

HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TOURING SUPERLEGGERA AND THE ROOTES GROUP, 1961-1967

Until now, when I told you about the real life between the Touring Superleggera coachwork company and their important customers, I told facts and stories which referred to one single car maker and even to one single model.

Today I wish to tell you about a group of companies, the Rootes Group. What does this mean? What will be different? Maybe nothing, but as a practical consideration the issue becomes wider.

The Rootes Group included several English makes under one single hat, the one of Lord Rootes. The makes were Hillman, Sunbeam, Humber and Singer, something like Alfa Romeo, Lancia, Ferrari, Maserati under Fiat's wing.

It is not easy for me to reconstruct, based just on a few notes and on my memories, the specific dates, the first steps, the initial meetings that opened the road to the very relevant relationship which came to be between us and the Rootes Group, which led to an achievement that only Touring Superleggera was able to realize in the whole history of Italian coachbuilders.

INTRODUCTION

I remember that in a morning of the Spring of 1962 an impeccable young Englishman showed up in our offices in Milan, asking to speak to the Management, showing his business card "George Carless - General Manager of the new Italian office of the Rootes Group". We welcomed him with the attention due to persons of sincere interest, even if still unknown.

Mr. Carless introduced himself with a nice joke on his name: my name is "Carless" which in English more or less means 'without car', but as a matter of fact I belong to an English group which builds hundreds of cars every day. He spoke perfect Italian, which was made clear by the fact that his father was English and his mother Italian.

More or less his introduction was as follows: the Rootes Group, one of the best know car makers, with offices in England and factories in several countries in the world, in the last years had established a daughter company in Italy, with offices in the Torre Velasca in Milan. Chairman was Baron Nalder, a lawyer, while I am the General Manager. Our first task is to organize a sales force for our products, which will be imported directly from England; this while we wait, and this is the purpose of my visit, to assemble our cars here in Italy, possibly making the modifications that the local market might require.

In order to do this we need a local partner that can accept the task of bringing our plan to conclusion.

We thought of you for two reasons, which are of the highest importance to us: first of all you already did work for English companies, you are considered and well known in England and you have a name of the highest importance in the automotive sector.

Second, you are about to open a new industrial complex big enough to house, in addition to your normal production of Superleggera coachworks, also the assembling of a few models of our production. I am pleased to have met you, I told you about our wishes and I hope that our plans will meet your interest.

Please tell me what you feel about what I told you; together with Mr. Nalder I would be happy to meet you at the Torre Velasca, where our offices are located.

This was the introduction, the beginning of the wonderful and overwhelming adventure that brought us to become builders of motor cars.

Until now my recollection of those now far away times is indelible in my mind. The details which follow may be not exact, some data and numbers could be made more exact, but basically what I am about to write reflects exactly how all this fascinating experience went.

FACTS

After Mr. Carless' visit we had a few meetings with Mr. Nalder, who came out to be almost more Italian than English, who lived in a villa with a wonderful park in Cernobbio, on the Como lake, and who was a member of several board of directors in English-Italian companies. Finally, a very nice person, who liked the works of Italians and who was especially fond of Italy.

We had other preliminary talks and then the first meeting in London with Lord Rootes and his two sons Timothy and Brian, his assistants, to know each other and to have a deeper exchange of ideas on the possibility to work out an agreement.

As a matter of fact the agreements that came out from that meeting and from the several other which followed on both sides of the Channel were quite a few:

1) We were to design and build, on Sunbeam mechanical components, a comfortable berlinetta-coupe, with a sporty look, Superleggera, meant to be the leader and the diamond point of the Rootes name in Italy.

2) We were to assemble the Sunbeam Spider "Alpine" model, previously modified by us to bring it up to date, modifications that were to be made also to the cars of the same model built in England.

3) We were to assemble the Hillman Super Minx model without any esthetical modification.

All these things are easy to say but hid new problems to face. The first point was normal routine for Touring, which had already successfully faced the task of working for other English car makers, such as Bristol, Aston Martin, Lagonda, Frazer-Nash, points 2 and 3 were an absolute novelty in the coach building world, not only in Italy but worldwide.

It is not easy, after so many years, to unravel these three activities, which took place a bit separately and a bit at the same time and the developments of which happened one after the other and often crossed each other.

Was the first production contract for the Sunbeam "Venezia", then the Hillman and the Alpine followed, or was it the other way around?

SUNBEAM VENEZIA

Already in 1961 our first studies on this project took place and the result was a 1:10 scale model, which today is in my archives, which was introduced to Lord Rootes, in London, during a dinner at his home, where I had been invited together with my partner, Mr. Ponzoni.

The Invitation at dinner very much surprised Lord Rootes' assistants, who knew that he invited at his home, very seldom, people that he really liked. We learnt afterwards that there were two reasons for the invitation: he wanted to spend a quiet evening with us, to get better acquainted, and to be able to examine the scale model, that no one of his assistants had seen yet, without any influence. Obviously he wanted to make the decision on his own.

It is apparent that the examination of people and work was favourable, so that the Venezia project was approved. The name was given afterwards, upon a suggestion of George Carless or Sepi Koelliker, the man who had been entrusted with selling the cars made by the Rootes Group in Northern Italy and who had always liked Touring's work.

It was therefore given the order to do whatever was required to start building a prototype in Milan and a complete chassis was sent to us, to be used for the construction of the first body, that was to be precisely as the scale model approved in London.

The prototype, at about the middle of 1962, was sent to England, where once again Lord Rootes gave green light and started the negotiation for an order of 300 cars.

In the first two months the prototype stayed at the factory in Coventry, where it underwent the routine tests by the Engineering Department. In those months I was very often at the

experimental departments, until with our consent a few small modifications to the dashboard, to the seats and to the front grille were decided, then the car came back to Italy, with English license plates, to have the agreed modifications made. Shortly after the car left again to London, for the official pictures for the press.

The car was finally christened: "Sunbeam Venezia" and received a badge with the flag of the city, the San Marco lion and the name Venezia in silver on red enamel.

The official presentation took place in San Marco square, in front of the English Ambassador, Sir John Guttrie Ward, and of the Major. I leave to your imagination to guess the surprise of the Venetians, when they saw for the first time in the history of the city, a motor car in their most famous square.

Moving the car on a pontoon was not easy or without suspense, as the worried faces of the people in the pictures that we print show. At one point the car almost fell into the sea because of the hand brake not being used. The danger was saved and the Venezia started sailing on safer routes on land.

ASSEMBLING THE HILLMAN SUPER MINX

This commitment really required great bravery on our side, since it took us to face a completely new task, which needed a different type of labour, less skilled but to be trained from the beginning, machines and equipment more suited for a car manufacturer than for a coachwork company.

It is enough to think of the assembling lines and to the various welders, a special assembling line for the mechanical components, placed in a different building, an organization to test drive on the road the complete cars. All this had never been asked before of a coachwork company, since the cars had to be delivered to the sales agents ready and running.

We decided to make the road tests of all the cars on two different routes, both on the roads of the Brianza, an area a few kilometres North of Milan, the main city of which is Monza. One was about forty kilometres long on various types of ground, the other was seven or eight kilometres long and was used for the final test.

At this stage I have to explain how things were done. Our job was called "Assembling from C.K.D." (Completely Knocked Down), which means assembling parts completely disassembled. In other words we had to put together cars, starting from minimal components all apart.

To give a precise idea I wish to point out that normally containers for transport were sent to us from England by TIR trucks, each of which had everything required to assemble twelve cars. Can you figure out the room taken by twelve cars? Well, this was all in one single container.

Luckily the engine, the gearbox and the differential arrived completely preassembled. Everything else had to be put together. I have to add, however, that at Rootes they were used to do it in the various factories around the world, so that their experience was outstanding in order to train new workers abroad.

The Italian case was however more complicated because at the time England was out of the European Common Market, while Rootes wished to sell their cars in this same market first by having them assembled and later built in Italy.

Both Rootes and Touring worked hard to achieve the objective. Rootes bought in Italy the available parts which were common to other cars, such as wheels, tires, horns, batteries, while we replaced with parts of our own production the seat structures, the springs, the carpets, the upholstery, the windows and several other things, making the already complicated issue even more complicated.

The final result was the possibility to sell these now Italicized cars even in Africa.

ASSEMBLING THE SUNBEAM ALPINE

Even in this case I can repeat what I already said on CKD, however with an additional complication, not to lose the habit.

While the Super Minx sedans were not aesthetically modified by us, the spider, pleasant and enjoyable sport car, had really horrible rear wings that the Italian market would never accept. We were entrusted with restyling them and to submit a modified car to the make, for approval. As we received the approval and this time it was Brian Rootes to give it, we were authorized to start assembling the parts received as CKD, however after having modified for the tail section the machinery received from England.

It was a great pleasure and honour for us, the decision by the English management to adopt our styling also for all the cars they made in Coventry, starting from the fourth Series.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

We thought to add other details and comments, in addition to my memories, by printing, in another section of this booklet, under the caption "The origin and the history of the Sunbeam trade name", an extract from the single issue "SUNBEAM VENEZIA" 1963-1966, written by Messrs. Alain Thirion (a Belgian) and John Neal (an Englishman) and distributed during the incredible meeting of Venezia, Alpine and Super Mix cars, which took place in 1991 in Brussels, to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the presentation of the Venezia. I was the guest of honour.

All the credit for the very successful event is to be given to the already mentioned Thirion and Neal, members and enthusiastic animators of the English "Sunbeam Alpine Owner Club" which reunites the Venezia owners and the Belgian Rootes Club.

At this point I only have to add my complete thought on the Venezia, confirming hereunder what I stated on the single issue already mentioned above.

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce this book, written with attention to every last detail, thorough and accurate. The Sunbeam Venezia Touring Superleggera is a car for which I have particularly fond memories. I would like, therefore, to explain why this is so.

Generally, when I am asked which of my creations is the car I prefer, I reply by posing, in my turn, another question. "Supposing you have several sons and you are asked 'Which is your favourite, how would you reply?'" Surely you would say that it is not possible to love one son more than another, but it is certainly the smallest and therefore the one more in need of affection to 'Whom you would dedicate most of your attention'.

Of course, I have created a large number of coach-built bodies 'which, considering the type of vehicle towards which Touring Superleggera is orientated, are mostly either sporting, powerful and aggressive (Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Bristol, Frazer-Nash, Aston Martin, Maserati, Pegaso) or particularly luxurious (Isotta-Fraschini, BC Monterosa, Lagonda, Lancia). In other words vehicles capable of bringing sunshine to a rainy day, with a strong personality 'which makes life really worth living'.

The "Venezia", to continue the analogy with sons, is an altogether quieter car, orientated towards a market less turbulent but more competitive and therefore more difficult to break into. Briefly, the Sunbeam Venezia is like the son most needful of affection and is for this reason the one I am particularly close to, so I was taken aback but very pleased when I heard of the decision of The Rootes Club of Belgium to celebrate the silver jubilee of its birth.

Today, this car has reached an age, which, for an automobile, is considered venerable and yet, as is said of beautiful women, it doesn't show it. It wears its years well and is still easy on the eye, is youthful, thrusting, full of 'go' and desirable.

In other words it is still proud to carry the name Sunbeam and to have been coach-built by Touring Superleggera.

Alain Thirion and John Neal, with the enthusiastic assistance of a few members of Rootes clubs, have succeeded in their book in bringing back to life the history of the Sunbeam Venezia Touring Superleggera, from the desire of Lord Rootes in 1959 to produce something special for the Rootes Group, to the signing of the contract in London in 1961, from the unveiling of the prototype in 1962, to the launch of the car in 1963 in the fairytale setting of the Gran Canal and the Piazza San Marco in Venice, finally to the start of production and now to its entry, twenty-five years after its birth, into the rare and coveted brotherhood of collectors' cars and into this "History" .. Thanks to this "History" the Venezia will live on as long as there are those amongst us who know how to appreciate the beautiful things in life.

Dott. Ing. Carlo Felice Bianchi Anderloni

SUNBEAM VENEZIA

At the same time as the production of the Alpine was started in Italy, Sunbeam introduced the two plus two seat coupe "Venezia" that simply is the Sunbeam Rapier with coachwork entirely designed by Touring and built with the Superleggera system, shell in pipe work and aluminium skin, typical of this coachwork company.

The Palazzo Ducale in Venice was the magnificent scene where the new Sunbeam Venezia was introduced, a car born from the co-operation between the Rootes Group and Carrozzeria Touring.

The Sunbeam Venezia Superleggera is a comfortable four-seat coupe, with a perfectly Italian style and luxurious finishing. The front end is perfect; the designers at Touring were able to make the traditional Sunbeam grill match with the Italian style, with twin headlights, very popular in the sixties.

The Venezia engine is an in-line four cylinder of 1592 cc, with a compression ratio of 9.1:1, delivering 94-horse power at 5800 r.p.m., with a double barrel carburettor. The block has an aluminium head and inclined overhead valves. There is also an oil radiator, for a more effective cooling at high speed. A very interesting feature is the overdrive on third and fourth speed, which allows travelling on a flat highway at low r.p.m.'s, even at high speed.

Visibility is by all means excellent and internal comfort is really remarkable. All details are looked after with great care, so that it is possible to call it a luxury car.

Being a Superleggera the coachwork is aluminium, with a tubular frame, which allowed a substantial reduction in weight. The top speed is about 165 Km/h and according to the make the fuel consumption is 9 to 10 Km. per litre.

All the main mechanical components were shipped from the Coventry works to Italy. The coachwork was built by Touring and the car was completely assembled in the factory where also the Super Minx and Alpine models were built. Altogether, consideration made of the parts which were manufactured in Italy, 60% of the work done could be attributed to the Italian party.

This notwithstanding, Sunbeam Venezia's horizon was getting full of dark clouds. After the introduction on the 9th of September, 1963, in Milan, it was officially launched, as we said, on the 21st of September in Venice, in front of the city mayor and of the English ambassador.

This was the first time that a car entered San Marco square, after having been transported on a barge along the canals of the city. The press had tributed a very warm welcome to the car, but there were doubts as to the price it would be sold in Italy by the Rootes Group.

The doubts were well founded. Among the 1963 Rootes models the Venezia costed as much as the big Humber. In 1964 its price was the same as the Sunbeam Tiger with the Ford V8 engine and it was higher than a Jaguar Mk2's.

How could the Italian dealers sell a 2+2 car of just 1592 c.c. at such a high price? Of course they would emphasize the beauty of the car, its comfort, the prestige given by owning a foreign car, as well as the aluminium body that cannot rust, but they also had to use a few tricks.

Let's for example look at the sales brochures: the power of 94 hp was incorrect, the engine was the same as on the Humber Sceptre, the speed mentioned, 175 or 170 km/h, according to another brochure, 'was inflated'. Another feature to attract buyers was the radiator to cool the oil, which is normally installed on high performance cars.

In September of 1963 it became apparent that the car had to be sold in Europe, not just in Italy, where Alfa Romeo and Lancia, both of significantly lower price, were dominating the market. The great majority of European countries were covered, exception made only of the Great Britain, where the very high duty would have made the price unaffordable.

As a consequence of the high costs and of the low production volume, the future of the "Anglo-Italian venture started to look rather uncertain. This and other reasons led to stop all promotional efforts on this car.

The Rootes Group has suffered severe strikes in 1961. Several production plans were delayed and even cancelled and the financial losses were heavy. With the Hillman Imp project already in jeopardy Rootes did not want to risk additional amounts in uncertain adventures. The Venezia project received a very low priority, with few hopes that the situation might improve.

Furthermore, in 1963 there was a strike at the Touring works, just a few months after the company had moved into the new factory in Nova Milanese. This brought large losses to the company, which had been financially weakened by the investments required by the new plant. These problems were never solved. Last, the Italian law was changed, so that the cars with big engines were more heavily taxed.

Contracts between Touring and Lancia, Maserati, Lamborghini were reduced and all studies on new sports cars were stopped. As a consequence the Nova Milanese works were never used at full capacity and the financial pressure became too heavy.

The company went under receivership in March of 1965 and went officially out of production on the 31st of December 1966, even if a few cars were completed within the 31st of January 1967.

In light of these problems the agreements between Rootes and Touring were revised with the objective of reducing the production of Venezias at 250 cars. With such an uncertain future it became more and more difficult to sell the Venezia. If chassis numbers can give an indication of the actual production, slightly more than 200 cars were built.

We know that Rootes sent to Italy just chassis and it is reasonable to believe that about 50 Venezias were built using the Super Minx platform, that Touring built between October 1962 and December 1966. This would not make any difference, since the two chassis were almost the same, but it showed that Rootes wanted to discourage further productions of the Venezia, while Touring needed to make as many as possible, to reduce costs.

To the contrary of the Alpine, the Venezia did not receive any improvement, not the all synchronized gearbox, not a more powerful engine and not even the 1725 c.c. engine that became standard on all the cars of the Rootes Group since the middle of 1965 and that on the contrary was installed on the last Alpines built by Touring and on the Super Minx.

In all the car shops and in the dealers' show rooms the Venezia could not compete with the new models. Being disadvantaged, it looked older and older, while the only attraction left were the elegant lines of the coachwork. Some examples found a buyer as far as 1968, but the price had been substantially reduced, by about 25% between 1963 and 1965.

The last ten cars left Italy to Spain. It is also possible that an open version had been considered. Touring had certainly done it and Federico Formenti had even made the drawings for it.

In conclusion, even before production of the Venezia had started, everything worked against production and development of this nice car, as it really would have deserved.

Shortly after production was discontinued, the companies and the people involved with the Venezia project would have disappeared: Touring in December 1966, Rootes in 1969. Carlo Felice Bianchi Anderloni became Director of the Alfa Romeo Style Centre, Alec Caine soon retired, George Carless became Director of Rootes Motors in the Bahamas. Also the Sunbeam name disappeared in 1976.

Even if remarkable in construction and handsome in design, the Venezia was completely ignored in the seventies. As the majority of Rootes cars, exception made of the roadsters, the collectors did not love it. Today however the level of the Venezia is even to that of other post-war Sunbeams, such as the Alpines, the Harringtons and the Tigers.

Now the Sunbeam Venezia will for sure attract the interest rightly reserved by enthusiasts and collectors of English cars, worldwide.

(Alain Thirion - John Neal, 1988)

Finishing of the Sunbeam Venezia

Torcello green
Lido white
Rialto grey
Laguna blue
Venezia light blue
Black (on request)

Finishing of the Sunbeam Alpine Torcello green

Tuberosa white
Misurina light blue
Carnival red
Devonshire grey