

ALPINE HISTORY

Alpine was a French manufacturer of racing and sports cars which used rear mounted Renault engines.

Jean Redele, the founder of Alpine, was originally a Dieppe garage proprietor who began to achieve considerable competition success in one of the few French cars produced just after World War 2. The proper pronunciation is closer to "al-peen".

Using Renault 4CVs, he gained class wins in a number of major events, including the Mille Miglia and Coupe des Alpes. As his experience with the little 4CV built up, he incorporated many modifications, including for example, special 5 speed gear boxes replacing the original 3 speed unit. To provide a lighter car he built a number of special versions with lightweight aluminium bodies: he drove in these at Le Mans and Sebring with some success in the early 50s.

Encouraged by the development of these cars and consequent customer demand, he founded the Societe Anonyme des Automobiles Alpine in 1954. The firm was named Alpine after his Coupe des Alpes successes but in those days, La Manche was very wide! Alpine did not realise that over in England the previous year, Sunbeam had introduced a sports coupe derived from the Sunbeam Talbot and called the Sunbeam Alpine. This naming problem was to cause problems for Alpine throughout its history!

In 1955, he worked with the Chappe brothers to be amongst the pioneers of auto glass fibre construction and produced a small coupe, based on 4CV mechanicals and called the A106. It used the platform chassis of the original Renault 4CV. The A106 achieved a number of successes through the 1950s and was joined by a low and stylish cabriolet. Styling for this car was contracted to the Italian designer Michelotti. Under the glassfibre body was a very stiff chassis based on a central tubular backbone which was to be the hallmark of all Alpines built. Alpine then took the Michelotti cabriolet design and developed a 2+2 closed coupe (or 'berlinette') body for it: this became the A108, built between 1958 and 1963

By now the car's mechanicals were beginning to show their age. Alpine were already working closely with Renault and when the Renault R8 saloon was introduced in 1962, Alpine redeveloped their

chassis and made a number of minor body changes to allow the use of R8 mechanicals.

This new car was the A110 Berlinette Tour de France, named after a successful run with the A108 in the 1962 event. Starting with a 956cc engine of 51bhp, the same chassis and body developed with relatively minor changes over the years to the stage where, by 1974, the little car was handling 1800cc engines developing 180bhp+: with a competition weight for the car of around (620Kg), performance was very high!

Alpine achieved increasing success in rallying and by 1968, had been allocated the whole Renault competition budget. The close collaboration allowed Alpines to be sold and maintained in France by normal Renault dealerships. Real top level success started in 1968 with outright wins in the Coupe des Alpes and other international events. By this time the competition cars were fitted with 1440cc engines derived from the Renault R8 Gordini. Competition successes became numerous, helped since Alpine were the first company fully to exploit the competition parts homologation rules.

In 1971 Alpine achieved a 123 win in the Monte Carlo rally using cars with engines derived from the Renault R16. In 1973, they repeated the 123 Monte Carlo result and went on to win the World Rally championship outright, beating Porsche, Lancia and Ford. During all of this time, production of the A110 increased and manufacturing deals were struck for A110s and A108s with factories in a number of other countries including Spain, Mexico, Brazil and Bulgaria.

1973 brought the international petrol crisis, which had profound effects on many specialist car manufacturers worldwide. From a total Alpine production of 1421 in 1972, the numbers of cars sold dropped to 957 in 1974 and the company was bailed out via a takeover by Renault. Sadly for Alpine, their problems had been compounded by the need for them to develop a replacement for the A110 and launch the car just when European petrol prices leapt through the roof.

Through the 1970s Alpine continued to campaign the A110 and later, the A310 replacement car. However, to compete with Alpine's success, other manufacturers developed increasingly special cars, notably the Lancia Stratos which was based closely on the A110's

size and rear engined concept, though incorporating a Ferrari engine. Alpine's own cars, still based on the 1962 design and using a surprising number of production parts, became increasingly uncompetitive. In 1974 Alpine built a series of factory racing Renault 17 Gordini's (one driven by Jean Luc Therier) that won the Press on Regardless Rally - World Rally Championship Round in Michigan USA.

In fact, having achieved the rally championship, and with Renault money now fully behind them, Alpine had set their sights on a new target. The next aim was to win at Le Mans. Renault had also taken over the Gordini tuning firm and merged the two to form Renault Sport. A number of increasingly successful sports racing cars appeared, culminating in the 1978 Le Mans win with the Alpine A442B. This was fitted with a turbo charged engine: Alpine had been the first company to run in and win an international rally with a turbo car as far back as 1972 when Jean Luc Therier took a specially modified A110 to victory on the Criterium des Cevennes.

Alpine Renault continued to develop their range of models all through the 1980s. The A310 was the next modern interpretation of the A110. The Alpine A310 was a sports car with a rear-mounted engine and was initially powered by a four cylinder 1.6 L sourced Renault 17 TS/Gordini engine. In 1976 the A310 was restyled by Robert Opron and fitted with the more powerful and newly-developed V6 PRV engine. The 2.6 L motor was modified by Alpine with a four-speed manual gearbox. Later they would use a Five-speed manual gearbox and with the group 4 model get a higher tune with more cubic capacity and 3 twin barrel webbers carburetors.

After the A310 Alpine transformed into the new GTA range produced from plastic and polyester components, commencing with normally aspirated PRV V6 engines. In 1985 the V6 Turbo was introduced to complete the range. This car was faster and more powerful than the normally aspirated version. In 1986 polyester parts were cut for the first time by robot using a high pressure (3500 bar) water jet, 0.15mm in diameter at three times the speed of sound! In the same year the American specification V6 Turbo was developed.

In 1987 fitment of anti-pollution systems allowed the V6 Turbo to be distributed to Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.

1989 saw the launch of the limited edition GTA 'Mille Miles' to celebrate the 35th anniversary of Alpine. Production was limited to 100 cars, all fitted with ABS braking, polished wheels, special leather interior and paintwork. This version was not available in RHD.

1990 saw the launch of the special edition wide bodied GTA 'Le Mans'. The car wore polyester wheel arch extensions with a one piece front. Wheels were 3 piece BBS style, 16" front & 17" rear. Otherwise identical mechanically to the V6 Turbo, the engine was fitted with a catalytic converter and power was reduced to 185BHP. This model was available in the UK and RHD versions carried a numbered plaque on the dashboard. The Le Mans is the most collectable and valuable GTA derivative. Also 21 USA spec GTA's were produced in 1987 for the American market. These were available from Renault dealers in the UK and the country's motoring press are belatedly recognising the GTA series as the 'great unsung supercar of the 1980s'

The Alpine A610 was launched in 1991, it was re-styled inside and out but was still recognisable as a GTA derivative. The chassis structure was extensively reworked but the central box principal remained the same. The front was completely re-designed The interior was also greatly improved. Air-conditioning and power steering were fitted as standard. The total production run for A610s derivatives was 818 vehicles 67 RHD and 751 LHD. After production of the A610 ended, the Alpine factory in Dieppe produced the Renaultsport Spider and a new era was to begin.

Sadly the last Alpine, the A610, rolled off the Dieppe line late in 1994, Renault abandoning the Alpine name. This was always a problem in the UK market. Alpines could not be sold in the UK under their own name because Sunbeam owned the trade mark (because of the mid 50's Sunbeam Alpine Mk I). In the 1970s, for example Dieppe were building modified Renault R5s for the world wide market. The rest of the world knew them as R5 Alpines but in the UK they had to be renamed to R5 Gordini!. Strangely enough with the numerous company takeovers that have occurred, it is another French company, PSA (Peugot/Talbot/Citroen) who then used to own the 'Alpine' trademark.

Fortunately, the Alpine factory in Dieppe continues to expand: in the

1980s they built the special R5 Turbo cars, following the rear engine formula they have always used. They built all Clio Williams', Espaces, and RenaultSport Spider. The factory proudly put its Alpine badges on the built early batches of the mid engine Clio series one Clio V6. The Clio Series 2 was also assembled there with more recent RenaultSport Clio 172 and RenaultSport Clio 182's.

Today the Dieppe factory is known as the producer of RenaultSport models that are sold worldwide, recently Renault gained control of the "Alpine" brand name and may be reactivated for a new sports car to be made in either 2007 or 2008. Some of the Renault Sport models produced in Dieppe are currently the Renault Sport Mégane 225, Renault Sport Clio 197 and the new Mégane Renault Sport dCi is to be built on Renault's Dieppe assembly line. All the Renault Sport Track, Tarmac and Gravel Racing Meganes, Clios are also made in the Dieppe Factory.

In France there is a large network of Alpine enthusiasts clubs: clubs exist in many other countries including the UK, USA, Australia, Japan.