

By Nigel Hughes

Edition 1

The Trend Setting Singer!

ROOTES

Special Points of Interest:

- * How Singer became part of the Rootes Group
- * The Chamois Story & Model Variations



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The Story of the Rootes Group starts in a small cycle shop in Hawkhurst in Kent in the latter half of the 1800s. Here William Rootes Snr ran a successful business. He had two sons, William Edward, born in 1894, and Reginald Claude, born in 1896.

William, or Billy as he was affectionately known, was an ebullient youth who had a passion for mechanical things - particularly motor cycles, which he raced with considerable success. As they grew up, neither son showed any interest in getting involved with the family business, so when he left school it was decided that Billy should join Singers as a penny an hour apprentice in the hope that the experience would stand him in good stead for the future.

The year was 1909, and Singer were still very much in the early days of car production, their main product having been a wide range of well designed pedal cycles and some motor cycles. By all accounts Billy enjoyed his time at Singers, and was regarded as a model apprentice, showing great innovative skills and engineering promise.

Billy Rootes never forgot the happy years he had enjoyed working at Singers, and ever after regarded the company with deep affection. His rise to fame and the success of his business ventures were meteoric, and by the 1920s he and Reginald had formed Rootes Distributors, eventually becoming the country's largest car distributor.

In the years that followed they were drawn into financially supporting some of the companies they represented, and soon found themselves taking over Hillman and Humber, becoming car manufacturers in the process.

Billy travelled widely, and during visits to America he had seen and studied the mass production techniques of General Motors. Back home in England most cars were still made utilising hopelessly outdated manufacturing processes, and as such operating with heavy overheads per unit produced. In the next two decades the Rootes brothers were to play a major role in transforming a large part of the UK motor industry into a more efficient mass production operation, saving a number of the most famous motor businesses in the process.

When war broke out, Rootes was in strong financial shape and had large manufacturing sites centred around the Midlands. During the war the company built 30% of all bomber aircraft, 50,000 aero engines (including 10,000 parts sets for Merlin engines which Rolls Royce would assemble) repaired 21,000 of all types, 60% of all armored cars and 35% of all scout cars, plus other reconnaissance vehicles. The company assembled 20,000 vehicles imported from the USA, repaired 12,000 others, made 300,000 bombs, 5 million fuses and 3 million ammunition boxes, and were chosen to build thousands of Hillman Minxes and Humber Snipes, accounting for 11% of the total UK output of wartime vehicles.

By 1945 Rootes were ready to embark on an ambitious post-war model programme. They had the financial resources and the technical capability to do this, and with massive factories



During the mid-fifties Rootes Group spent much time negotiating with Standard Triumph to form the basis of a merger of the two concerns, however after 18 months these were abandoned

The Singer Chamois

strategically placed, were ready to take the Rootes Group to its peak. Like many other old established car makers, the war saved Singer from financial disaster. During the conflict the firm prospered - it's factories were never too seriously damaged by bombing to stop production, and a steady stream of war work ensured packed order books.



After the war, Singer continued with the same basic 1939 models, the 2-door Nine Roadster and 4-door 'Super Ten' and 'Super Twelve' Saloons, but with slightly larger engines, 4-speed gearboxes and other improvements.



The directors felt sufficiently confident to invest in the development of a new saloon - the SM 1500 - to replace the Ten and Twelve. Assembly was to be concentrated on the Birmingham factory site, but this was an amazingly unsuitable six storey building, where chassis assembly was located on the fourth floor, body trim and paint on others, and final assembly on yet another!

From 1949 to 1955, Singer built the



same two basic models - the four door SM1500 Saloons and the two door Roadsters. Both cars used the same basic overhead camshaft 1500 cc engine and four speed gearbox, but did not sell well, and, not surprisingly, with the limited production capacity from the company's two sites, by 1954 Singer Motors were in serious financial trouble. The company desperately needed new models to survive, but could not afford the huge investment this required. A new fibre-glass bodied Roadster, the SMX, was shown, but never put into production, and sales of engines to HRG never reached the numbers hoped for.

In 1954 the firm's overdraft reached £206,000 and they reported a loss of £89,000. A four day week was introduced during the following winter, and by the end of the 1954/55 financial year the overdraft was reported as having reached £500,000 and the firm had lost £140,000.

Whilst things looked bleak for Singers, over at the Rootes Group things were a very different story. In 1955 the Company sold 104,913 vehicles - 58,729 for the home market and 46,184 for export. Rootes were far more interested in the export markets than any other British manufacturer, and they had progressively built up a worldwide dealer and service network, with an 11.7% market share earning a healthy £3.6 million profit.

Sir William Rootes - he had been knighted during the war - knew Singers were in trouble, and commenced what was to become a complex and long process which eventually led to the acquisition of the company and the promise of a brand new model the company could be proud of. The first meeting of the Rootes/Singer Motors Board took place in December 1955 and in January 1956 Rootes took over officially. During the next year Rootes set about re-organising the whole of Singers systems and re-financing the firm. By the end of that first year they reported a staggering £600,000 loss, but by the end of the 1950s Singer would once more be back in the black and making healthy profits.



Under Rootes ownership the styling and engineering teams were tasked with developing the new Singer. They quickly identified that the older 1500cc Singer ohc engine could be shoe-horned into the brand new Audax body shell, and with subtle detail improvements the Singer product was positioned high up in the Rootes model range just behind the prestigious Humbers. At this time Rootes engaged Raymond Lowey's design team in America, who had been responsible for the impressive Studebaker Hawk and



Starliner models, and consequently there are a number of similarities

between the trans-atlantic designs.

It was against this backdrop that the new Singer was launched in September 1956 as the Singer Gazelle.



At this time the Rootes Group range did not include a small car, and a decision was taken to develop a brand new small car. The project was codenamed Apex, and eventually became the Hillman Imp - Singer Chamois - Sunbeam Stiletto.

The new car suffered with a number of inherent design faults that were not fully evaluated or remedied, and within months of the launch hundreds of unhappy owners were filling service departments.



This brilliant little car, that was clearly more advanced than anything on the market, better looking and so vital to

the Rootes Group, would never fully regain its full credibility or deserved market leadership.

In September 1961 the Rootes Group became embroiled in an industrial dispute that started at the British Light Steel Pressings factory in Acton, where components were made for virtually every model in the Rootes range. It was an odd sort of strike which developed into a personal struggle between the Acton shop-stewards and the Rootes Family.

As the strike dragged on it led to the complete stoppage of all car production, with such a harsh effect on the liquidity of the Group that some of the major dealers were lending the hard pressed company money to tide it over. The strikers received no backing from the unions involved, who kept urging them to go back to work.

In the end, after 13 weeks, the Family won and the strikers drifted back, minus the shop stewards who were sacked, but the victory had been a very costly one.

In 1962 the Group built 147,535 cars but made a huge loss of £2 million.

In 1964 with the Group in severe financial difficulties, Lord Rootes and Sir Reginald flew to America and met with Lynn Townsend of Chrysler and there signed a deal.

In return for 30% of the voting shares and 50% of the non-voting ones, Lord Rootes gained for the hard pressed Group, £12 million of Chrysler money plus a Chrysler underwritten £15 million rights issue. Although to the outside world everything seemed the same, soon Rootes would be absorbed into the vast Chrysler marketing machine and lose much of its identity.

On 12th December 1964, Lord Rootes died. He was 70 years old.

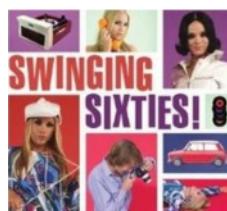
Rootes cars were always renowned for offering just that little bit more than their rivals and much of the subtle eye for detail emanated from the top man himself who always personally tested new models and gave his opinions.

Lord Rootes had built up a great motoring dynasty without which many fine old English names would have vanished many years before.



In 1958 Sir William Rootes at 64 years of age, began to draw back from the day to day control of the firm.

In the 1959 New Years Honours List he was made a Baron—becoming Lord Rootes of Ramsbury



William Rootes quote:

"No other man-made device since the shields and lances of the ancient knights fulfills a man's ego like an automobile"



NEW SINGER Chamois

The Chamois Story.

The Rootes small car project started in 1955 because it was realised that although the Group produced medium and large cars, it had been behind its competitors in not having a high volume 1,000 cc vehicle, and this class of car accounted for a considerable proportion of sales in Britain.

Michael Parkes (Project Engineer - who later went on to work for the Ferrari F1 Team) and Tim Fry (Coordinating Engineer) were charged with getting the project off the ground.

The designers came up with an odd-looking car code-named 'The Slug'. This met all the key criteria Rootes were looking for, but like the VW Beetle a number of years before, it was not met with enthusiasm. When the development team presented its two prototypes to the Rootes Board, it was made clear they were not interested in allowing the Group to produce a car that so obviously resembled a bubble-car. Sir William hated the sight it so much he refused to ride in it, and one can but imagine what his comments might have been in the close circles of the family!

The Board did, however, agree on one thing, which was that Rootes needed a small car, and that it needed to maintain the quality and solidity of the rest of the Rootes range. Further to this, it needed to have a four-cylinder engine, and be able to accommodate four adults. The growing popularity of the Morris Minor and Austin A30 in such fuel-starved times, demonstrated to the board that this was the right way to proceed.

Because of fuel rationing, the Board of BMC turned to Alex Issigonis with a design brief for an ultra fuel-efficient new small car. As news of the development leaked out, competitors

stopped and took notice of what was going on - chief among them the Rootes Group. The 'Apex' project was dawning.

In 1956 the Group made £1.7 million profit, and held an 11% market share. But as a result of the post-Suez depression, 1957 was a bad year for the British motor industry generally, and despite selling 94,493 vehicles, Rootes made a £600,000 loss.

Financially and commercially the Apex project was a risky business. It committed the company to building an entirely new car, learning new, high technology casting techniques, and not only to building the cars in a factory 300 miles away from its Midlands based production plants and engineering facilities, but also to building a brand new factory in Scotland to house its production.

While the company had been buying land at both Dunstable and Coventry, the government of the day forbade any expansion of the established sites, and would not issue Industrial Development Certificates. However, if Rootes chose to site a new factory near Glasgow, the government, with an eye to gaining disgruntled voters, would offer considerable grants to fund the building and development of a brand new manufacturing plant.

This decision was far from Rootes' best interests, not only because of the difficulties in communication the distance created, particularly as far as the manufacture of an 'all new'



Source: www.imps4ever.info

The Singer Chamois



motor car was concerned, but also in the recruitment of a notoriously militant, Clyde-side labour force. But with no alternative, Rootes had to accept the situation, and in May 1961 work began on building Linwood - the future home of Rootes Scotland.

In the late spring of 1962, a trio of Apex cars were tested in France, and then in the Spring of 1963 they were sent to Kenya for extended evaluation. The test program was highlighting problems, one of which was a number of gearbox failures. These were thought to be caused by the revvy nature of the Coventry Climax engine, which demanded frequent



gear changes. The engine, by this time, had been developed into an 875 cc unit, and was more advanced than its rivals, thanks to an overhead cam-shaft and light-weight construction.

It was decided that the new car would sport a transaxle (gearbox and differential in the same housing), but because Rootes had never used this arrangement in any other cars, it hired Adrian West as Senior Transmission Engineer. West's task was to design and build a transaxle strong enough to withstand harsh use, yet light enough to appeal top all buyers the car was aimed at.

West's transaxle boasted excellent gear-change quality, which was attributable to the use of a baulk-ring sychromesh (something the Mini missed out on, and suffered from as a result). The combination of Coventry Climax engine and West transaxle was a hard one to beat, and it was light-years ahead of the competition when the Imp was launched in 1963.

The original Apex design prototypes looked rather box-like, and were not

deemed attractive enough for a new model of such importance to the Rootes Group. Once again the Rootes stylists looked towards America. It is easy to see that the Chevrolet Corvair was used as a reference point, and as this car was seen as being popular with the young, Rootes embodied many of its features.

Production of the Apex might have presented problems, but there were also internal Rootes procedures that hindered its development and later production. The Apex engineering team was based in Ryton on Dunsmore, separate from the main engineering office at the Stoke plant. As the Apex programme was considerably behind schedule, it was coming under pressure for a launch date. The losses the company were suffering this time could not be sustained much longer - the new car's launch at this time would mean several innovative features, such as the pneumatic throttle, automatic choke and marginal cooling were not going to be fully evaluated. Ware knew the dangers of launching a new car without thorough development, and in the fullness of time he was proved correct.

On 2 May 1963, the Duke of Edinburgh officially opened the Linwood factory, and the new Hillman Imp basic and DeLuxe models were launched to the public. Problems soon manifested themselves - defective water pumps and automatic chokes, overheating, coolant leaks, throttle problems and lack of performance. Word soon spread, and the car gained a reputation for poor reliability. The Rootes dealers had little experience with this brand new hybrid and





The Singer Chamois

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its engineering advances, and therefore struggled to cope with the rush of problems, whilst at the production stage, it took years to iron them out because Linwood's industrial relations were poor from day one, so any engineering changes that needed to be introduced had to be done progressively and could not be speedily effected. It was a desperate situation.

1963 was not a good year for Rootes either, and despite increasing production to a record 177,646 units, the losses were too heavy for the Group to sustain.

The first tentative approaches from Lynn Townsend of Chrysler must have seemed like a prayer answered. All through the early part of 1964 negotiations took place between the two organisations.

First official news of the tie-up between the two concerns came on 4 June 1964, when agreement was finally reached between Lord Rootes and Sir Reginald Rootes, with Lynn Townsend and George Love, Chairman of the Chrysler Board, concerning the proposed acquisition of shares.

A new Singer appeared in October 1964 in the guise of the pretty little Singer Chamois. Powered by the 875 cc Coventry Climax 4 cylinder, overhead cam, 39 bhp engine, the Chamois had a better standard of trim than the Imp. Also, it had benefited from being launched some time after the earlier technical fiascos.

The car had a chrome-edged side flash and five chrome rubbing strips on top of the (rear) engine lid, and a dummy radiator grille at the front. Inside, it was attractively trimmed, with padded crash rolls, and sported



a wooden dash-board and door cappings. The opening rear window was



a real novelty. Priced at £600 (incl PT), it was a neat package and sold well, but sadly the reputation gained after premature launch of the Imp, dogged this outstanding little car for the duration of its production.

September 1965 saw introduction of the Chamois Mark 2, and a limited number of superb Singer Rallye Chamois Mark 2 'Specials'.

new Luxury travel with exhilarating performance
Singer Chamois Sport



Half-yearly figures for the Rootes Group were released on 16 January 1966, and they made gloomy reading - all this amidst growing investment and increased production of 172,361 vehicles.

In the early sixties the development of the Imp rear engine technology gave way to a view that this might be the way forward for the company's next generation of vehicles. Despite a large amount of work being completed, the Swallow project was abandoned and the highly successful Arrow range brought into production.



In October 1967 a very attractive Chamois Coupé was introduced, with sloping rear roof line and fixed rear window. At the same time the Chamois and Chamois Sport gained four headlights, but lost their interior wood trim. Models were now priced at £550 + £155 PT.

In late 1969, with losses still mounting, the Chrysler dominated Board embarked on a major rationalisation



of their products and vehicle ranges, and a decision was made to axe the Singer name, along with what had once been the backbone of Rootes - the Minx.

In January 1970 the Daily Telegraph published a short news item - "Rootes may end Singer Model." It went on to say that a rationalisation programme, which could lead to the disappearance of the Singer marque was being considered by Rootes. By 26 January the Times was boldly announcing: "End of the line for Singer - Another famous British name in motoring - Singer - is to disappear under the further rationalisation of marques within the Chrysler-

controlled Rootes Group."

The formal announcement came on 2 March 1970 in a brief press release that the name of Singer was to be dropped, and models after 1 April rebranded Sunbeam. There was a flurry of national indignation, but by the end of March the Singer story was all but over. Singer cars were, however, produced in New Zealand for a short while, as a special factory had been set up to assemble Singers there.



It was the end of a remarkable history that had gone from pedal cycles to the heights of competitive success in the 'thirties, to middle-England values of the 'fifties and 'sixties. It had spanned nearly 100 years, and rallied to the call of the nation in two world wars.

Singer was respected as a quality car producer, and many of its products had acquitted themselves admirably. The British motor industry was a poorer place for the loss of so time-honoured a name.



Summary of the Main Identifying Features of each Chamois Mark/Model:

Mark 1 - Launched Oct 1964. Chrome-edged side flash. Five chrome rubbing strips on engine cover. Opening rear window. Wooden dash and door cappings. 875 cc , 39 bhp ohc engine.

Mark 2 - Launched Sept 1965 - Mark 2 badges on doors. Manual choke. Improved engine - larger valves. Improved rear seating. From Sept 1967 fitted with four headlights, but no interior wooden trim.

Sport - Launched Oct 1966 - 997 cc, 51 bhp engine, with twin 1.25" Stromberg carbs and four-branch exhaust manifold. Louvres in rear of engine cover. From Sept 1967 fitted with four headlights, but no interior wooden trim.

Rallye - Launched 1966 - Sport engine, with oil cooler. Brake servo and heavy duty suspension.

Coupé - Launched Sept 1967 - 875 cc engine as Mark 2. More luxurious interior trim.

Chamois Chassis Numbers ranged from B722000001 to B733006587. Its wheel base was 6' 10" and overall length 11' 9".

THE NEW
LIGHT
CAR
IN
THE
LUXURY
CLASS

NEW SINGER *Chamois*

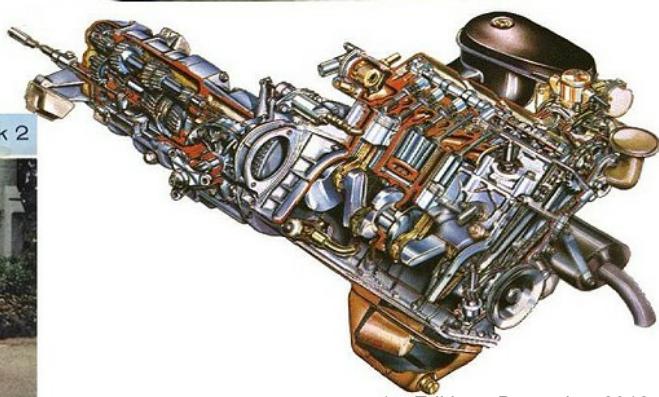


THE NEW LIGHT CAR IN THE LUXURY CLASS
SINGER *Chamois*

NEW **Singer** Chamois Coupé
luxury and economy in an elegant new shape



the elegant SINGER CHAMOIS Mark 2



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