



# 1875 - **SINGER** - 1970

## A Brief History of the Marque



**George Singer**  
1847 - 1909

### **Founder of the Singer marque was George Singer.**

Born in the Parish of Stinsford, Dorset on 26th January 1847, George served his apprenticeship at marine engineers John Penn & Sons, of Lewisham. He moved to Coventry in 1869 and joined the Coventry Machinists Company, where he was a 'Sewing Machine Finisher', as well as being involved in the design of Britain's earliest bicycles. In 1873 George married Elizabeth Stringer and they had four children - sons Arthur Leonard and Ernest, and daughters Minnie and Louise.

**In 1875** George set up his own business, Singer & Co, to make bicycles. He was a philanthropist in the true sense of the word, and created a close bond with his workforce, encouraging the creation of sporting and social activities, including Cycling, Motor-cycling and Cricket clubs, an Athletic Association, a Rugby Union Team, and in 1883, the 'Singers' Football Team, which, in 1898, changed its name and became the Coventry City Football Club.

**George Singer** was also very active in civic affairs. He became a much respected member of the community, and was appointed Mayor of Coventry three times.

**In 1888** George had a magnificent house, Coundon Court, built to his own specification, and he lived there with his family until his death on 4th January 1909. The Singer family survives through George's great great granddaughter Annabel Levaux and her son, George.

**Singer & Co** manufactured high quality bicycles. In 1894 it was renamed **Singer & Co Ltd**, changing in 1896 to the **Singer Cycle Co Ltd**. In 1903, with motor cars on the horizon, its name reverted to

*The Singer  
'Challenge'*



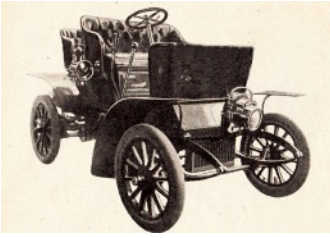
**1875-1928 Bicycles**

**Singer & Co Ltd** until 1936, when it became **Singer Motors Ltd**. This continued until late 1955, when financial difficulties led to the company being taken over by the Rootes Group, which maintained the Singer marque until 1970, latterly through Chrysler, who took a controlling interest in the Group in 1967.

**The first Singer cycles** were the 'Challenge' series, called 'Ordinary Bicycles', but more commonly known as 'Penny Farthings'. Later models included the 'Xtra-Ordinary', Apollo and Courier bicycles and the Lawson Safety Cycle. In 1878 George Singer took out a patent on the 'XtraOrdinary', which protected the idea of raking the forks backwards so that the steering axis would strike the ground at the point of contact of the front wheel.



**1901-1904 Motor Wheel**



**1905 - First Singer Car**



**1904-1906 Tri-Car**



1907 Singer 12-14 HP

The idea, suggested by Mr George Dominy from Weymouth, made the machines more stable and easier to steer. From around 1886 the same effect was achieved by curving the forks forwards, as seen on the Courier model, which is used on bicycles today.

**The first Singer motorised vehicles.** In 1900 Singer obtained a licence to manufacture the Perks & Birch 'Motor Wheel'. This was a fabricated aluminium wheel, driven by a built-in, 2 hp engine. Motor Wheels were fitted to bicycles and tricycles with strengthened frames. Production continued until 1904-05, with several variants, including a milk churn carrier, a 'Governess' type body, a Tri-Voiturette, and the Fore-Car, predecessor of the Tri-Car.



1905-1915 Motor-Cycles

**Singer motorcycles** appeared in around 1905, and continued in production until 1915 with a range of conventional machines, including 346 cc two-stroke models, and from 1911, side-valve models of 299 cc and 535 cc.

**The first Singer car.** In October 1904 Singer announced it was about to start manufacturing motor cars, and at the February 1905 Olympia Motor Show, 8 hp and 12 hp cars were displayed. These had been designed by Alex Craig and were built under licence from Lea & Francis. The engines were twin cylinder units, horizontally mounted under the floor.



Brooklands Favourites,  
G O Herbert & Singer 'Bunny III'

**By 1910**, Singer cars were winning races regularly, including the 'Bunny' cars, the first of which, driven by Gerald Herbert, won three races in one day at Brooklands, with average speeds of over 78 mph.

**In 1912**, a 20hp Singer with a White & Poppe engine, was driven from John O'Groats to Land's End by a Mr Warn of Poole, without stopping the engine - a remarkable achievement.

1910-1912 'Bunny' Racers

**A variety of cars, vans, trucks & buses** were produced into the 1920s. The cars included the famous 10 hp, production of which continued throughout the First World War alongside munitions work. It was the Singer 10 hp on which Lionel Martin based his motor-racing success, subsequently founding the Aston Martin marque. The 'Ten' lasted well into the 1920s, developing into the Singer 10/26 for the 1925 and 1926 seasons, after which it became the Senior.



1912-1924 Singer 'Ten'

**1926** was a significant year for Singer, when the Junior was introduced. This had a new, 848 cc overhead camshaft (ohc) engine, the basic design layout of which was used in the majority of Singer's subsequent models, and can still be



1925-1926 Singer 10/26



1926-1932 Junior



1933-1937 Sports/Le Mans

recognised in the last ohc engine designed by Singer, the 1497 cc unit used in the Rootes Singer Gazelle from 1956 to 1958.

**During the late 1920s** Singer was the UK's third largest motor manufacturer behind Austin and Morris. In the 1930s the company produced a wide range of models, including the Singer Nine series, one of which was the Nine Le Mans, so named because of the car's achievements in the gruelling 24 hour race. A 1½ litre version of the Singer Le Mans was the only car ever to win an Olympic gold medal - this was at the 1936 Berlin Games.

**From 1934**, Independent Front Suspension and 'Fluidrive' transmission were adopted for some models, and a streamlined saloon, the Airstream, was produced, a number being bought by bandleader Jack Payne for his musicians to transport themselves and their instruments. Also in 1934, Singer even ventured into the world of speed-boats, which were powered by marine versions of the Le Mans 4 & 6-cylinder engines. But the Company image was marred when 3 members of its 4-car team in the 1935 Ards TT race in Northern Ireland crashed spectacularly owing to steering failure, the cause of which was never fully explained.

**In 1935** the Singer Bantam was introduced. This was a Morris Eight 'look-alike', but with a Singer grille and bantam cockerel radiator mascot. Despite its lively performance, this attractive little car did not sell in the quantities hoped for. In 1938, an important development was incorporated, the 972 cc, ohc, two-main bearing engine being replaced by a more robust 1074 cc, three main bearing unit. This engine, in a tuned form, was also used by the HRG Company, a respected manufacturer of traditional sports cars, to power their '1100' models. HRG also used the Singer Twelve 1496 cc, ohc engine as a basis for the power unit in their '1500' models.

**In March 1939** a new car, the '9' Roadster, was introduced to succeed the Le Mans and Sports Nine models. It was based on Bantam chassis and running gear, but production ceased six months later with the outbreak of the Second World War. During the war, Singer manufactured parts for Wellington bombers and Spitfire fighters, gun components, bomb and shell casings, and pressings for 367,029 Jerry cans.

**After the war**, the Singer Company continued to manufacture models from their 1939 range - the '9' Roadster, Super Ten and Super Twelve saloons. But it was obvious that if the Company was to prosper, a new model was needed, so in 1949 the modern-looking, six-seater SM 1500 Saloon was launched, with independent front suspension and a new, 1506 cc (later 1497 cc) ohc engine.



1934-1935 Airstream



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1934-1935 - Commodore and Cadet Speed Boats



1935-1939 Bantam



1939 Bantam Van



1937-1948 - Ten & Twelve



1954 - SMX Roadster



1938-1956 - Engines for HRGs



1939-1955 - 9 & SM Roadsters

From 1951, this engine was also used to power the SM Roadster, known as the 4AD. The SM 1500 saloon was face-lifted at the end of 1954 and re-named the Hunter, which was characterised by its upright radiator grille with a horse's head mascot.

Despite this the company **founded**, and Rootes officially took over on 29 December 1955, carrying on with the Hunter until September 1956, when the first Gazelle was produced. This was based on the new 'Audax' body shell, a link to the old firm being maintained by utilising the 1497 cc Singer ohc engine until February 1958, after which Gazelles were fitted with Rootes 1592 cc and 1725 cc ohv engines. A larger model, the Vogue, appeared in 1961, also using the Rootes 1592 cc and 1725 cc engines.

In the few years preceding the Rootes takeover, Singer experimented with steam power and fibre-glass bodies, notably the SMX Roadster, as well as developing, jointly with HRG, a 75 hp, twin ohc engine for the Hunter, and building Monarch Tractors for the OTA company.

In 1964 the **Chamois appeared**. This was an up-market version of the Hillman Imp, with an 875 cc, ohc, alloy engine developed by Rootes from a Coventry Climax cast iron design. It had great potential as a competitor to the Mini, but suffered various mechanical problems that should have been eliminated before production commenced. Various models were produced up to February 1970, when they were re-badged 'Sunbeam' until March 1976.

Rootes '**Arrow Range**' cars were introduced during 1966, the bodies being made by the Pressed Steel Co in Swindon. The Singer variants carried Gazelle and Vogue badges. The Singer models were discontinued by Chrysler in March 1970, when the last Singer, a Vogue, rolled off the line. After this it was re-badged 'Sunbeam' and production continued until autumn 1970.

So in 1970 a once famous **marque became history**, but the name of its founder carries on, thanks to Singer owners everywhere who lovingly restore, maintain and use the few remaining examples of George Singer's legacy; to the efforts of Singer clubs worldwide, and to a number of enthusiastic individuals determined to research as much as possible of the Singer family and company history.

The **Singer name** is now owned by Peugeot, but, as far as is known, the company has no plans to use it again.

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With grateful acknowledgements to all who have contributed to this work. By definition it is not the whole history of Singer, and many more interesting details can be found in the publications listed under [Links>Publications](#) on our website, [www.asco.org.uk](http://www.asco.org.uk).

Mike Hyman (Editor)



1949-1954 - SM 1500



1954-1956 - Hunter



1964-1970 - Chamois Mk 1 & 2



1956-1966 - Gazelle Ser I - VI



Annabel Levaux, George Singer's great great granddaughter, with her son George, at Coundon Court, and an 1880 Singer 'XtraOrdinary' bicycle



1966-1970 - Arrows Range Gazelle Ser VII & Vogue Mk V



1961-1966 - Vogue Mk I - Mk IV