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Riding a Sunbeam to Paris

By Andrew R. Barron

Having driven a Seven from London to Cannes, an Elise from Houston to Boston, and using an Esprit as a daily driver for the last 10 years, I have been interested in acquiring a more sensible ride. In addition, I frequently travel back to the UK and Europe for business (and pleasure) and find it annoying and expensive to rent a car. Having a UK drivers license I thought it may be worth buying a car, keeping it in storage and using it whenever I am back on the other side of the pond. It has to be a Lotus, but what to buy?

Despite what we may all say (and do) Lotus cars are not the most practical form of transportation. However, during its years as a manufacturer Lotus has collaborated with three of the major auto makers to turn one of their mundane cars into something special. The first was with Ford in turning the humble Cortina into a racecar. Then Chrysler approached Lotus to create a winning rally car from the Sunbeam hatchback. Finally, the Vauxhall (UK wing of GM) Carlton was turned from a reps car into the fastest saloon car in the world. Each one has 4 seats and is able to cruse long distances without being cramped and carrying luggage for several weeks. So which one?

Cortinas in even OK condition are reaching silly money in the UK (actually significantly higher than an equivalent condition Elan!) while Carltons have not depreciated significantly (and their insurance is high). That leaves the Sunbeam which are available for modest costs and have good technical and parts support.

Most people in the US will not have not seen a Sunbeam Lotus since they were never sold this side of the Atlantic. In the late 70's Chrysler UK were interested in challenging the Ford Escort RS and Vauxhall Chevette HS in the World Rally Championship. They already had a suitable car in the shape of their new hatchback – the Sunbeam, named after a part of the Rootes Group that became Chrysler UK.

The Sunbeam was a 2 door, rear wheel drive hatchback that had not made a significant sales impact versus Ford's Fiesta and VW's Golf. It was a tidy shape, but nothing exciting. In fact the Sunbeam shared its bodyshell with the Plymouth Omni and Dodge Horizon (although these were both front wheel drive). Chrysler's Director of Motorsports, the dynamic Chris O'Dell, started to look for a possible high performance engine for his rally car that could be used in a homologation special for the street.

O'Dell approached Lotus to supply a rally-tuned 2L Type 907 engine from Lotus (as used in the Elite, Eclat and Esprit). It was shoehorned into a Sunbeam and was duly tested by Rally great Tony Pond who took it to second place in the 1978 Mille Pistes rally in France. On the strength of this one car O'Dell won approval from Chrysler to homologate the Chrysler Sunbeam-Lotus – 400 would have to be built before competition was allowed.

Now it transpired that this deal could not come at a better time since Lotus had recently lost a valuable customer for its engines with the failure of the Jensen Healy in 1976, and were in need of finding a replacement. Thus it was agreed that Lotus would develop and manufacture the cars (jointly with Chrysler) and they would even assign it a Lotus Type number (81). Since Chrysler required a 2.2L motor, Lotus developed a new engine (based upon the presently produced 2L type 907) which was designated the Type 911. The 911 motor is distinct from the later 2.2L Type 912 motor fitted to Esprits, Eclats, Elites and Excels, with different carburettor settings, ignition, lubrication system, main bearings, and sump. For the Sunbeam the engine was rated at 150 bhp at 5,750 rpm, while peak torque was 150 lb.ft at 4,500 rpm. In its class for rallying this gave the Sunbeam higher horsepower than its two UK built rivals: Escort RS1800 having 120 bhp and the Chevette HS having 135 bhp.

During the development of the Chrysler Sunbeam-Lotus, Chrysler of Detroit became tired of its European subsidiaries hemorrhaging cash and sold them, lock-stock and barrel, to Peugeot-Citren of France. Thus, all British Chryslers became Talbots and the name was changed to Talbot Sunbeam-Lotus.

The cars were built at Linewood in Scotland shipped to Lotus in Norfolk where Lotus set up a separate production line for the cars. In addition to fitting their engine, Lotus fitted a ZF 5 speed gearbox and strengthened the rear axle. As would be expected the suspension was also tweaked along with upgraded brakes. All the first series cars were painted black with a wide "boy racer" stripes down the sides (although a light blue version was available as a later option). The paint scheme echoed both the then current JPS sponsorship of Lotus F1 cars and the simplicity of the white/green scheme for the Lotus Cortina. The interior was standard Sunbeam, and the only Lotus badges were a pair of large emblems on the front wings within the side stripes.

As a rally car the Sunbeam-Lotus was a success, wining the world rally championship in 1981. This achievement is greater than it may first appear since the Sunbeams managed to beat the mighty factory Audi Quattro team, who had massive financial backing from sponsors Rothmans. As far as sales went the car was not as big a success. Of the expected 4,000 cars projected, only 2,298 were actually sold and the program was cancelled in 1981. However, the Sunbeam-Lotus remains an archetypal hot-hatch, and brought financial stability to Lotus and visibility to Talbot.

At the present, Sunbeam-Lotus have a minor cult following in the UK, but prices have not risen over the last few years. A good (but not concours) example can be purchased for about £3,000 (just under $6,000 with the present weak $). So armed with a computer

Riding A Sunbeam (Continued on page 5)

Photo by Andrew R. Barron

We made it! Merrie and the Sunbeam-Lotus outside the Hotel Le Meridien (Paris).

RIDING A SUNBEAM *(Cont. from page 1)*

I started to search for examples for sale. Through one of the UK cars for sale web sites I found what appeared to be a relatively clean example with a good history and recent engine work and partial restoration. The car "MUF380W" has even featured in a Club Lotus magazine article and the late Graham Arnold's book 'Lotus', part of the Sutton Photographic History of Transport Series. So it was famous – after a fashion!

After arranging for someone to check the car out and talking extensively with the owner, it was possible to determine what would be needed immediately and what was going to need work. Now, who could I get to work on the car?

While the Sunbeam was in production, a firm called Skip Brown Cars developed performance parts for the car (from handling to engine work), and although the founder passed away, his wife (Del) and son (Paul) continue to provide an extensive service (011-44-(0)1829-720492). I had arranged with one of Skip Brown's customers who run a transport service, ADTrans (011-44-(0)1926-512705) to collect the car and take it to Skip Brown for a service and general check over prior to my collection. In general had been looked after, but it was going to need some work.

Since my girlfriend, Merrie, and I had previously decided to spend Christmas in the UK, we decided that it would be fun to collect the car and drive to Paris for a few days as well. With that plan in mind I informed Del of the plan to drive almost 1000 miles in a car that had done less than 200 miles in 3 years! Del and Paul are great and were able to work out what needed for safety and what could be done in stages.

Taking the train and taxi to Skip Brown Cars (just outside Crewe in the Midlands of England) on the 21st of December, we met with Del and Paul and talked through their findings on the car. Despite what seemed like a long list Paul said, "except for a recently restored car it was better than a typical Sunbeam-Lotus they would see". With a few instructions on starting the car and a caution about the noise of the limited differential – loud banging in slow turns from the clutch plates that is the norm for many live axle race cars – we were off!

The journey back to my parents house near the south coast of England was uneventful, but provided a good chance to get used to the car on the motorway and in stop and go traffic (due to rush hour on the M25). The next days journey to Boulogne in the North of France, via ferry from Dover to Calais, was shorter and further tested the heater and space for maps etc. But it was the drive from Boulogne to Paris along the A16 that really gave me a chance to assess the car's potential.

Unlike a typical Lotus, driving the Sunbeam puts you on a similar eye level with other drivers. You sit high up with excellent visibility due to large windows and narrow pillars. Despite the high ride, there is no more roll in the corners than a modern hot-hatch.

One area we found that sets the Sunbeam apart from any other Lotus is interior space. Irrespective of the four seats and large boot (trunk), the interior has large door pockets (in which 3 bottles of Coke or water fit in each) and several glove compartments/trays for money, maps, sun glasses etc. The glove compartment is even big enough for a woman's large purse and more besides! Eat your heart out Elise owners!

Unfortunately we found that the radio didn't work, but the engine noise was music enough. The car is not loud although with the windows down the performance exhaust (a Skip Brown after-market product) made itself known. Windows up the most intrusive noise came from wind at the B-pillars and road noise through the rather chunky tires. I think the use of a more modern (softer compound) tire will solve this latter problem.

While the weather in UK had been cold and sunny, the trip to Paris produced everything from sun, to rain to high cross winds. Irrespective, the Sunbeam cruised along without missing a beat. The engine had been dyno'd at Skip Brown to be 151 bhp at 5,000 rpm and for a car weighing just over 2100 lbs, the performance is there on demand. It is actually difficult to keep to UK's 70 mph speed limit in 5th gear, the car just wants to go faster. I found myself constantly slowing down. The 130 kph (about 81 mph) speed limit on much of Frances highways is much easier to maintain. In fact on overtaking a series of trucks I reached 100 mph without any effort – the car clearly has more. On the highway overtaking does not require gear changes since the torque is sufficient to pull the car past almost anything we encountered, including a couple of brand new 5-series BMWs.

We had made a major error in our timing in the trip to Paris. We arrived in rush hour! Now having been used to London driving (very fast, close but courteous, except for tourists), having lived in Boston (bad, fast and rude), and living in Houston (very bad, no signals, and drafting like NASCAR), you would think I would be prepared… but no! Paris driving is not for the faint of heart. It is like racing amongst a group of novice drivers who you are not sure of their ability, and who think they are driving a demolition derby. The secret was to just go, and not worry if they were going to hit you or lent on the horn! Now this would be fine, except in rush hour its even worse. In stop and go traffic lane changes are made with a frequency that remind you of a school kid desperate for the bathroom hopping from one foot to the other seeking relief while waiting for the teacher's permission to go!

Over 2 hours to go about 10 miles is a potential disaster for many old Lotus, but the car didn't overheat, although the temperature did get close to the red zone. Once we were off the Paris ring road, we started to follow the directions provided by the Hotel. A blind dyslexic would have given better map directions. Like one of those instruction manuals translated from Chinese into English, there was something lost in translation. When road A is supposed to "turn into" road B, it actually means you are supposed to turn left at a junction it doesn't mention! So we got lost. Now the traditional approach for any male is to drive in circles using four letter Anglo Saxon words at any approach. Well I tried that. Then decided once we had gone past the same roundabout twice to find a map or get directions. Stopping at a bus stop (Parisian bus stops all have street maps) I was looking at the map, when the owner of a restaurant nearby offered directions to (a) the hotel and (b) a source of 'benzene' (French for petrol or gas) which we were running desperately low. Getting back in the car, it would not start and attempts to crank it over resulted in the battery getting weaker and weaker. The restaurateur and his friend pushed us to a parking space where with soothing words from Merrie, we waited until the carbs had cleared themselves and we could start again. First stop was the gas station, then back to that often visited roundabout to ask directions in a bar. Success, the barman actually knew where we were going- well actually he had a city map and found it for me. With much hand waving and poor French (me, not the barman), I got the idea. Finally, hours later than we expected we arrived at the hotel – parked the car and headed for the bar!

After an all-to-brief few days walking around Paris, just sufficient to counteract the excessive eating and drinking, we prepared to head back to England on Christmas eve. Paris' signs caught us out once more and we started along a nice but busy highway for about 30 miles, before I realized I had driven this route before on the vintage Monte Carlo Rally, and it was heading South not North! With a quick turn around and a high-speed dash back to Calais we made the ferry.

The car certainly attracted much attention during the journey. Many guys my own age remember these cars when new and gave the traditional 'thumbs up'. While the immigration man in Dover commented on the classic status and the unsubtle throaty roar of the exhaust. The black and silver paint scheme is not as unsubtle as modern cars but it is definitely distinctive.

Arriving in England during a heavy rainstorm on a cold night tested the handling of the Sunbeam. The addition of a limited slip differential was seen as a necessity even when the cars were new. The short wheelbase (7'11") and narrow track (4' 3") resulted in a tendency to have snap oversteer. I had already found that the car understeers at medium speed corners but was neutral at higher speeds. In order to limit the noise of the limited slip, I found that kicking the backend out around corners resulted in a comfortable drive. It is not quite so docile in the wet. However, only once did the car show signs of stepping out, and that was around a sharp roundabout, at a higher than necessary speed in the rain. In general the car inspires more confidence than it was given credit for by the motor press when the car was new. It certainly will be interesting to autocross the car at some point. Despite unassisted and therefore heavy steering, the Sunbeam-Lotus is a fun car to drive.

After 960 miles I have fallen in love with the handling, the power and the overall ease of driving the Sunbeam-Lotus. So what is next? Well the car is in storage near Gatwick airport at present, and as you read this I will have already gone back to England at the end of January for a business trip for which I will make further use of this interesting piece of Lotus history. Eventually I may bring the car to the US, but until then, no more will I have to suffer modern shit-boxes (sorry – rental cars) but for a relatively low cost I can have my own transport that is fun to drive, distinctive, and importantly a true Lotus.