

PRACTICAL CLASSICS COMPARISON TEST

SUNBEAM vs. RILEY

Peter Simpson compares two sports saloons from the fifties. Photographs by Paul Skilleter and Peter Simpson.



We have often thought it strange that the classic car movement doesn't pay more attention to the Sunbeam-Talbot 90 range. Many 'forgotten classics' have not been remembered simply because there wasn't really very much about them to inspire interest but, unlike these, the Sunbeam-Talbot was undoubtedly a good car, a sporting saloon as at home on the daily run to work as competing with almost unparalleled success in the Monte Carlo rally. We decided that it was high time we gave the car some attention, especially as 1988 is both the fiftieth anniversary of the Sunbeam-Talbot 'marque' and the 40th anniversary of the introduction of the 90 range!

For a change, though, we thought it might be more fun and more interesting not to look at the Talbot on its own, but to take it and compare it with another well-regarded sporting saloon of the era, the RM Riley. We considered that the RM would be an interesting comparison because, although it, too, is a sporting saloon from the late forties and early fifties, that is about where the similarity ends! For while the Sunbeam-Talbot is an all-steel saloon with a fairly conventional four-cylinder overhead valve engine and up-to-the-minute styling for the period, the Riley is a traditionally built, wooden framed saloon, with a separate chassis, running boards and, of course, the famous twin-cam engine. Both cars have independent front suspension but, whereas the Talbot

employed a relatively conservative coil-spring arrangement, the Riley had a torsion-bar, unequal length parallel wishbone set-up, inspired — like a number of other British post-war designs — by pre-war Citroen practice. Both cars were produced under well-regarded marque names that had been absorbed by larger concerns but, while the Riley can be considered a 'pure' Riley having much in common with the cars produced by the independent concern (its engines and chassis owed nothing to the rest of the Nuffield group), the Sunbeam-Talbot can be thought of as a Rootes product, through and through.

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Talbot Tales and Riley Ramblings

The Sunbeam-Talbot tale is a complicated one, far too long to go into in any detail here but, briefly, Sunbeam had merged with the French company Darracq in 1920, Darracq having acquired Clement-Talbot the previous year, thus forming the STD (Sunbeam-Talbot-Darracq) combine. Sunbeam-powered cars gained the World Land Speed Record in 1922 and 1925, and in 1926, 1927 and 1929 the company themselves held the record. Though Sunbeam embarked on this programme as a way of obtaining publicity at less cost than by being involved in Grand Prix Racing, the cost was still high, and STD Motors had to issue £500,000 worth of 8% guaranteed notes, redeemable ten years later.

It was these that let Rootes in when STD defaulted on the payments. First Talbot were acquired then, a few months later, the Sunbeam company followed (incidentally thwarting William Lyons' SS Company which had also put in a bid). On the car side, however, Rootes (like SS) were interested in little more than the Sunbeam name and car production was wound up completely by 1937. The Talbot name, however, continued with new Talbot Ten and Three-litre models, these being based, respectively, on the Hillman Minx and Humber Snipe. In August 1938 the Sunbeam name was revived by the creation of the Sunbeam-Talbot marque, though the cars remained as before and all production was at the former Talbot works. At the outbreak of WWII there were



Having decided that the RM would make an interesting comparison with the Sunbeam-Talbot, we decided to match it with a 2½-litre model. The 2½ was closer to the Sunbeam-Talbot's engine capacity and performance potential, exceeding it slightly, in fact. But since a 1½-litre car was also readily available, we felt we couldn't pass up the chance to compare both varieties of Riley with the Sunbeam and with each other.

We thought it would add interest if, as

well as test-driving all three cars ourselves, the owners drove each others' vehicles too. In doing this we did not hope or expect that either owner would become an 'instant convert' to the other cause — that sort of thing just doesn't often happen in the classic car movement! — but we were hoping for some interesting comments, especially as the owners in question had rather different approaches to owning classic cars and the cars themselves certainly lead very different lives. First, however, a little of the background of the two marques.

four models in the Sunbeam-Talbot range, the Ten (1184cc), Two-litre, Three-litre and Four-litre models. After the war, the two smaller models were reintroduced, but replaced by restyled versions in 1948 known as the Sunbeam-Talbot 80 and 90. An overhead valve engine was also fitted. In 1950 the 80 was dropped and the 90 appeared in MkII form, increased power and coil spring front

Despite a 1950 facelift, the Riley instrument panel remained essentially pre-war in character, as does the rest of the interior. John makes no apology for the modern radio, auxiliary vacuum gauge or extended switches; neither of his cars (this is the RMA) was ever intended to win concours awards.

suspension being the main changes. The IIA appeared in 1952 with open rear wheel arches and a higher headlamp position, and the following year the Talbot designation was dropped, the MkIII model introduced in 1954 being badged as simply a Sunbeam MkIII. By this time the 2267cc engine was producing 80bhp and capable of propelling the car at up to 94mph. A short-lived 92bhp IIS appeared in 1957 but that was the last year of the line, manufacture being ceased in favour of the contemporary Minx-based Sunbeam Rapier introduced two years earlier.

The 80 and 90 were available as four-seater saloons and dropheads; additionally a two-seater open car, the Alpine, was available from 1953 to 1955. As well as the body differ-

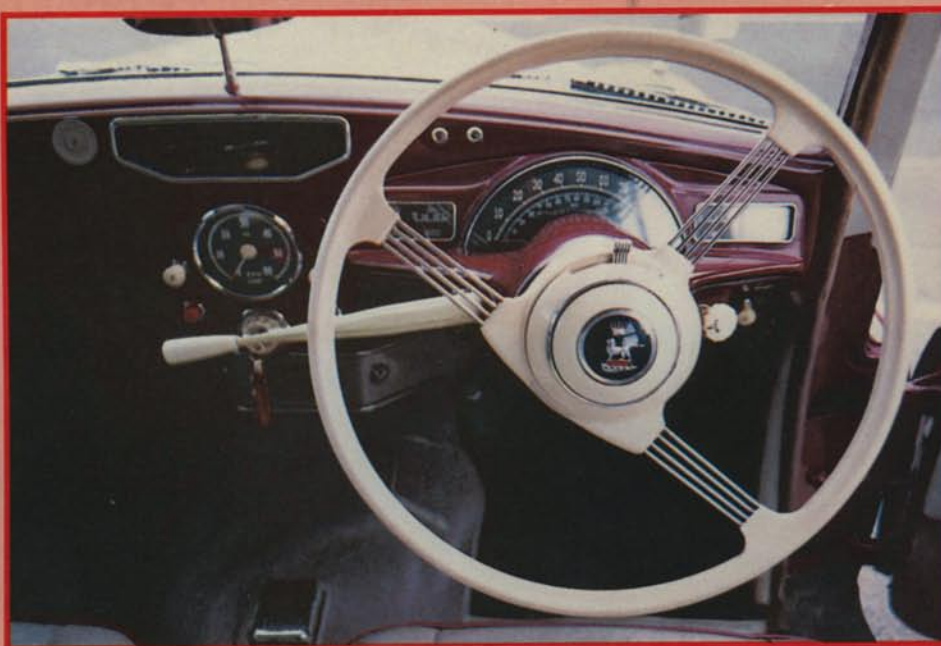
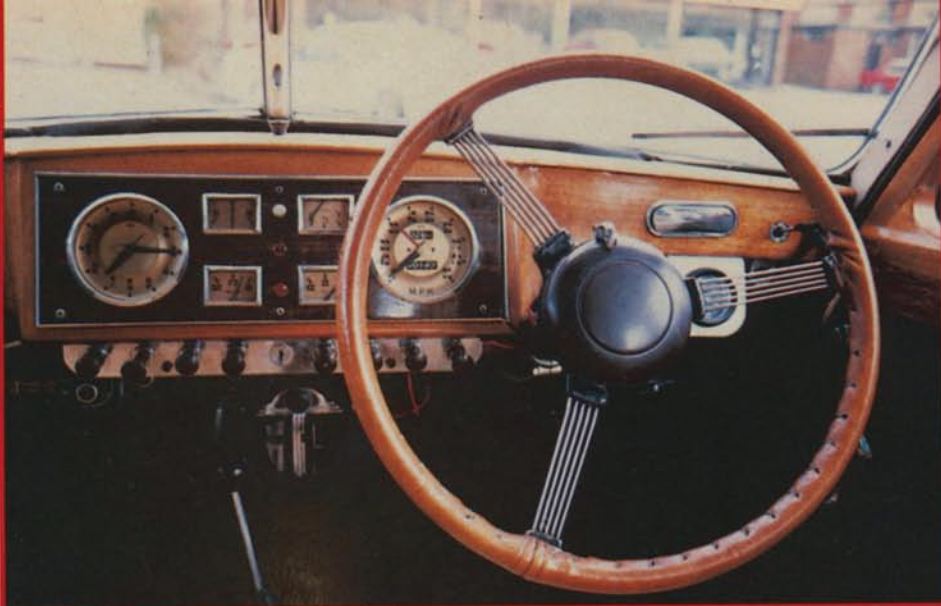
The Sunbeam, however, has been renovated to original specification. The transatlantic look would have been bang up to the minute when the car was current and certainly would have increased the car's showroom appeal, epitomising the Rootes philosophy.



2 1/2-litre RMF on left, 1 1/2-litre RMA on right. The 1 1/2-litre cars were 7in shorter than the 2 1/2s, but the body is identical from the windscreen back. John has fitted direction indicators unobtrusively, by converting the outer auxiliary driving lamps on both cars.

ences, the Alpine had increased power and a 100mph capability. For much of the production run most Alpines were exported to America. Overdrive became a standard fitting from 1954 but, like the rest of the range, a column gearchange was always fitted, though many cars were converted to floor change after leaving the factory.

During the early fifties the Sunbeam-Talbot 90 range enjoyed considerable rallying success. Who can forget the victories of Stirling Moss, Sheila Van Damm and Per Malling in the Monte Carlo Rallies, or the numerous



There is adequate space inside the Sunbeam and, as is obvious, David's example has a particularly smart interior. The Riley has the rather awkward, umbrella-type handbrake.

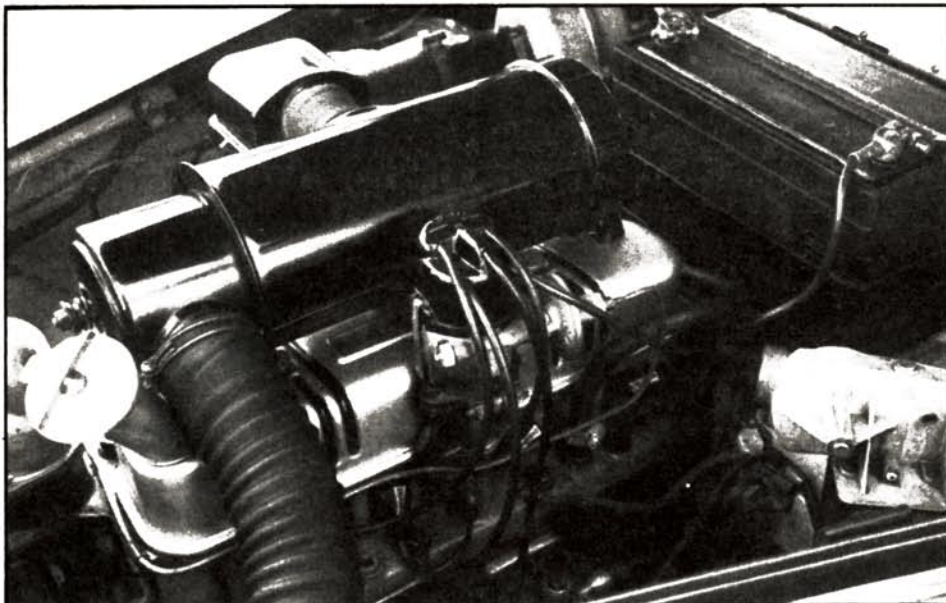
Alpine and RAC rally awards, making the 90 range, arguably the most successful British rally saloon before the 'Mini era'. Undoub-

tedly much of this success was due to the car's simple, rugged design and inherent reliability.

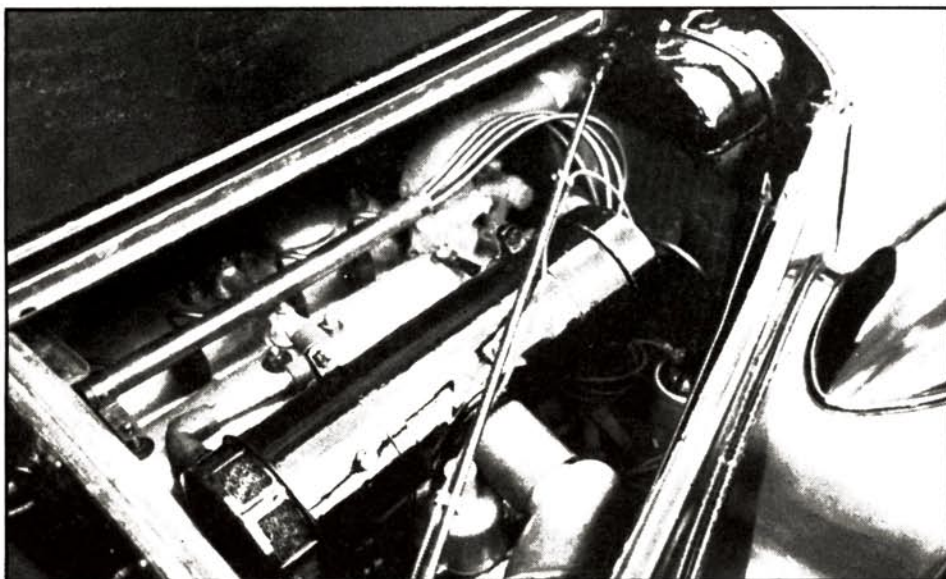


Specifications

	RMA	RMF	Sunbeam
Engine cc	1496	2443	2267
Bhp at rpm	55 at 4500	100 at 4500	77 at 4100
Max speed	81.8mph	94.8mph	93.6mph
0-60 (secs)	25.1	15.2	17.4
Fuel cons (mpg)	26.2	25	25
Length	14ft 11in	15ft 6in	14ft 3in
Weight (cwt)	24½	29½	27¾



The Sunbeam's engine is a purely Rootes unit, having started life before the war in 2-litre form. Apart from the Alpines, the engine was in its highest state of tune in the Mk III at 85bhp.



Mechanically the Riley is rather more adventurous. The twin-cam (in block), overhead valve design can be traced back to the 1926 Riley Nine and the same basic layout lasted until 1957, subsequent Rileys being BMC-powered.

The genesis of the Riley RM is well documented and has been described in these pages before, so we will give a simple, basic outlined of the range here. 1½- (RMA) and 2½-litre (RMB) RMs were introduced in 1946, with identical bodies from the windscreen back, although the RMB had a longer bonnet and wheelbase. In 1952 both models were facelifted, a larger rear window, one-piece front bumper, improved rear axle, all hydraulic brakes and a two-piece prop shaft being just some of the changes. The 1½-litre cars became known as RMEs, and the 2½-

litres RMFs. A further series of improvements was made to the RMEs in 1953, the most noticeable of which was the deletion of the running boards and fitting of different wings. There was also the RMC Roadster, intended mainly for export, and the RMD drophead. Both of these are now extremely rare.

The cars we tried

The 2½-litre Riley RM will need no introduction to regular readers, as it is John Joiner's RMF that was the subject of the DIY

rebuild feature in the April 1987 issue of *Practical Classics*. For the benefit of recent converts, John has owned the car for no fewer than 22 years, having bought it for £90 in 1966. A rebuild was completed some nine years ago, since when the car has been in regular, all year round use as John's long-distance car, clocking up an average annual mileage of 8-10,000.

The 1½-litre RMA also belongs to John and is his 'short-haul' transport. It was owned by three families until 1975 since when, like the RMF, the RMA has been licenced continuously and used regularly.

The Sunbeam-Talbot isn't really a Sunbeam-Talbot at all of course; being a 1955 model it is a Sunbeam MkIII. David Carpenter, who claims to have wanted a Sunbeam-Talbot since he was a child, bought the car four years ago. Prior to that it had been stored for 12 years. The long lay-up was in almost ideal conditions, so the body was extremely sound and the grey top section didn't even need painting! The bottom section needed a certain amount of attention and respraying to remove various minor parking scrapes incurred over the years but there was hardly any rust. Nevertheless, the engine needed a full rebuild after its long period of idleness and a complete new braking system was fitted along with a new clutch.

The interior was generally good except that moths had attacked the carpets. A new set had to be made but fortunately the headlining just needed cleaning. The seats were generally good and they responded well to treatment with a Woolies renovation kit and David's son (a coachtrimmer by trade) was able to 'invisibly repair' a cigarette burn in the driver's seat.

The car is now in superb condition throughout; it won the 'best saloon' award at the Sunbeam Talbot Alpine Register's 1986 annual rally. To date it has covered just over 41,000 miles from new and is used during the summer months and 'better winters' but is certainly a hobby car rather than everyday transport.

Driving the cars

Paul Skilleter writes:

For no particular reason, driving either of these two cars had eluded me, so I jumped at the chance to remedy this gap in my motoring education. In fact, I can't remember having even sat in a Sunbeam before, though I'd always rather admired its compact, curvaceous lines and was mindful that a competition career including Monte Carlo successes indicated that it couldn't quite be the faceless fifties wonder a lot of people used to dismiss it as a few years ago.

As you climb into the Sunbeam you're immediately aware of typical Rootes solidity; the individual seats hold you comfortably and the thick door and window pillars enclose you in a snug sort of way — in this the interior's a bit like a 'Mk 1' Jaguar saloon. The engine idles smoothly and, as you move off, the car has altogether quite a refined air to it.

Column changes are an anathema to some people but Rootes contrived to make the device quite tolerable and I found the Sun-

beam's reasonably precise and pleasant to use.

There was no discernible lost motion in the steering but the Sunbeam's handling could not be described as crisp, with quite a lot of wheel movement being needed to point the car into a bend. However, once you nip the incipient understeer in the bud, the car adopts a fairly neutral attitude when cornering and this, combined with reasonable acceleration and a 70mph cruising speed, means that the Sunbeam can more than keep ahead of the herd in B-road motoring.

You seem to step back a couple of decades when you get into the Riley 1½ — the interior is pure pre-war and so is the view over the centrally hinged bonnet. Start the engine and you at once hear a busy, sewing-machine noise from up front rather than the decorous hum from the quieter Sunbeam unit. Moving off reveals a well-cushioned clutch and a convenient, central gear lever with light and positive movements but what makes the biggest impression is the steering — light and very responsive, it gives the car an almost modern turn-in and the Riley feels delightfully balanced through a corner, its handling completely belying its antiquated looks.

You don't exactly have bags of power at your disposal but the 1½-litre engine is extremely willing and thrives on revs, and John kept urging me to hang onto the gears ("it's safe to 5½ or 6!").

The 2½-litre Riley made an interesting comparison; it's interior dimensions are the same but you are confronted by a much larger wheel, and on the move the car feels much beefier and more muscular. Turn a street corner and you know why the wheel's so big — the extra leverage is definitely required thanks to the additional engine weight.

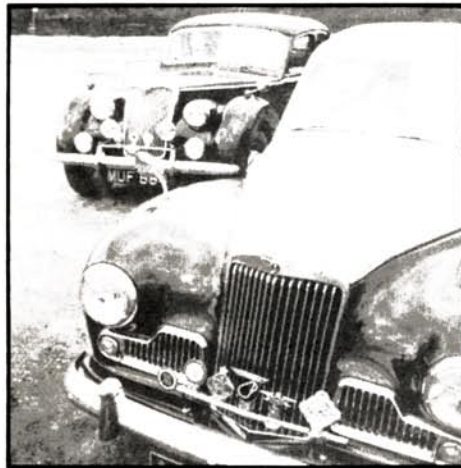
On the open road the 2½ was, to me, something of a revelation. It really did feel fast. Once out of second it gathered momentum rapidly and an indicated 80mph showed



Smiles all round, at the end of an enjoyable day's driving!

within a very short space of time. OK, by absolute standards a rep in a 1.6 Sierra would have no difficulty getting past but, with a bit of determination, the Riley driver isn't going to be left behind very often.

Add in a similar degree of roadholding and handling to that of the 1½ and you have an outstanding sports saloon — one that would, I believe, be quite capable of holding off a Mk VII Jaguar on slow roads, displaying less roll and initial understeer than that car. Nevertheless, when comparing the Rileys to the Sunbeam (whose performance seems to fall midway between the two) you have to remember the advantages bestowed on the Rileys by radial tyres. Sticking the Sunbeam on these would no doubt improve its hand-



ing but, even then, I think it would have to give best to the Rileys. To summarise: the Sunbeam, and particularly this one, is a pleasant and comfortable saloon with sporting inclinations — but the Riley, if less refined, clearly emerges as the driver's car.

Peter Simpson adds:

I think that both owners were surprised by many aspects of the other car(s). David, though not a complete stranger to Rileys (he owns a Riley-engined Healey which is under restoration), was, I think, expecting both Rileys to be somewhat staid carriages compared to the Sunbeam and, as his test-drive continued, I noticed the fixed expression on his face changing — first to a slight grin and then to a full-blown smile of enjoyment! Typically, John had told him to drive the car hard and then left him to it. David's overall impression of the RMF was of a fast, nicely handling car, a wolf in sheep's clothing. He was, as we expected, particularly impressed by the steering.

If David was willing to swap steering gear with John, John conceded that he would like to swap lack of rattles and noise. He also expressed surprise at how good the column gearchange was and enjoyed driving along fast stretches of road. Certainly, John found driving the Sunbeam an interesting and informative experience.

At the end, I asked both owners if they would consider swapping their car for the other's. Needless to say, neither would. I didn't think it fair to press them about why — we all like our particular cars, often for no apparent reason — and I certainly didn't think I had the right to try to convert two enthusiasts who are as keen as John and David! □

The writers would like to thank John Joiner and David Carpenter for allowing us to try their cars and giving us such an enjoyable day.

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