



# THE FISHERMAN'S TALE

Dubbed the Fisherman's Coupé, this unique Alvis TF21 was a bespoke build for a keen angler. We take it down to the river again and trace the car's chequered past

Words RUSS SMITH Photography JONATHAN JACOB



Alvis TF21 Fisherman's Coupé



Our resident angler Russ needed little excuse to get into gear



For the TF, the straight-six received revised cam profiles and an extra carb



Most of a fisherman's inventory is easily swallowed by this TF21's more accessible boot; longer rods are accommodated by a split-fold rear seat

Alvis had become something of an anachronism by the mid-Sixties. With an upright grille, pontoon wings and an overhead-valve engine from 1950, they were out of place in a fast-paced world of Minis and E-types. Alvis's final roll of the dice, the TF21, saw just 106 built before it ceased making cars altogether in 1967. But it had no trouble finding 106 buyers willing to pay a healthy sum to keep one foot in a past that spoke of the importance of tradition and quality.

For one man, Edward Farr, chairman of an Essex estate agents, even that wasn't enough. He had bespoke requirements that led to the creation of the unique Alvis TF21 we're taking for a spin today.

For many, fishing is more than merely a hobby or pastime. It becomes an affliction that eats into your very being. It shapes how you see the world - and any piece of water you might pass by. Many have fallen under its spell, from pre-Raphaelite artist Sir John Millais to former England goalkeeper David Seaman. I have also been afflicted since boyhood, so completely understand why a successful businessman might make the purchase of an already expensive car even more so by commissioning modifications to suit his tackle and travel needs.

They are fairly subtle changes though, at least to the casual glance. Surely no one but an Alvis stalwart would notice that the bootlid has been extended all the way down to the number plate surround. That makes the opening around four-and-a-half inches lower, all the better for swinging in a heavily laden fishing creel. The triangular red Alvis badge was left off, as was the chrome centre strip that usually adorns the bootlid.

All other changes are inside the car, the key one being split-fold rear seats to allow rods to be safely stowed. Sources at the Alvis Owner Club confirm that this is the only 3.0-litre car to be fitted with them. The front seats are Reutter recliners, a popular option for Jaguars of the era. There's also a unique 'one-shot' long lever to operate the driver's door window, though the passenger still has to wind a handle in the traditional manner. Finally, the woodrim steering wheel is the same as one Farr saw on an Aston Martin at the 1965 Motor Show and preferred to Alvis's

slightly more traditional offering. All of the modifications were carried out by coachbuilder Radford, which Alvis used for special-order work like fitting Webasto sunroofs.

Our man certainly knew what he wanted and wasn't afraid to pay for the privilege. So what did he end up with? To be honest I'm sold from the moment I slide into the recently refurbished driver's seat. Like being a child sitting on the lap of a grandparent and feeling the strong bones beneath the yielding flesh, initially you sink in but there's underlying firmness and support. You feel safe, cuddled, even, and could stay here forever. Or at least as long as it takes to get to wherever your next fishing adventure has been planned.

I feel bound to make comparisons with the early Alvis TD21 that I enjoyed immensely on a road test four years ago. That left a lasting impression, though the car wasn't without its shortcomings, which I listed at the time. It quickly becomes clear that others had noticed them too, back in the day. In the seven years between that car and this TF21, Alvis had addressed every one.

Most obvious from the off is how adding 35bhp to the TD's 115 has transformed the car's character from wafter to charger. The engine is freer and higher-revving too, which all contributes to the effect.

A key remark on the TD was that driving it was akin to a spa day lowering my heart rate; the TF quickens it. This car wants to play, and though it will still happily drift along at the 60mph that was its predecessor's happy place, it will now readily do the same at 80mph, should you wish, holding that pace as easily as it gets there.

Some of that longer-leggedness is down to the extra gear provided by the ZF five-speed gearbox that appeared in the very last of the TDs. Then again, the TF's power is so much more flexible that it would be almost as good with the old four-speed and taller final gearing. As it is, I quickly find the car is quite unflappable if I jump the odd gear, from second to fourth, or third to fifth. In fact that's preferable in a way because the smart little gear lever is far from light and requires assertive use.

As does that novel 'one-shot' window lever. Give it a good shove and the glass drops like a guillotine, and can be raised just as quickly. Farr was obviously no man for wasting precious moments at car park and toll barriers that would be better spent casting his line from a riverbank.

'A TD21 lowers the heart rate; the TF quickens it. This car wants to play'





Unique interior appointments include the dash-mounted flying salmon motif, Aston-sourced steering wheel and the 'one-shot' driver's side window lever

However, by far the greatest transformation from TD to TF is felt through the rim of that Aston Martin steering wheel. The early car's biggest fault was its steering. Heavy at low speeds, slow to respond at any pace, and prone to wander a bit on straight roads. Thankfully Alvis offered ZF power steering as an option on the TE then fitted it to all TFs. The result is a completely different driving experience. Smooth, quick to respond and perfectly weighted, it brings the essential driving element of poise, and makes this a car that feels a lot more modern than it looks.

This is nice enough in the general run of A-roads, but on taking to minor routes over the North Yorkshire moors, with growing confidence in the car's abilities, it takes things to another level, enthusiastically diving into bends and clipping apexes without ever feeling unsettled, and having the thrust to pounce out of each bend and onto the next. I was not expecting this. Now I'm appreciating the Alvis's excellent slim-pillared, low-waisted glasshouse as more than just a great way to see the scenery; it also helps you to carve your way through it at an almost unseemly pace.

With all this dashing about it's good to also report that the brakes have been upgraded to suit. The TD's all-drum set-up was not on its list of greatest assets, but now there are discs at each corner. They cannot be judged by modern standards, but for a mid-Sixties car they are perfectly adequate. By which I mean better in feel and retardation than those of a Jaguar from the same era.

I've sufficiently sung the praises of the seats, but the rest of the cabin also makes this a first-class place to travel in, well thought out and finely crafted. Instruments that were previously housed in the centre of the dash are now grouped in a binnacle ahead of the driver, which brings a more sporty Sixties vibe to the cabin. It successfully breaks up what might otherwise be a sideboard slab of deeply lacquered walnut. Not that I'm knocking what is a constant reminder of the car's quality, with its new-era feel enhanced by a push-button Radiomobile in the centre of the dash. But the speaker grille below it hasn't kept pace with progress and looks more suitable for the sounds of Kenny Ball and his Jazzmen than Sergeant Pepper. I love the smoked Perspex sun visors too.

This is a car of character, and it rightly seems to have been enjoyed by several characters too, creating a joyfully chequered life.

Being based in the heart of Essex, I'm assuming the first owner Edward Farr was what would have been termed a 'generalist' angler, happy to pursue anything with fins rather than just the more exalted game fish. There may be a leaping salmon mascot adorning the rolled top of the dashboard, but that may have been down to limited choice; I doubt any silversmith would have bothered crafting the image of a sulking chub. It would have been many centuries earlier that salmon ceased to run up the River Chelmer, if indeed they ever did. I'm even more convinced that - given the car he chose - Farr talked the language of quality fishing tackle. Names

Early morning trout fanciers will be rewarded with keen handling on the empty A-roads they'll encounter



Olde worlde grille masks a modern-feeling powerplant



**'OWNING THE ALVIS TF21 FISHERMAN'S COUPÉ**



David Salter owned the Fisherman's Coupé for two years, selling it only recently to make way for a unique Armstrong Siddeley he'd been offered. He's also chairman of the Alvis Owner Club and says, 'There is also an Alvis TF21 Drophead in my garage, which I've owned for 16 years. I did spend a little on the Fisherman's Coupé, though much work had been done by Classic and Sportscar Centre before I bought it from there. My work was limited to having the rear bumper rechromed and the seats and steering wheel restored. It does make a great touring car.'

'Once you get a TF21 in decent condition they are easy cars to own. You should probably allow around £1500-£2000 a year to run one. Parts availability is very good and there are a good number of specialists like Red Triangle, which know the cars inside out.'

'With only 100 regular TF21s built, plus six others bodied by Graber, the trick is finding one, though they do benefit from a 90% survival rate. Build numbers were split 80/20 in favour of coupés, and roughly half the cars had automatic gearboxes, so the Fisherman's Coupés preferred five-speed manual gearbox is a definite plus point.'



'This is one of those rare cars that I cannot find fault with. Perfect transport for the man who has nothing left to prove'



Deeper bootlid gives a clue that this Alvis was tailored for special use; good overtaking power was standard on TF21s

like Hardy, B James, Allcock and JW Young would have graced the hand-crafted items carefully stowed in the extended boot area; rods and reels built to last a lifetime. A bit like an Alvis, in fact.

Farr kept the Fisherman's Coupé for three years, clocking up 30,000 miles and, I hope, a fair number of memorable catches. The car was then sold, via Broughtons of Cheltenham, to John Davies of South Wales. He kept the car for 17 years, at some point re-registering with LPO 1, a number plate that later turned up on a truck belonging to the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

By 1986 the Alvis had acquired its current plate, PBY 75D, and now with 78,000 miles on the clock was ready for another owner. This was the Highlands GP and vintage car enthusiast Dr John Forbes-Proctor, a thirsty character by all accounts, renowned for his kilt-wearing. He was dubbed 'Dr Dram' by the national newspapers following a scandal where he was both reported to the General Medical Council for attending patients while under the influence of drink, then banned from driving for a year after being pulled over in his vintage Bentley while leaving a car rally and found to be more than twice the drink-drive limit. Forbes-Proctor was forced to quit; marriage break-up swiftly followed and, unable to escape the scandal, he abandoned the Alvis and fled to Australia.

By that time in quite poor condition mechanically, the Alvis was bought from Forbes-Proctor's wife - still with a doctor's bag in the boot - by garage owner Jim Shepherd of Montrose in July 1991 who set about bringing it back to life. The Doctor was seemingly not one for sparing the horses because the engine had dropped a valve, a rear spring

had broken, and a new clutch was needed. After ten more years the Coupé passed to Bob Clark who did a little more revitalising work before two years later selling it to Alvis Club member Robin Johnston of Inverurie who would keep it for the next 16 years. During that time he continued to improve the car, racking up bills totalling a hefty £45,000 with Red Triangle but reaping the benefit by adding another 35,000 miles.

It then passed to the club chairman, David Salter, who was kind enough to set me loose in the car while it was being offered on commission by Classic and Sportscar Centre in Malton, North Yorkshire. His work on the car is detailed in the boxout, the finishing touches that have resulted in a car that needs nothing more than driving and servicing, at least for now.

And for me the driving is what this car is all about. Preferably to places where I could cast a line, because that original custom spec does make it perfect for that purpose - enjoyable trips to the usually remote venues that we anglers dream about. Exclusive estate lakes that harbour legendary carp; powerful rivers with even more powerful barbel; and maybe even back to Scotland in pursuit of wild salmon... and perhaps a wee dram.

This is one of those rare cars that I cannot find fault with. Perfect transport for the man who has nothing left to prove. It was most telling during my time with the car that four different people stopped and said something along the lines of, 'That's lovely. What is it?' If I'd been in a position to, I'd have made an offer on this car. It's that good. I hope the new owner appreciates that. Even more so, I hope they are an angler. Maybe they'll even invite me on a fishing trip.

#### 1966 Alvis TF21

**Engine** 2993cc in-line six-cylinder, ohv, three SU HD6 carburettors **Power and torque** 150bhp @ 4750rpm; 182lb ft @ 3750rpm **Transmission** Five-speed ZF manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** ZF recirculating ball, power-assisted **Suspension** Front: independent by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar; Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs and telescopic dampers **Brakes** Servo discs front and rear **Weight** 1554kg (3426lb) **Performance** Top speed: 120mph; 0-60mph: 12.5sec **Fuel consumption** 18mpg **Cost new** £3281 (plus mods) **Asking price** £55,000