

A FERRARI BY ANY OTHER NAME

*This is a fastback Sunbeam Alpine yet it wears the Cavallino Rampante. **John Simister** unravels its compelling racing history – and tests it at Goodwood*

PHOTOGRAPHY Paul Harmer





SEBRING, FLORIDA, March 1963. In the NART (North American Racing Team) garage, being made ready for the 12-hour endurance race, is the usual cluster of red Ferraris. One, however, looks unfamiliar. It has tailfins and seems somehow lighter in build. Yet the prancing horse crest is present on both front wings, just as it should be, and the blue driver's seat is just like that of a nearby 250GTO.

NART is synonymous with Ferrari, having been set up by the Italian company's US importer, Luigi Chinetti. But our be-finned red coupé is not a Ferrari at all. It's not even Italian. It's a Sunbeam Harrington Alpine, and therefore British, but owner Fillipo Theodoli was a pal of Chinetti's and also worked for the Gardner advertising agency, which handled the Ferrari and Alitalia accounts. Thus the Harrington Alpine became an honorary Ferrari.

Driven by Theodoli and Bill Kneeland, a man with much experience of racing Alpines, the number-55 Harrington finished fourth in class, behind an Abarth-Porsche and a Porsche Carrera, and 36th overall. Kneeland started the race and got away first from the grid, but it soon became clear that the newly fitted Weber carburettors made the drivers pay for the extra power with an unexpectedly heavy fuel thirst. So the Alpine had to pit earlier than scheduled to refuel, and there was no pit steward standing by to snip the filler cap's sealing wire.

Richard Waite, one of the pit crew, tells how the team tried illicitly to remove the wire and ended up yanking off the entire filler assembly. After the fill it was re-sealed with duct tape, and naturally it leaked copiously all over the track. Masten Gregory spun his E-type on the slippery petrol and had strong words with the Harrington crew after the race... but the result stood.

THAT WAS THE Alpine's last race. Its first was a year earlier, in 1962, Theodoli trying out his new toy in the Sebring 12 Hours as a works Rootes Group entry and wearing number 44. He and Freddie Barrette finished 33rd overall and tenth in class. For the pair's next outing, a four-hour SCCA event at Vineland, the Alpine had to be entered in the modified class on account of its stripped-out interior, improved airflow to the engine bay, and the NART-sourced seat and NART-made 40-gallon fuel tank. So Theodoli got his Alpine experts, D&H Motors in New Hampshire, to add to the engine's already Stage Three tune as supplied by Thomas Harrington Ltd. This involved a hotter camshaft and that pair of Webers, replacing the original Zenith instruments, to feed the engine's increased appetite for fuel and air. Result? The Alpine ran as high as fourth but finished tenth.

A month later, in September 1962, it finished 13th at the Bridgehampton 400km. Theodoli entered both events privately, but next came that 1963

Sebring race under NART's wing. And that, as far as Harrington Alpine chassis number B9106097's race history is concerned, is that. Theodoli sold the Sunbeam straight after Sebring, via D&H.

The new owner was Bob Avery, who traded in his Sunbeam Rapier and had his new toy converted back broadly to original Harrington road spec apart from keeping the racier camshaft. Those Webers and their manifold were valuable – D&H's asking price was \$3800 with Webers, \$2500 back on Zeniths – and Bob reckoned it was just fine on the lowlier carbs, with 'a beautiful warble at idle. When I stepped on the go pedal, it scooted!' Bob Avery kept the Harrington for the next 49 years, right up until he passed away.

GUY HARMAN BOUGHT the Harrington in 2012, intrigued by its history. Also intrigued was Clive Harrington, whose father Clifford not only ran the Harrington coachbuilding arm – the Hove, Sussex-based company made some very handsome bodies for buses as well as being a major Rootes Group dealer – but also designed the Alpine conversion. We're with both of them at Goodwood today, the Alpine having just emerged from finishing touches, after various experts have recommissioned it, lightly restored it and rendered it back into 1963 Sebring specification. Bob had already restored it in the 1990s.

'It arrived in pretty good nick,' Guy reports. He plans to race it, most glamorously in this year's Goodwood Members' Meeting, just as Bob had hoped would happen. Today is its first shakedown run, only four miles having passed under its wheels since it was driven out of the restoration workshop. So what, exactly, has Guy bought?

As created by the Rootes Group, the Sunbeam Alpine was an open-top sports car with an optional hardtop. Seeing a gap in the market for a compact GT coupé, Thomas Harrington Ltd, with Rootes' approval, devised a fastback conversion to be sold through Rootes dealers. The new panels – roof and bootlid – were of glassfibre, with aluminium roof-gutters. It was launched in March 1961, based on the Alpine Series II with an engine enlarged to 1592cc from the original 1494cc, and tuned to one of three possible stages by Rootes dealer and tuner George Hartwell, along the coast in Bournemouth.

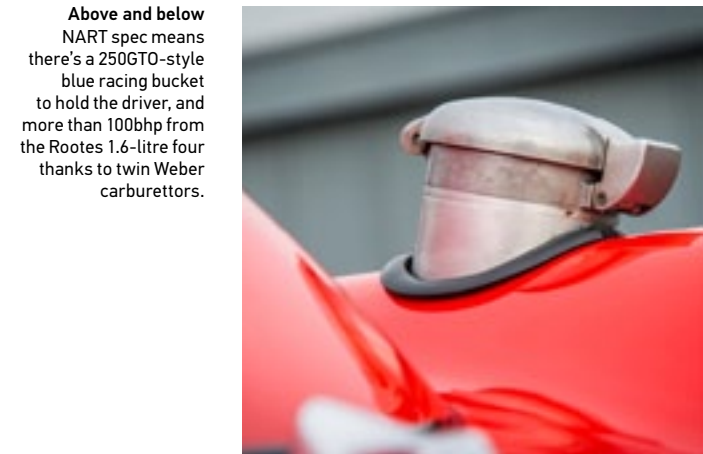
In all, 110 Harrington Alpines were made in the body shape of Guy Harman's car, plus some Series C hatchback versions and 250 examples of the Harrington Le Mans, introduced in October 1961 and built in parallel with the original version. The Le Mans lost the tailfins and instead had a downward-sloping tail; they were named to celebrate the Harrington's win in the 1961 Le Mans 24 Hours of the Index of Thermal Efficiency, driven by Peters Procter and Harper. Today that winning car

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Left and below
The Sunbeam Harrington today at Goodwood; its last competitive race in-period, the 1963 Sebring 12 Hours, where it finished fourth in class – despite an irregularity...



SUNBEAM HARRINGTON ALPINE



Above and below NART spec means there's a 250GTO-style blue racing bucket to hold the driver, and more than 100bhp from the Rootes 1.6-litre four thanks to twin Weber carburettors.



lives in the US, having been owned and raced in the interim by Clive Harrington. An interesting footnote to the Harrington Alpine programme is that the company also produced the body panels for the Triumph Dove (always pronounced 'Dové') GTR4 conversion sold by Doves of Wimbledon.

Fillipo Theodoli came over from the US to Hove to collect his car personally. He arrived at a large and busy enterprise, the dealership (but not the coachbuilders) still going strong in the 1970s as the re-formed Harrington Motors when your correspondent, then a student at Sussex University, regularly patronised the parts department seeking pieces for a high-maintenance tuned Imp. (I got them to write me an engineer's report for my insurance company, too, and I well remember the grin on the mechanic's face on his return from thrashing JLL 251D along the A27. But I digress.) Nowadays there's a PC World on the site instead.

Thomas Harrington Ltd listed a Weber conversion as an enhancement to the Stage Three tune, but it wouldn't fit a left-hand-drive car because there wasn't enough space around the steering box and brake master cylinder. Then D&H discovered that Weber itself had also developed a twin-DCOE kit, this one suitable for LHD, which was duly acquired and fitted. Gordon Harrington, Clifford's brother and head of the Rootes dealership, alluded to the subsequent Weber fitment in his reply, dated 24 September 1963, to a letter from Bob Avery keen to learn more about his new purchase.

As bought by Guy Harman, the Harrington was still in 'fast road' specification and showed little sign of its track record. A Sussex-based company, restorers and preparers of old racing and road cars, then set about returning it to its 1963 Sebring state. There was a little repair work

to do on the lower rear quarters, and the standard front valance had to be cut off and replaced with one incorporating a large air intake mirroring the radiator grille aperture. The holes for the external petrol filler and the door light to illuminate an endurance racer's racing number had been welded up, so were reinstated.

The NART parts – seat, fuel tank – had gone back to NART so replicas were created, along with the various period stickers. The scrutineering tag is original, though, having been safely filed away all those years. As for the engine, Guy has the original but has had a new one built with a lightweight steel flywheel, stronger connecting rods and a Piper 306° camshaft. When optimally set up with a better exhaust manifold, it should produce around 150bhp – nearly half as much again as the original engine made in period.

It's newly installed in the Harrington, ready for me to add a few more miles to the four that have so far passed under the Sunbeam's new Dunlop CR65 racing crossplies. It's a good thing that we have a dry day. 'They used to leak like a sieve,' Clive Harrington observes.

I open the driver's door. The window is wound down and there's no quarterlight, so I make sure I don't poke an eye out on the slim, sharp, easily unnoticed pillar standing at the door's front edge. Now snug in the blue bucket seat, I face a giant chronometric tachometer through a vast wood-rimmed steering wheel. A hefty wooden knob tops a surprisingly long gearlever. Neither carpet nor passenger seat are present, but the Sunbeam seems otherwise fully equipped. There's a stout modern rollcage, too. The pedals are offset heavily to the left.

The engine starts with a hearty bellow and settles to a steady idle. Time to head for the Goodwood pitlane and out on the track. There's no →

1962 SUNBEAM HARRINGTON ALPINE (as raced in 1963)

ENGINE 1592cc four-cylinder, OHV, two Weber 40DCOE carburettors POWER Over 100bhp @ approx 6200rpm
TORQUE Approx 100lb ft @ 4750rpm TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual with overdrive on third and top, rear-wheel drive
STEERING Recirculating ball SUSPENSION Front: double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, leaf springs, lever-arm dampers BRAKES Discs front, drums rear WEIGHT 900kg PERFORMANCE Top speed 120mph. 0-60mph 9.5sec



first-gear synchromesh in this Alpine – it came later, in 1964 – but the lever has the precise action I remember from a 1961 Rapier I once owned, marred only by a stiffness across the gate. There’s overdrive on third and top but it’s currently not working. Rootes’ works racers got a five-speed ZF gearbox but customers weren’t given the option.

I exit the pitlane, feel the engine’s free-breathing revvability, and ready myself for the first bend. I didn’t expect the Sunbeam to be a precision instrument in the way a well-set-up MGB, say, can be with its alert rack-and-pinion, and so it proves. Through Madgwick and beyond, it’s clear that the Harrington is all about broad brush-strokes, an approximate heading fine-tuned much more easily by throttle than by the springy steering that results from a steering box and a necessarily complex linkage. Rapid changes of a driver’s mind are apt to go unnoticed by this Harrington, which prefers to cling doggedly to its trajectory of least resistance. You also have to make a conscious effort to move your right foot a long way leftwards when you want to brake. Otherwise you’ll find yourself going unintentionally faster.

So you have to work with this racing coupé, not fight it. Brake, aim, turn and feel the mass sit heavily on the outside rear CR65. There’s now a touch of roll-induced oversteer, so you unwind the steering a little, let the Alpine settle in its attitude of lean and power through the corner in a broadly neutral balance. The rear lever-arm dampers are quite stiff, the resulting transient shifting of forces helping to tip the crossplies into the start of their slither-zone to counteract the initial hint of understeer, but you soon learn to trust their progressive loss of grip and gain in slip-angle. Ultimately there’s more grip than you think there’s going to be, and the Alpine relays in detail exactly how much is left.


On the Lavant straight the speedometer needle, surely optimistically, passes the end of the scale (at 120mph!). I’m at 5500rpm and rev the engine no higher in deference to its newness, but the Harrington and I are cracking on well. Overdrive third would have been good at St

‘The Harrington is all about broad brush-strokes, its heading fine-tuned more by throttle than steering’



Mary’s, but there’s enough torque to keep the momentum in direct top until Lavant Corner, taken in third, and the long sweep onto the straight.

Then everything happens at once at the chicane. I want to snick into second after the braking and just before the leftward flick, but I don’t give the throttle a big enough blip to reach the required pre-engagement revs and the tail performs a fine wiggle as I re-engage the clutch. This turns into a pleasing power-drift as I re-accelerate and the Harrington is momentarily dominated by engine output, not momentum. This is not an agile car, but it’s a faithful one.

Shortly after my drive, Clive Harrington tried the Alpine on a very wet day at Goodwood and reported back that it felt much as it should, and ‘very much a Harrington’. Since then, Guy has had another new engine installed, and Chris Snowdon of CS Racing has fine-tuned the chassis set-up and softened the rear suspension. He has also rebuilt the gearbox and overdrive, so all the bugs found in my driving session should have been eradicated. Now it’s in fine fettle for Guy to race in the Les Leston Cup at the Goodwood Members’ Meeting in March. Prancing horses and all. 

THANKS TO Guy Harman, Clive Harrington and Goodwood (www.goodwood.co.uk).

