

# The Rootes Group Story

## Introduction

When William Rootes first opened a small cycle shop in Kent 100 years ago, few could have guessed that a great British motor industry legend was in the making.

In the years that followed, his small business grew into an empire that was to make the Rootes name famous throughout the World. Yet today, apart from the cars, which brought Rootes, such fame and fortune, few clues to the early days of the company remain. It is still therefore somewhat fitting that the only reminder should be in Kent, where the business first started. Rootes Maidstone is still a flourishing motor dealership, selling Peugeot cars.

## The Beginning

William Rootes went into the motorcar business in 1898 and soon found that selling them could be highly profitable. His business prospered, and by the time he moved to larger premises in Maidstone in 1914, he had a chain of agencies selling some of the great names of the time: P.N. Metallurgique, Morris, Briton, Ford, Italia, Delaunay, Belleville and Wolseley. In addition there were agencies for Singer, Darracq, Humber and Sunbeam, all of which were to eventually become members of the Rootes Group.

## **Billy and Reggie create the biggest motor retailer.**

After the First World War, the day to day running of this expanding enterprise passed to the founder's two sons. Billy, a dashing energetic charismatic young man was a total contrast to the younger son, Reggie Rootes, an accountant by profession with a more sober approach to life. But the business combination was outstanding, and by the mid 'twenties Rootes had become Britain's biggest motor retailer. It was in 1929 that they first became involved in coach building, acquiring the firm of Thrupp and Maberly, who were to become the oldest company ever purchased by Rootes. Started by Joseph Thrupp, an experienced coachbuilder in 1760, the firm merged with another coach building enterprise started by George Maberly. The resulting partnership of Thrupp and Maberly then proceeded to absorb many of Britain's best known coach building companies, utilizing the skilled labour and, at the same time reducing the opposition. Thrupp and Maberly had become coachbuilders for Humber, Daimler and Rolls Royce by the Time Rootes acquired them in 1925.

The record for all three companies, now one big combine, was enough to attract the Rootes Brothers. One of the Humber designers of the time was Alec Issigonis, later to design the Mini. Golden Arrow, the world record-breaking car designed by Captain J. S. Irving, who designed the Sunbeam record breakers. In 1926 the Rootes Brothers moved their business headquarters to Devonshire House in London's select Piccadilly, setting up their operation opposite the Ritz.

## **Rootes become car manufacturers**

Rootes were now looking for an opportunity to move into car manufacture and in 1927, with the backing of the Prudential Assurance Company, formed Rootes Securities. A year later they made a successful bid for Humber-Hillman.

Another engineer who had worked for Humber but left to start his own company was W. O. Bentley. Hillman had also started the career of one particularly brilliant engineer, Raymond Mays, who was one of their apprentices in 1920 but whose name was later to become synonymous with E.R. A. and B. R. M.

When Humber had completed their takeovers they faced a serious cash-flow problem and were in desperate need of a backer to help them through the crisis. Billy and Reggie Rootes were only too happy to oblige.

So was born Rootes the Motor Manufacturer, with Billy as Chairman and Reggie as Managing Director of the group. It was a strange beginning for the brothers who ploughed heavy investment into two new models only to have the first, the Hillman Wizard, flop disastrously. Fortunately, the Hillman Minx, Launched in 1931, together with the Aero Minx and new Commer range of the following year, were an outstanding success.

Billy Rootes was engrossed in the whole field of motor manufacture and had personally volunteered to help test the prototype Hillman Minx over thousands of miles in Europe and North Africa.

## **Rootes 1939 War Effort**

Before the outbreak of war, Rootes was to expand its empire still further, taking the names of Sunbeam, Clement-Talbot and Karrier into its fold. Their time was to come, but for Rootes the contribution to the war effort was just beginning. They became the first British company to join the "Shadow Factory Scheme" and by the time the sirens sounded they were already turning out planes and fighting vehicles for the services. Rootes put their entire group at the disposal of the Government and Billy Rootes was appointed Chairman of the Shadow Factory Group, heading the supply council of the Ministry of Supply. Reggie kept the supply lines at Rootes flowing smoothly and played a prominent part in the supply of aero engines and aircraft production.

During these frantic war years, Rootes produced one out of every seven bombers mad in the UK, 60% of the armoured cars, 30% of the scout cars and built 50,000 aero engines, as well as assembling 20,000 vehicles imported from other countries.

Billy Rootes became Sir William Rootes in 1942, in recognition of his services towards the war effort. He had been amongst those charged with putting Coventry back on its feet in 1940, after the Luftwaffe's single most intensive bombing raid of the war. In the space of a few hours the German bombers had dropped nearly 35,000 incendiary devices, 14,000 high explosive bombs and countless land mines.

## **Post War World wide expansion**

The transition from war to peace was a difficult one for Rootes, but the brothers found the secret of harnessing their enormous and efficient workforce to the task of motor manufacture. They set up marketing companies and plants throughout the world. The first was already producing cars and trucks in Australia only a year after the war ended. Output from the factories climbed sharply, exports rose dramatically and everyone enjoyed the period of expansion.

There were some losses of course, including Humber cycles, which Rootes decided to allow Raleigh to make under licence and subsequently purchase the patents. Rootes completed another link with their starting point in Maidstone when they purchased the firm of Tilling-Stevens in 1951. The brothers, by this time Lord Rootes of Ramslade and Sir Reginald Rootes, had been looking for a company experienced in diesel engine development to assist with the fast expanding truck business. Rootes started the construction of a new truck plant at Dunstable and had it in full production two years after its opening.

It was also during this period that a new name joined the Rootes Group, Singer, the company where the first Lord Rootes had once been an apprentice. Not only was Rootes entering a period when it had an invincible record for the quality of its products but was also the start of the great sporting triumphs which were to stamp the name of Sunbeam firmly onto the motorsport scene. Initially the Sunbeam Talbot 90s and progressively the Sunbeam Mark IIIs, Alpines, Rapiers and finally the powerful V8 engined Sunbeam Tigers were to score a long string of successes in international competition.

### **Rootes Record Breakers**

In the hands of top drivers such as Stirling Moss, Sheila van Damm and Peter Harper, Sunbeam cars broke record after record and took home almost every trophy in existence. In the ten years from 1951 to 1961 Sunbeam had no fewer than twelve team or class wins in the Monte Carlo Rally alone, and a list of wins on other major international events, which is almost too long to relate. Other drivers for Sunbeam in rallies and saloon car events included Mike Hawthorne, Peter Collins, Jack Brabham, Chris Amon and the two Rodriques brothers. The team raced at Le Mans and Sebring and only officially disbanded in 1969.

### **The Scottish Hillman Imp**

On the production front, 1960 had heralded a major decision by Rootes who were eager to manufacture a small car. It was to become the Hillman Imp and the talented team of engineers who designed it produced a sophisticated, innovative and technically advanced challenger to meet the growing demand for small cars. A new plant to produce the car was built in Scotland and in 1963 both plant and car were launched. It was the first car to be produced in Scotland for more than 30 years and the first British production car to have a rear mounted aluminium engine.

## **Economic Decline of Rootes**

But in Europe the motoring scene was changing and the competition was increasing. Rootes faced a new situation where the top quality of its cars was no longer enough to guarantee increased sales. The company needed to create a new range of products and rebuild its position. With time and money Rootes could succeed but there wasn't much of either left. The machinery required would cost an enormous sum and already sales and profits were falling.

The Chrysler Corporation had faced similar problems a few years before and had fought its way back to profitability by ruthless efficiency. It was becoming obvious to Chrysler that motorcar production was spilling over national boundaries and when they went looking for overseas investment opportunities they found Rootes looking for financial aid.

So it was that Chrysler, the world's third largest vehicle producer, acquired a minority interest in Rootes in 1964. Within three years Chrysler had a majority holding and the company became Chrysler United Kingdom.

For the Rootes brothers, involvement in the dream they turned into a reality was all but over. Only the famous names like Hillman were to provide a reminder of the famous days. Chrysler used the Hillman brand names for their successful Hunter and Avenger cars, and other names like Sunbeam were to become famous again under Chrysler.

## **The French Connection**

The company was later to pull out of Britain and what remained of the former Rootes and subsequent Chrysler was taken over by P.S.A., the French Car giant controlling both Peugeot and Citroen.

The company, now the Peugeot Motor Company Limited in the U.K., is writing anew chapter of history for the organization, which was originally founded by the Rootes brothers. Even the company name, Talbot, is a reminder of those earlier days.

Back in Maidstone, where it all began, Rootes Maidstone lives on as a Peugeot dealer and part of the new Anglo-French operation. Rootes Maidstone is keeping not just a business, but also a tradition going. That tradition, which started back in that small cycle shop, is now 100 years old.

## **Derek Warner (Rootes)**

*The text in this article has been left unaltered from when it was first discovered some 10 years ago. The paragraph headings and photographs have been added. The building in Maidstone is now occupied by Robins and Day and remains a Peugeot franchise.*