

SINGER MOTOR CLUB

Special points of interest:

- How Singer became part of the Rootes Group



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The Rootes History 1/4



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 Back home in England most cars were still made utilising hopelessly outdated manufacturing processes, and as such operating with heavy overheads per unit produced.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 strategically placed, were ready to take the Rootes Group to its peak.



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



In 1955 Singer Motors lost £140,000 whereas the Rootes Group made a profit of £3.6 million.



The SM 1500 developed into the more attractive Singer Hunter of 1955

Like many other old established car makers, the war saved Singer from financial disaster. During the conflict the firm prospered - its 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, the Singer directors felt sufficiently confident to invest in an important new car - the Singer SM 1500. Car assembly was to be concentrated on the Birmingham factory site. 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 1947, when the SM1500 was previewed, to 1955, Singer built the same two basic models - the four door Saloons and the two door Roadsters. All 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.

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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 bodysell, 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.

For some strange reason at this time the Rootes Group range did not include a small car. This disadvantaged them in this new rapidly growing sector of the market, and a decision was taken to develop a brand new small car. The subsequent project was codenamed Apex, and would eventually become the Hillman Imp - Singer Chamouis - Sunbeam Stiletto.



Elegant NEW **SINGER** Gazelle

In 1962, despite building 147,535 cars, the Group continued to lose money, due mainly to heavy investment in the Imp project, which was not only way over budget but also heavily behind schedule. 1963 fared little better, and, despite increasing production to 177,646 units, the losses were still £200,000. With such financial pressure the Group was lured to rush the final crucial stages in the development of the new small car project and full scale production commenced.

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.

A deal made in 1966 by Rootes with the Iran government, resulted in Hillman Hunters being exported to Iran in CKD (Completely Knocked Down) kits throughout the 1960s and '70s. When production in Britain ceased in 1979, the tooling was shipped to Iran, where they continued to be built until the 2000s. To this day this is one of Britain's biggest ever export deals.

In late 1969, with losses still mounting, the Board embarked upon a major rationalization of their products and vehicle ranges, and a decision was made to axe the Singer name. With production of the entire Hunter range being moved up to Linwood to free up space at Ryton to build the new Avenger, the last Singer Vogues rolled down the assembly lines.

There was a flurry of national indignation in the Times and Telegraph during January 1970, but by the end of March that year the Singer story was all but over. Singer cars were produced in New Zealand for a short while longer, as there was a special factory set up to produce CKD Singers there.

By now Rootes were in very serious trouble. When Chrysler's Lynn Townsend made an tentative approach to Rootes regarding a possible tie up of the two firms, it must have seemed like a miracle, and on 4th June 1964 Lord Rootes and Sir Reginald flew to America and there signed a deal selling 30% of the Rootes voting shares and 50% of the non-voting shares to Chrysler for £12.3 million.



In 1956 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



1966 saw the end of the big Humbers with their withdrawal. In 1966 the Group posted a loss of £3.4 million



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"



The half yearly figures for the Rootes Group were released on 16th January 1966 and they made gloomy reading and all this against amidst growing investment and increased production (the Group built 172,361 vehicles). Behind the scenes Chrysler were buying up all the available Rootes stock moving closer to a full take-over of the company.

In the early sixties, the developments of the Imp rear engine technology gave way to a vision that this might be the way forward for the company's next generation of vehicles, and work commenced on a larger design code named the Swallow. A great deal of development work went into this car using the Coventry Climax engine, which was to be one of



the most interesting aspects of the Swallow. As with the Imp, Rootes asked Coventry Climax to produce an engine for the Swallow, and also like the Imp, it was based on an existing unit, the 1220cc FWE. This was already installed in the original Lotus Elite, and proved to be an excellent basis for a range of family car units. Swallow was designed to use 1250, 1500 and 1750cc versions. With the announcement of the Ford Cortina, it came under financial scrutiny from Rootes management.



After being instructed to limit the car's length to 14 feet, the team were given permission to enlarge it slightly in the interests of passenger space, but because of the Cortina's influence, the Swallow's body engineering would need to be as light and efficient as possible. Pressed Steel produced a shell that met these demands (6,000 lb ft/degree compared with 4,650 of the later Arrow). The styling was overseen by Rex Fleming, as can be seen the photograph.

Rootes were by now feeling the full impacts of the financial effects of the new Linwood factory, and the profit margins of the Imp

were already looking very slim. With this in mind the Management took an ultra-conservative view of the current situation, which led to the Swallow project being re-appraised. The less complex, conventional engineered Arrow project, which had been developed concurrently with the Swallow since late 1962, was perceived to be far less of a business risk, and because it was an almost evolutionary design and build, it would be cheaper to develop. It was also recognised that the Arrow had the capability to be extended into an altogether bigger car. In November 1963 the Swallow was cancelled and the company put its concerted effort into the more traditional Arrow.

Lord Rootes' health had been steadily deteriorating, and on the 12th December 1964 it was announced from his palatial home, "Stype Grange" near Hungerford in Wiltshire, that he had passed away. The motor industry had lost one of its greatest and most colourful leaders, and tributes to his lifetime's work came from every walk of life.

On 1st July 1970 The Rootes Group name was changed to Chrysler United Kingdom, and the Rootes name was also consigned to the history books. Many people had much to be grateful to Lord Rootes for, and his loss was keenly felt, none more so than by his family and the Rootes staff who worked closely with him.

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