

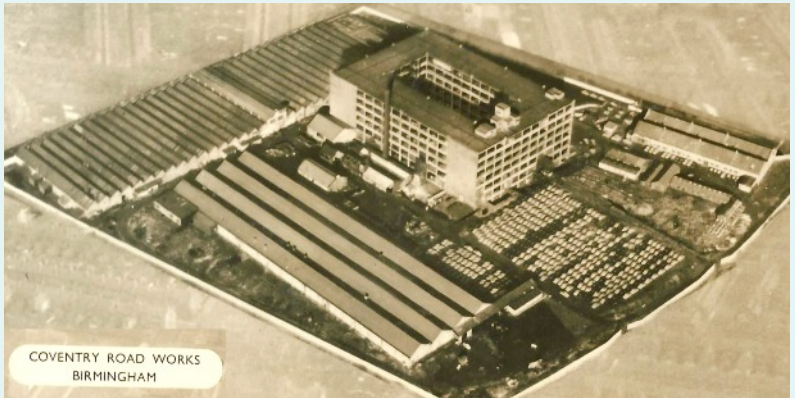
Years of Plenty and the Years of Lean - The Audax Era 1956-1966.

from Barry Paine

The Rise and Fall of Rootes – Heroes or Villains?

In the last instalment it was recounted that the Rootes Group had acquired Singer following a meeting on 29th December 1955. The Singer Company had failed commercially and the inevitable takeover had taken place, no doubt to the dismay of the Singer management team and workforce, as well as many of their loyal customers. Many would have seen Rootes as villains who would pursue a ruthless programme of standardisation. Others might have hoped that perhaps the new masters would revive the Singer name with an up to date new motor car, and thus restore the fortunes of the old Company.

The connection between Rootes and Singer went back a long way. William Rootes served his apprenticeship with Singer at Canterbury Street and in 1913 had started his own motor business by selling his chicken farming enterprise and investing in a number of Singer Ten cars, which he then went on to sell at a profit. Rootes were also main agents for Singer over many years.



Clearly the Rootes Board had some

serious decision making to do as 1956 approached. Should they scrap the Hunter or keep it going for some time? What should they do with the Hunter 75 engine, developed by HRG? What should they do with the Singer factories, including the monolithic multi-storey building in Birmingham, totally unsuited for modern mass production techniques?

It is said that William Rootes, given his earlier links with the Company, had a certain amount of affection for Singer, but this did not get in the way of him imposing strict, some might say ruthless, measures, including the scrapping of the Hunter 75 and other projects that might divert from focused and efficient motor car manufacture. One ex-Rootes employee reported that Rootes were keen to discard as much unnecessary material as possible, and consigned many items to the skip.

Rootes did keep the Hunter going until well into 1956. This would have been a commercial decision, rather than a matter of sentiment, because the planned new Rootes Singer would not be ready until late 1956. It would also have been good news for the workforce, because it provided continued familiar employment. The new masters did, however, see fit to make improvements to the old 1497cc Hunter engine, such as widening the camshaft lobes and drilling the rockers to provide extra camshaft lubrication.

The expression 'badge engineering' is considered by some to be a derogatory term, and the first all new Rootes Singer, the Gazelle, was indeed a badge engineered car. It was based on the Audax body shell, common to the Sunbeam Rapier and Hillman Minx. I always



1956 Singer Gazelle Series 1 Convertible

considered the word 'audax' to be somewhat dull, but Chris Hayward tells me it is a Latin adjective meaning bold or daring. I like it a bit more now!

The decision was made to equip the first Singer Gazelles with the overhead camshaft 1497cc Hunter engine, rather than the simpler 1494cc Rootes push rod power unit. It is not clear why this was, considering the fact that it would surely have been more efficient to use the latter. Was it just a question of

using up engines still lying around the factory, or did William Rootes retain a certain amount of affection for the old Singer Company and its products? There are differing schools of thought on this subject, and we shall probably never know the answer.

The Gazelle used the Singer 1497cc engine until 1958, when the Rootes push rod engine eventually replaced the Singer power unit that had been conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War. No doubt this was again a purely commercial decision, and it extinguished the last link with the old Singer Company created by George Singer with his father-in-law in 1875. Initially the Gazelle was



Singer 1497cc engine in Gazelle Series 1

assembled in the old Singer factories, but over time production was transferred to the large Rootes plant at Ryton. The Birmingham factory was converted for use as a stores and distribution centre. The Audax Gazelle remained in production until 1966, having been joined by the Singer Vogue in 1962.



1962 Singer Vogue Mk. 1 Estate

Rootes' answer to the Mini, the Singer Chamois, became the third member of the Singer family of cars. It was in production from 1964 until 1970, and was a superb little vehicle, bristling with innovation, and in the tradition of many Singers of earlier years, employed an overhead camshaft.

Although, following their first year in charge of Singer, Rootes reported a loss of £600,000.00, by the end of the fifties a healthy

profit was being returned. The introduction of the Gazelle had turned the Company round. This up to date, medium sized, family saloon sold in far greater numbers than the old SM1500s and Hunters. At the same time, the Singer name had been saved and employment had been

provided for many workers. It can justifiably be said that under Rootes, ironically, the years of plenty had returned - but for how long? Unfortunately there was a dark shadow on the horizon.

Anybody who lived through the sixties will remember the increasing strength and belligerence of some sections of the trade union movement. Tragically, the Rootes Group was to suffer at the hands of militant workers, and in September 1961 the Company 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 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 thirteen weeks, the Rootes family won and the strikers drifted back, minus the shop stewards who were sacked, but the victory had been very costly. 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, whereby, in return for 30% of the voting shares and 50% of the non-voting ones, Lord Rootes gained £12 million of Chrysler money, plus a Chrysler underwritten £15 million rights issue. Although to the outside world everything seemed the same, Rootes would eventually be absorbed into the vast Chrysler marketing machine and lose much of its identity. It is tragic that industrial action, taken by militant members of the workforce, dealt Rootes such a severe blow. If the Company had not been subject to such an onslaught from militant workers it might well have further prospered, allowing it to continue the venerable Singer name in the process.

Although the 1955/6 Rootes takeover of the old Singer Company was a seismic event heralding huge changes, it signaled the return of the Company to a period of prosperity, and it is safe to say that given the financial state of Singer in 1955, the Rootes takeover was beneficial. In fact the Rootes buyout led to some of the best 'Years of Plenty' the Company had experienced since the mid nineteen twenties. The Rootes Company was heroic - not villainous!

There are those today who maintain that the only true Singers are those built before 1956! However, ASCO can be proud that when the club was inaugurated by Dave True in 1976, it set out to embrace all Singers, from George Singer's time in the nineteenth century, right up to and including the Rootes era and beyond.

Barry.

Bibliography: Nigel Hughes The Singer Gazelle – 'The all new Singer'
Kevin Atkinson The Singer Story