ford V8 had transformed the Alpine from a cute little sports car to a hot rod in disguise. The 4.2 litre Ford V8 put out nearly twice as much horsepower, 164bhp, compared to the Alpine's 88, but the really significant increase was torque, up to nearly three times the Alpine's. One tester even achieved a 21 second standing-quarter using *only* top gear – such was the incredible torque of the Ford V8.

## Tiger's career: An abrupt end

By most yardsticks, the Tiger was a success story. In its short life – just over three years – over 7,000 Tigers were built, the tragedy being that the MkII 289 Tiger was axed just 30 days after it had been unveiled to the buying public, due to pressure from Chrysler's management, who had taken over the running of Rootes. The Mk II Tiger was the natural progression – the same beautiful body with an even more powerful 289 Mustang engine installed and quite a few other (mostly cosmetic) changes. It represents the ultimate Tiger; more powerful and with handling that was even better.

The Mk II Tiger now commands a significant premium over the 260 version, helped by the rarity factor. With fewer

**... Continues after poster**





**Our test Tiger owner, Richard Jensen, behind the wheel of his Mk I. Richard also owns a very rare Mk II Tiger**

than 600 built, most went to the USA. Much of the US had (and still has) salt applied to the roads in winter. How many exist today? – possibly fewer than 200 worldwide.

Perhaps the best testament to the excitement and value offered by the Tiger is born out in one of the Brooklands collection of road tests on the model. Of five published Tiger tests, two had been written by journalists so impressed they bought the product, a tribute more glowing than any printed text.

*Footnote: many cars are fitted with LAT options. LAT stands for 'Los Angeles Tiger', and were options installed by Rootes at their main service depot at Long Island, New York, or at their West Coast warehouse in Long Beach, California. Most were Ford performance goodies, but they also included wheel and trim options.*

## Mark 1 Road Test

Richard Jensen, of Sydney, owns this beautiful 1965 Mk I Sunbeam Tiger, built originally for the English market. It is not Richard's first sports car, as he's previously owned no less than five very desirable vehicles including two E-types and an earlier Tiger.

Richard bought the car in 1988,

supposedly fully restored, but not all work had been carried out properly, and Richard was compelled to lavish another \$10,000 on it to bring it up to scratch. The rear axle was out of alignment causing the car to crab, and the motor had to come out for major surgery.

So how does it look now? To this scribe it looks stunning – absolutely gorgeous, but then I'm biased. I've been in love with these cars since I first laid eyes on one at 14 years of age. Out for a ride on my pushbike I spotted a gorgeous red Alpine parked out front of a neighbour's house. Something looked different but I knew not what. A closer inspection revealed the Tiger script, and twin pipes exiting the rear. It was love at first sight. I finally prised myself away, and just after turning into our driveway, I heard an almighty screech of rubber. I raced back but the car was gone, just two stripes of Dunlop autographing our street.

Therefore be warned: anything reported will be influenced by my favourable prejudice. Not that Richard's car needs any help. It is in excellent condition throughout. It's not perfect, what car ever is? But it took a lot of searching to determine any faults, and these were of a very minor nature. Some people may balk at the 'Minilite' mag wheels which were neither available ex factory, nor as LAT options.

However they suit the car well, and

wheels are, after all, are a bolt on, bolt off proposition. In ten minutes they can be changed.

Other than that there was little I could find that was not factory original. Richard initially thought the motor had been changed for a later 289 unit, but when the engine came out and was pulled down, it was revealed to be an original 260.

Sometimes I wonder whether being involved with classic cars relates to an avid interest in these incredible automobiles, or to an excitement and pleasure at meeting the owners, often the nicest bunch of people I could hope to meet, with a generosity of time, energies, and an affection for life that never fails to impress.

Richard is no exception. He proudly showed me his car and enlightened me on much of the Tiger story.

## Additions, deviations and the LAT options

His car is pretty much as original, although he acknowledges a number of deviations like the exhaust extractors and Holley carburettor, to name a couple. Richard has also fitted a couple of LAT options: alloy rocker covers and a chromed air filter cover. Painted in the original shade of Adriatic Ocean





**The graceful lines of the Tiger. What sports car lover could fail to be seduced?**

Blue, the car looks more like a pampered three-year-old than a 28 year old veteran of the sixties.

Richard kindly invites me to take the wheel for a good long jaunt up to Brooklyn, on the Hawkesbury River, in Sydney's North West. Richard follows in our rental stationwagon, allowing my girlfriend to accompany me in the Tiger. The Tiger's rear seat is little more than a joke, but in defence the car was only ever marketed as a two seater. The top is off and the tonneau is unzipped. We climb in. I adjust my seat forward, my legs being a mite shorter than Richard's.

The seats feel comfortable, as does the position of the steering wheel, and the general layout is very good. The gearlever, another Tiger give-away with its reverse lockout clasp, is solid and chunky. The lap belts are fastened and the ignition key twisted. It fires in an instant. A gulp of petrol and the Tiger roars, release the foot and roar becomes purr, albeit a deep husky purr.

No power steering – it's heavy, but not excessively so. Onto full lock to turn it round in the cul-de-sac and the outer front tyre is trying to scrub itself off its rim. Obviously the toe-out-on-turns angle was not designed correctly.

A few revs and gently off the clutch – it bites smoothly and progressively. With an increase in accelerator pressure the car picks up speed rapidly.

The Ford Toploader gearbox feels solid and robust, as though engineered for far more demanding tasks than hauling around a little English convertible. Ratios feel well placed, though with the incredible torque of the V8 an even higher diff ratio could have been utilised. Having never driven a Tiger before, and

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not being in the habit of pushing other people's cars to the limit, at least not without an owner beside me (to keep me in check) I took it very gently. Even so I could tell this was a sports car with class, not to mention grunt! It felt tight, and cornered directly. It was a car to have a

lot of fun driving. One could row the gearbox, or sit back in top gear and let the incredible torque do all the work, pulling strongly and firmly in top from around 20 up to almost 120mph (although I doubt I went any faster than 60).

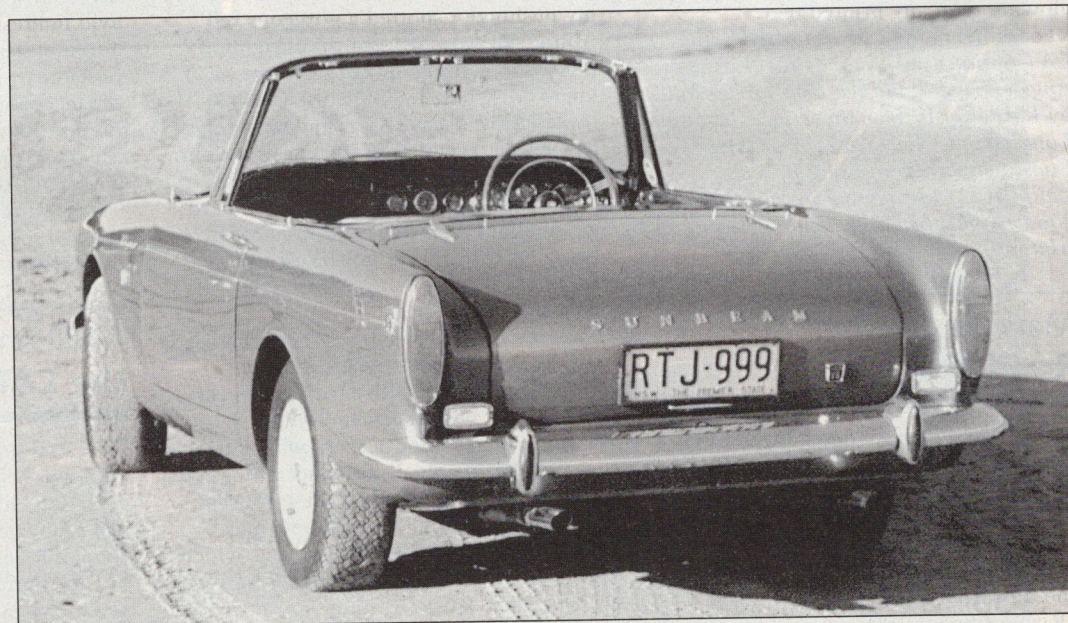
## The real joy of sports car driving

It was a Sunday afternoon in mid-June and the weather couldn't have been better. The sun was out and the air was warm. I was on

top of the world; my girlfriend beside me, a V8 out front; behind the wheel of a handsome sports car (top down of course) with power a plenty, and handling to match – this was life and I was living it with a capital 'L'! I suspect more than a couple of people mistook the car for an Alpine, and that's half the fun – proving the point; the Sunbeam Tiger may look like the dainty French maid, but lift the hood, or press the gas pedal, and all becomes clear – the Tiger has bite!

Richard is now justifiably happy with his little Mk I Tiger and is turning his attention to his second Tiger – a rare Mk II salvaged as a rusted out wreck from a garage in Detroit. "It's the only Mk II in Australia, and despite being rotten as a peach, it's worth restoring just to keep it alive – they're *that* rare," says Richard, and that, if nothing else, typifies his admiration and belief in Rootes' greatest sports car ever.

**Julian Matthews**



**With its powerful Ford V8 heart, this is the view most other drivers get of the Tiger**