Seven Heaven – The 60th National Austin Seven Rally at Beaulieu

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Austin Sevens and Big Sevens galore, plus their enthusiastic owners, descend on the New Forest… Kim Henson reports.

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Over the weekend of 1st and 2nd July, The Pre-War Austin Seven Club held their 60th National Austin Seven Rally at the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu.

The event, supported by Motoreasy and RH Classic Insurance, continues to be the world's longest-running rally of a single make, single model car at the same venue!

For 57 years it was arranged by the 750 Motor Club, with this organisation's Austin Seven activities then being passed on to the Pre-War Austin 7 Club, after amicable and constructive discussions between the two clubs.

Each year the event incorporates special themes, celebrating different types of Austin Seven and for 2023 there were two – Big Sevens, plus Commercial and Military 7s.

On the Saturday (1st July) a visit to Exbury Gardens in the New Forest had been arranged, and a lunchtime arrangement of 60 Sevens in a '60' formation was filmed from the air using a drone:



Photograph copyright Beaulieu Enterprises Ltd.

A scenic route through the Forest to Beaulieu followed the Exbury Gardens visit.

The Sunday (2nd July) was the main ‘static display’ day, with Sevens and their owners in their droves lining up on the display fields of Beaulieu.

For many (most!) the camaraderie of the Austin Seven community is a highlight of the event, coupled with the opportunity to drive in a Seven to an event celebrating one of the most famous and much-loved British car models of all time.

The story began in 1922 with the ‘big car in miniature’ approach adopted by Herbert Austin when developing the Seven, which arrived in 1922. The model saved the Austin company and enabled many families to get their first taste of motoring. Some 101 years later the car is still loved, enjoyed and revered!



Two of the earliest Austin Seven models; the grey example in the foreground is a 1925 C Type Tourer.

In addition to the vehicle line-up, incorporating many different types of Seven from the Chummy models of the 1920s to the Ruby and Big Seven variants of the late 1930s, there was an Austin Seven Gymkhana, organised by Mike Griffiths and Penny Chew, and, notably, the largest Austin Seven Autojumble anywhere. I noted all manner of Austin Seven components, new and used, and including wood framework for body shells, bodywork panels, engines, chassis frames, you name it!

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If you are thinking of buying an Austin Seven, it is worth noting that even 80+ years after the last example was built, spares are readily available at reasonable prices, to keep these

diminutive automotive marvels on the road and enjoyed.

One of the highlights of Sunday's activities was the cutting, at 1pm, of a wonderful 60th Anniversary cake, carried out in a special ceremony.

This year a total of approximately 200 Austin Sevens took part in the event, including 15 Big Sevens.

Rally Organiser Ian Nelson said that he was pleased with this great turnout, and was enthusiastic in welcoming the Big Sevens and their owners.

The Austin Big Seven, 1937 to 1939



A two door 'Forlite' in the foreground, with a four door 'Sixlite' (my own car) next to it.

In case you are wondering, the ‘Big Seven’ was the last incarnation of the Seven, introduced in 1937 and produced for only two years before the Austin Eight arrived, just before World War II dictated events. By contrast with the ‘Ruby’ Seven, also built until the late 1930s, the Big Seven was larger, featuring a longer wheelbase and improved leg room for rear seat occupants. It also had a bigger engine (900c, developing 25 bhp – Austin termed it ‘Potted power’, compared with the ‘normal’ Seven’s 747cc unit) and was fitted with ‘easy clean’ pressed steel wheels, by contrast with the wire wheels used on the Ruby.

Another distinguishing feature of all Big Sevens was the rear bodywork, which incorporated a spare wheel compartment built into the body, and covered by a flat lid that sat flush with the surrounding panelwork. By contrast, the Ruby models featured a spare wheel mounted externally on the rear bodywork, with a separate steel cover.

The Big Seven was produced in two door (‘Forlite’) and four door (‘Sixlite’) versions, in each case the number of ‘lites’ referring to the total number of side windows on the car. Interestingly the Forlite version inherited the dashboard style of the contemporary Ruby, with comparatively small instruments, whereas the Sixlite was endowed with larger instruments, more like those of the larger Austins of the late 1930s.

Production of both the Seven Ruby and Big Seven models (as well as the earlier Sevens) took place at Austin’s Longbridge factory, Birmingham.

In 1939 the freshly styled and mechanically amended Austin Eight was introduced, replacing the Big Seven. (However, very few civilian Eights were sold before World War II intervened, from September 1939).



Some of the 15 Big Sevens in attendance.

Austin Seven Commercials



The commercial versions of the Austin Seven were always practical and economical to run, and these days are seen as ‘desirable’ for their good looks too.



In their time most examples had a hard life in everyday operation, so comparatively few survive and it was terrific to see some fine examples on display at Beaulieu.



An attractive 1937 Seven van, based on the Ruby.

Enjoying this year's Rally…

I attended this year with my own 1938 Big Seven 'Sixlight' four door saloon, that I have owned for 45 years now, and it was great to have my car included in the line-up of 15 Big Sevens in attendance; a great turnout.

My wife and I enjoyed looking at the other Big Sevens in the display, and meeting some of their owners.

It was marvellous that Robin Taylor and his wife Diane were at the Rally. Robin has been running the Big Seven Register, helping fellow Big Seven owners with comprehensive technical advice and parts, as well as producing an excellent newsletter, for more than 40

years and is taking a well-earned rest from this job, at the end of this year. It was very fitting that Robin received a special award at the Rally for all his hard work, also that his own Big Seven won the prize for the best Big Seven. Well done Robin.



Robin and Diane Taylor in their 1939 Big Seven, after winning First Prize in the Big Seven Class. Robin was also given a special award for helping Big Seven owners for more than 40 years.

It was also good to meet Norman Clare, who operates the Facebook group for Austin Big Seven owners. Norman's enthusiasm and helpfulness is much appreciated by Big Seven owners at home and abroad.

From the Big Sevens my wife and I moved on to the 'Austin jumble' stalls, finding a few small items for my Big Seven and marvelling at the range of parts on offer for Sevens of all

types.

There was then time to spend a couple of hours meandering among the wide variety of Sevens on show, from early 1920s ‘Chummy’ models, through the saloons and sports models of the late 1920s/early 30s, and including the fascinating ‘specials’. We spent some time too admiring the Ruby models on display, noting the distinguishing features (notably revised window frame shapes – less angular on the last models) of the early and late versions.



An early Ruby on the left of this shot, with a later example on the right.



One of my favourite cars of this show – a 1938 Ruby Mark 2, that had completed an ‘end to end’ run of Britain in 1972 and was then garaged for 48 years. It’s now back on the road, having been brought out of hibernation. Just a wonderful true story.

We also enjoyed looking at the large numbers of ‘soft top’ Sevens in attendance. One of my personal favourites has always been the four seater ‘Pearl Cabriolet’, such a practical classic car and very appealing with its full length opening roof.

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A particularly striking version of the Seven has always been the Swallow saloon, developed

by William Lyons (later Sir William), of the Swallow Sidecar Company. The example below was one of two saloons (as well as a Swallow two seater) that graced the Beaulieu display this year…



Here are some more of the cars on show at this year's Rally…



Driven from Peking to Paris in 2007; 8,000 miles, 45 mpg, no breakdowns!



As with all the cars at the Beaulieu Rally, this 1935 Pearl Cabriolet , originally from Northern Ireland, has a fascinating history. Owner Gordon Puzey attended his first Austin Seven Rally at Beaulieu in 1963!



This shot shows contrasts in Austin Sevens at the Rally, including typical closed saloons like JB 777 and wind-in-the hair ‘specials’!



Some of the prize-winning cars at the Beaulieu Rally.

VERDICT

A lovely, happy, laid-back event celebrating all that is good about the Austin Sevens (and their owners). These small but big-hearted cars still make a great deal of sense as relatively affordable, easy and fun to own and maintain classic vehicles.

From my perspective it was also great to see so many Big Sevens at the show, and indeed, with my own much-loved example, to be involved in a small way.

Next year:

Next year's event will take place on 30th June 2024, and the special theme will be 'Long-Distance Austin Sevens'.

