

The Rootes Group - Carrozzeria Touring Cooperation 1961 – 1967

Original text Giovanni Bianchi Anderloni, Registro Touring Superleggera, adapted by JPPeirs, edited by webmaster HWV.

Pictures : Bianchi Anderloni Family Archive.

It was most certainly no coincidence that on that sunny spring morning in 1961, Mr. Georges Carless (what's in a name?) turned up on the doorstep of Carrozzeria Touring in Via Ludovico di Breme in Milan.

Mr. Carless of Anglo-Italian descent, was the managing director of the newly formed Rootes Italia company. He explains that he is setting up a sales network in Italy and exploring the possibility of manufacturing cars in Italy. He is on a mission from Lord William Rootes, to gauge Touring's appetite for such a collaboration given Carrozzeria Touring's experience of working successfully with British car manufacturers and its worldwide reputation in motorsports.

Further meetings and discussions with the President of Rootes Italia, Mr Nalder in his sumptuous villa at Cernobbio on Lake Como, and with Lord William and his two sons Timothy and Brian and their staff in the UK, led to the drafting of an agreement which was signed in Milan in the autumn of that year, 1961, at the offices of Rootes Italia offices in the Torre Velasca close to the Duomo in Milan.



A visit to the Touring factory in Nova Milanese.

From left to right: Mr. Carless (Rootes Italy), Gaetano Ponzoni (Managing Partner of Touring), The British Consul General in Milan and leader of the group Carlo Felice Bianchi Anderloni (Managing Partner of Touring).

The agreement consisted of 3 parts :

1. **The Hillman Super Minx** had won the "Taxi for Europe" trophy a few months earlier and there was a lot of interest from major cities such as Rome and Milan. However, there were import taxes from the UK to the then smaller European Economic Community. To avoid these, parts could be shipped in CKD (Completely Knocked Down) form for assembly by Touring in Milan.





- Assembly of the open top sportscar
Sunbeam Alpine Spider based on imported CKD parts, after some stylistic improvements.



- Design and manufacture of a sports coupé based on Sunbeam mechanicals but built to the famous “Superleggera” principles, a birdcage of welded steel tubing, with hand-beaten aluminium bodywork and luxurious interior.

Touring built a large new factory in Nova Milanese, with a dedicated assembly line for Rootes cars. In a separate hall was an automated body-painting line, one of the largest in Europe at the time, capable of handling up to 70 cars a day.



Design work began immediately on the Sunbeam Alpine and later on the Sunbeam Venezia.

A 1:10 scale model was made in 1961 and Carlo Felice Bianchi Anderloni took it on a trip to London where he was invited to a dinner at Lord William Rootes’s home to present it away from the offices.

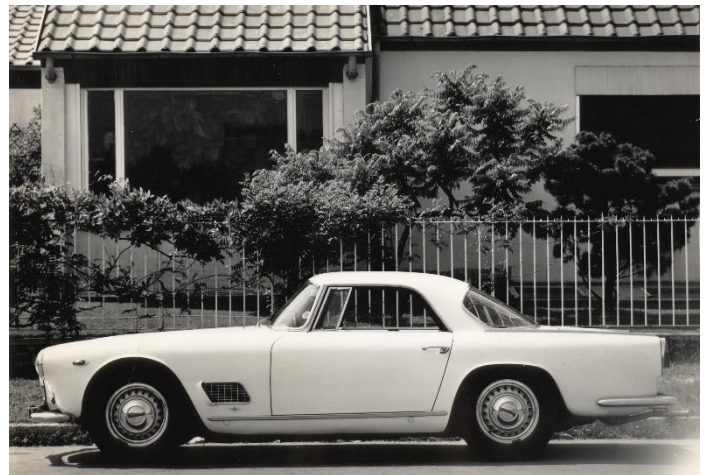
Lord Rootes approved the concept and a full-scale prototype was built and sent to the UK for inspection in mid-1962. Lord Rootes gave his approval and an initial order for a series of 300 Venezia’s, for which the mechanical parts were immediately shipped.

The Venezia had the straight lines, the “Chinese eyes” front and the cut-off fins at the rear that were typical of Carrozzeria Touring, and could be seen on many other famous Touring designs, such as the Aston Martin DB4, the Lagonda Rapide, the Alfa Romeo 1900 CSS of 1957, the Alfa Romeo 2000/2600 Spider, the Alfa Romeo Praha, the Lancia Flaminia Touring and the Maserati 3500GT to name but a few.

The front end is also reminiscent of the dual headlight configuration of the Hillman Super Minx, but the parking lights on top of the headlights have been adapted into cabin ventilation vents on the Venezia.

The chrome radiator grille is, of course, in keeping with its Sunbeam namesake.

Some of the other famous Touring designs:



At the same time, restyling work on the Sunbeam Alpine revealed that Touring had cut off the rear fins, which were considered ugly by Italian taste, and brought them in line with Touring’s house style. Touring also changed the layout of the fuel tanks to increase the load space in the boot.

Work on the Hillman Super Minx also had progressed in parallel and cars were being sold in good numbers, that is Super Minxes and Alpines.

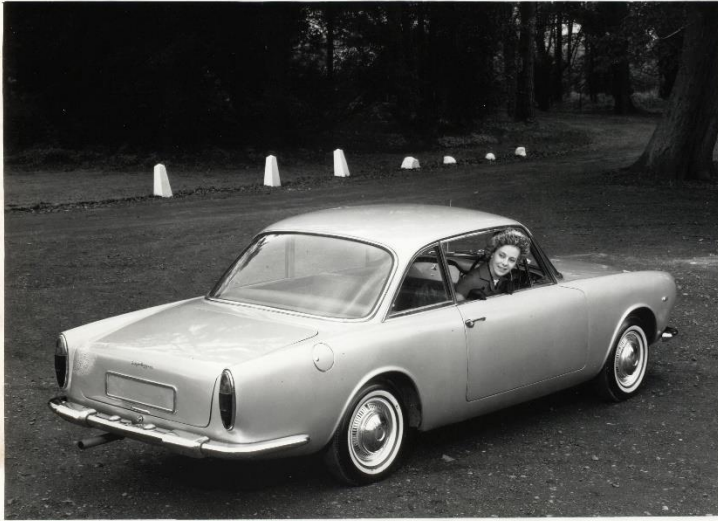


The Venezia was unveiled to the press and public in a grand show for the period, transported on a barge on the Canal Grande in Venice and landing in Piazza San Marco. Sales of the Venezia were rather slow and after a quantity of certainly less than the initial projection of 300, most probably only about 140 cars had been produced during 1963 and 1964, the production of this model was stopped, and a number of Venezia’s remained unsold for some years in various showrooms in Europe. Market analysis showed that the price was too high and the performance too low. It is rumoured that one of Lord Rootes’s sons had a V8 fitted to a Venezia, but there is no evidence that this ever existed.



The Sunbeam Venezia Superleggera.





The Sunbeam Venezia Superleggera.

It is appropriate here to point out a misinterpretation by Graham Robson in his book "Cars of the Rootes Group", where he states that the production of the Venezia dried up because Touring had financial problems. The timeline proves this statement to be inaccurate and probably an assumption of the author.

Firstly, in 1961 the Rootes group was hit by 13 weeks of workers' strikes and as a result subsequently the number of cars manufactured and sold collapsed to the extent that the Rootes Group made heavy losses in the financial years 1961 and 1962. This signalled the beginning of the end of the Rootes group as it stood. The Chrysler Group had

at that point already acquired a minority shareholding in Rootes.

The arrangement between Rootes and Touring was as follows: Rootes would ship CKD's to Touring in Italy, without invoicing. The parts were then used by Touring to build cars, and when the cars were ready to be sold and inspected by Rootes Italy, Touring would invoice Rootes for its "added value".

Touring was in fact going through a difficult financial period caused by the general strikes in Italy in 1961 and 1962, which led to a serious drop in orders from Lancia and even more so from Alfa Romeo. But it was not until the end of 1966, long after the production of Venezia's had ceased and after Lord William Rootes had died in December 1964 and the Group had been taken over by the US Chrysler Group, that the latter decided unilaterally in 1966 to cancel the agreement with Touring, stopping the supply of parts and slowing down the payment of Touring's invoices.

As a result, Touring was unable to repay the financing for the new plant in Nova Milanese and went into receivership in 1967.

As in all stories, the fate of the two companies seems to have been closely linked.





One of the last ripples of the common fate, was the order Rootes gave Touring in early 1964 to study a Touring body on the basis of the Hillman Imp. Carlo Felice Bianchi Anderloni got into an Hillman Imp which he used in Milan, and for which he developed drawings and a first model in scale which was shipped for approval to Rootes Italia..... it was never returned to Carrozzeria Touring.