

Driving around with Walt Woron

Putting the ruggedly constructed Sunbeam Alpine through the paces . . . Driving the '54 Ford with its new ohv engine, the Packard Deluxe Clipper, the '54 Pontiac Star Chief Custom Eight

SUNBEAM ALPINE

WHEN YOU SIT DOWN to write about a car like the Sunbeam Alpine, it isn't easy, because first of all you wonder "Am I looking at this car in its true light? Am I comparing it mentally with other cars that it can't be compared with? Am I giving opinion or facts?"

Facts are what I'll try to give, but they're bound to be colored by opinions. After all, if I say the car corners good (which it does, incidentally), that's not only a fact, but it's also an opinion. So here goes.

First of all, I wouldn't make the mistake of calling the Sunbeam Alpine a sports car, and I'm glad that the builders (Sunbeam Talbot, Ltd.) don't either. I think it falls more closely into the touring car category, a type of car that's disappeared from the American scene. It has some of the advantages of both the sports car and the stock car: flat cornering, quick steering, high-speed cruising ability, comfort, excellent finish, considerable luggage space, good ride, and it can be made to seat three (tightly). On the other hand, it's not easy to steer in traffic, is awkward to shift, and is somewhat lacking in power.

To get down to details:

The curved backrests and thickly padded seats won me over. I drove the car for miles without any discomfort except for trying to find room for my left foot to rest when I wasn't using the clutch. The passenger complained of hitting his knee against the grab rail, mounted quite low on the instrument face of the dash. The armrest between the two seats can be taken out (it's held down by four screws); you can then put a pillow on the brake lever and three small people can squeeze in for short rides.

I had no trouble seeing out of the Alpine, except when I had the top up. Then there's a problem in seeing out to the right rear. Incidentally, when I had to put up the top (which is quite involved and really needs two people to make it easier) claustrophobia began to get me. It has marvelous protection from the weather when it's all buttoned up. Only complaint here is that the sliding panes in the detachable door windows (I call them that because they're more than side curtains) swell up and don't slide too freely. I'd also like to see a pushbutton door handle outside so you don't have to slide open the pane to open the door.

The Alpine isn't a car the little woman would be able to drive easily, because of its relatively hard steering until you get rolling along. Yet, you needn't worry about her getting run over in traffic; the car's small (only 14 feet long and four feet, 10 inches high) but you can see it.

Steering is fast, precise, and keeps the car on a straight line

with hardly any correction necessary. As far as cornering ability is concerned, I tried this out (among other times) by following an MG that was really pushing through some severely winding roads. I surprised him no end when he found me still on his tail after five or six miles of this. It stays flat through corners, breaking loose a little too soon (around 45 mph on asphalt or concrete).

The small (138-cubic inch) four-cylinder, ohv engine seems willing to pull the fairly heavy (2998-pound) car along, but you have to be a shift artist to get the most out of it. Performance is good once you get into high gear (3.9 to 1 ratio). Getting it there and keeping it there is something else.

The Alpine uses a four-speed box, with gearshift lever on the right side of the steering wheel. The "H" is set up opposite to normal; on top of this, when shifting from second (lower, forward position) to third (upper, aft) I really had to concentrate not to hit first (a spring to pull up the lever would solve this problem). I also skinned my knuckles a few times on the central dash knobs. You have to practice a lot, and you get to, because you have to shift a lot to take advantage of the power output (90 horsepower). The engine power, transmission gears, and car weight are matched pretty closely.

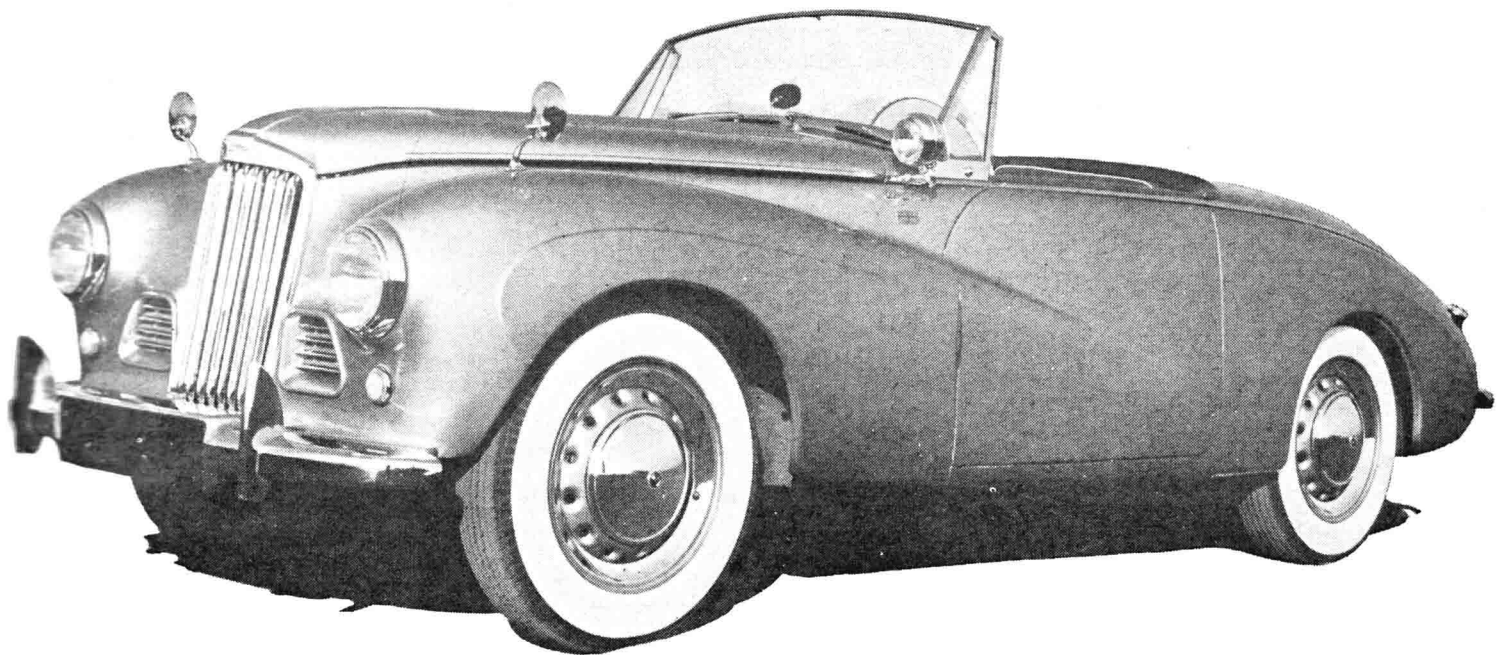
Ordinarily you don't have to start out in first, but your acceleration will suffer if you don't. To stay with most cars away from a traffic light I had to use all gears, winding it up fairly tight in low, shifting quickly into second and into third. Here it began to feel like it was moving.

The somewhat short-wheelbase (107½-inch) Alpine gives a good ride. I didn't feel it bottom once in all the time I had the car. There's only a slight amount of up-and-down movement even over the worst dips or bumps. (The double-acting hydraulic shocks are largely responsible for this. I stormed over one terrific bump where the car made a tremendous leap; it came back to earth without bounding up and down to let you know where it had just come from.)

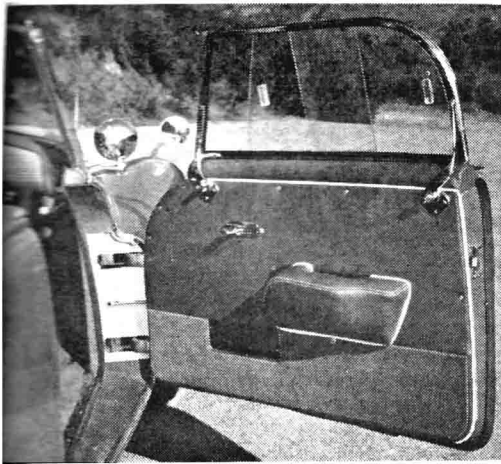
The brakes felt good and were good. The clutch and brake pedals and throttle are too close for comfort and fast action unless you really concentrate. I sometimes found myself stepping on my left foot to stop and when I corrected that I was stepping on the throttle.

The engine compartment is crowded, with the carburetor, valves, and distributor all easily accessible. The fuel pump is another story.

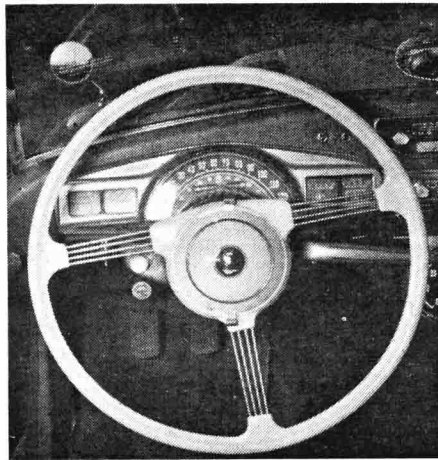
The car as a whole is ruggedly constructed and finely finished. Body panels fit well, the doors close solidly, and much quality has been built in. *(Continued on page 48)*



Sunbeam's lines present a good combination of staid, angular effects and sweeping elegance found in the sleekest foreign cars



Side windows are more than "curtains"; they're sturdy, attach firmly, have sliding panes. Door opens only with inside latch



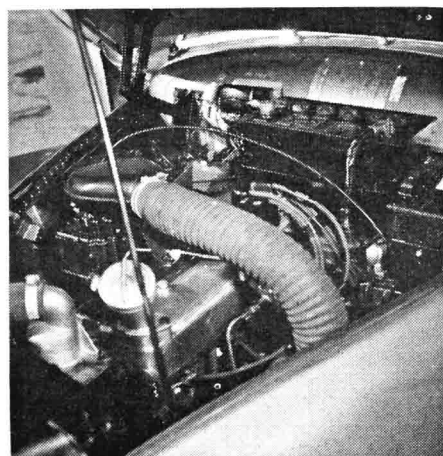
Instruments are grouped for easy reading, have British and American graduations on dials. Controls are centrally located



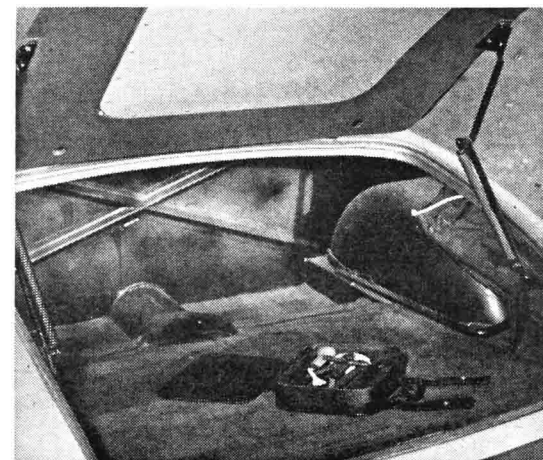
Thickly padded seats and curved backrests are a boon to long distance motoring. Center armrest can be removed for added space



Uncluttered lines, open wheel wells add to Sunbeam's appearance. Neat, trim top provides snug interior, cuts down vision

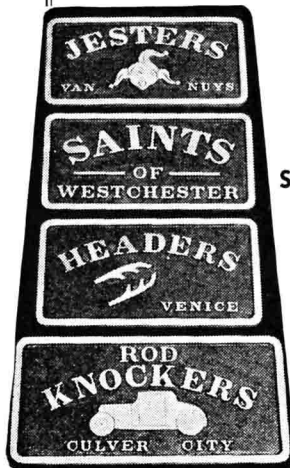


Although it appears crowded, 90-horsepower, ohv four is reasonably accessible for service. Output requires much shifting



One reason why the Sunbeam Alpine is classed as a top-notch touring car is its roomy trunk. Tire nests below trunk

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FORD

AT THE RISK of being branded pro-Ford, I'm going on record to tell you that the '54 Ford is as much better than the '53 as the '49 was better than the '48. No, I'm not talking about looks, but something of more interest—performance and handling.

At the Ford Proving Grounds a few months ago, I spent a few hours in a '54 Ford, and I confess I like this new "bomb." Around the handling course, "an asphalt snake," I kept slamming into corners harder and harder, speeding up each lap around, trying to make the car swap ends. It wasn't easy, because the second the rear wheels lost traction and began to go off in search of greener pastures, I fed it more gas, tugged at the wheel, and was on course again.

If you're lazy or just plain like the idea, you can have your car fitted with power steering. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't need it; the loads aren't high enough on the front end.

Here's why I said the '54 was a bomb: Don (MacDonald, our Detroit Ed.) tried to stay with me in a '53, and I trimmed him, but good, without really trying. It storms up to 60 mph in five or six seconds less than the '53. In high gear it leaps ahead like a greyhound. It makes less noise doing it too; that throaty growl of former V-8s is gone.

Another thing: It feels real good behind the wheel. There's lots of room and everything's easy to reach. The speedometer is great; there should be more like this one. It's mounted right up on top of the panel and you drop your eyes about like blinking to see it.

The ride's about the same as last year, which is still pretty good. The car doesn't go bounding all over the road when you come out of a dip or hit a bump. Ripples in the road don't come up through the tires and steering wheel to give you a shock treatment.

I go for the power brakes on this car. It's not set up so you can pivot your foot from the throttle to the brake, but the big thing is that you can stop the car, in case the engine dies or long after it dies, without the assist-

ance of two small boys. To test this feature I nosed the Ford up a 30 per cent grade, stopped it, pulled on the hand brake, shut off the engine. I pumped the brake several times, released the hand brake and then—with just the normal push on the foot brake—kept the car from rolling downhill. Ford chassis engineers, take a bow!

So far, this has all been about the V-8, but many of the boys at Ford are prouder of the overhead Six. I found out why when I drove it. It not only handles like the V-8 (same ball-stud front suspension) but moves, too. It doesn't leap, but is lots better than the '53, particularly at cruising speeds (60-80). If I were to choose between the two for a road car, I'd probably take the Six.

PACKARD

WITH DON MACDONALD stationed in Detroit, you readers of MT can read our impression of the new cars before we give our regular and comprehensive road tests. There'll be many times in the future when I won't be able to drive one of the cars as early as Don can. That's the reason you'll be hearing from him in this column from time to time. Like now, when he had a chance to drive the new Deluxe Clipper at the Packard Proving Grounds in Utica, Mich. Here's what he had to say:

"Since Packard is one of the two straight-eights still being made in the industry, I purposely watched for any sign that it's not in the same league as competitive V-8s. Hooked to Ultramatic, this long-stroke, high-torque engine is right in there pitching performance-wise. To extract its best, though, you have to know how to take advantage of both the converter's torque multiplication and the direct-drive feature of the Ultramatic transmission. Excellent 0-to-60 times can be had by starting in LOW and shifting to the DRIVE range at about 50 mph. Packard's passing punch will get you around that truck with room to spare if you tromp down hard enough at 30 mph in HIGH to contact the accelerator kickdown which shifts you to the



"Oh, let him have it! I'll get you another one!"

torque converter. When you reach 50 mph, let up on the accelerator ever so slightly and you automatically drop into direct drive at just about the point where torque multiplication from the converter ceases. The throttle linkage is designed so that you can move the pedal within this range and remain wide open.

"Packard uses the Bendix power brake (calling it Easamatic). The convenient pedal is not too sensitive and I was pleased to find that this version will stop the car with the engine stalled and the vacuum reserve gone. It may be a little hard for your wife to do it, but I locked the wheels at 50 mph under these conditions. This probably stems from the self-energizing Packard brake shoes. The test car was equipped with Bendix linkage-type power steering. It's relatively sensitive (4½ turns from lock to lock), but on straight-aways, you feel like you're still driving the car. The definite oversteer characteristics are derived mostly from toeing-in the rear springs and increasing the angle of the inside front wheel in a turn. I like the comfortable, chair-height seats and the four-fender visibility from the driver's position. Springing is soft and gives a comfortable ride."

PONTIAC

AND HERE'S WHAT Don had to say about the new Pontiac Star Chief, the biggest car in the Pontiac line:

"You sense the bigness of the Star Chief

when you drive it. It has a feel that can only be described as 'solid.' Its ride benefits from better weight distribution. The added overhang (nine inches) doesn't seem to affect the ride as you think it might; on the contrary, it has the effect of a pendulum, dampening out pitch even under severe conditions.

"There's no metal-to-metal contact at any point between the body and frame, while mounts are located so that the natural vibration frequency of the frame is dampened out.

"I found the car to be acceptably stable at high speeds on winding roads. Its higher-than-usual roll center keeps it level in any turn taken within posted speed limits. I like Pontiac's version of Saginaw power steering—it acts like it's not there on a straightaway and comes into its own in city traffic and parking.

"The Star Chief doesn't exactly drag its heels, but it's not the one to bet on in any race away from a stoplight. Like most in-line engines that are (or were) coupled to Hydra-Matic, the noise level is a little high during initial full-throttle acceleration. Out on the highway the engine is quietly responsive. You can cruise around laboring trucks or Sunday slowpokes with plenty of power left over for an emergency.

"Controls are as easy to reach as ever, except for the hand brake. This has redesigned linkage to make parking possible on hills without dislocating your shoulder."

—Wall Woron

Where Does Your Favorite Car Rate?

(Continued from page 17)

while the high bhp per cubic inch indicates greater overall engine efficiency.

The average braking distance in the low-price field wound up in a tie for best brakes among the Chevrolet 210, the Ford Customline V-8, and the Willys Aero Ace. Actually, there is not too much spread between the best stopping distances and those of the other cars in this price bracket.

Operating cost per mile also wound up almost the same way, with the Chevrolet 210 at 9.2 cents, the Ford V-8 and Willys at 9.3.

In its price field (\$2050 to \$2500) the Olds Super 88 far outclasses the other cars in its ability to take off from scratch and get to its top speed, which is also well above the other cars. Surprisingly, its fuel consumption is excellent also, being but 0.5 mpg behind the first-place car, the Hudson Super Wasp, with 19.7 mpg. The Olds Super 88 also winds up with the lowest operating cost per mile (10.5 cents).

Best brake stopping distances and lowest maintenance and repair figures honors go to the Buick Special.

Best acceleration and top speed in the \$2500 to \$3000 price bracket are split between the DeSoto V-8 (which gets away from the stop signal quicker) and the Buick Super (which has the most ability to accelerate at cruising speeds and the highest top speed).

Best average fuel consumption in this category (by a wide margin) goes to the Kaiser Manhattan, with 23.1 mpg. The same car also has the lowest maintenance and repair cost

figure in this hotly contested group.

The Buick Super gets another feather in its cap with the lowest operating cost per mile of 13.7 cents.

The Cadillac 62 appears to be pretty much the queen of its class with the best acceleration (from a standstill and at high cruising speeds), the highest top speed, the best average fuel consumption, and the lowest operating cost per mile. This latter figure of 8.5 cents per mile is mostly due to the fantastically low depreciation of this car. The depreciation figure is almost eight cents per mile less than the average of this class.

Best brakes in the over \$3000 class, based on average braking distances, belong to the Chrysler New Yorker, while the Packard Cavalier chalks up the lowest maintenance and repair cost.

We could go on like this endlessly, pointing up various things, but that would take a certain amount of the pleasure out of it for you. Go ahead and have your fun. Compare away!

You've probably already noticed changes in our road test tables in the January issue, when we tested the '54 Plymouth and Nash Rambler. All the '53 cars were tested alike and identical data were figured on all of them, though we added certain facts to the printed Story in Figürs during the year, and omitted others. A full story on how MT conducts its road tests will soon appear, and of course our usual tests and latest figures will come to you all year.

—The MT Research Staff

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