

A Family Connection

By Andre Loubser



GSM Dart



Sunbeam Alpine

The history of the GSM Dart and Flamingo has been covered several times during the past 60 years by several journalists and car magazines, in particular the definitive history by Sandy Brunette in his book *Dart The Real GSM Story*.

There is, however, a fairly-unknown 'family connection'.

History tells us that as students at Stellenbosch University, Bob van Niekerk and Willie Meissner shared a dream of building their own sports car as they were not all that impressed by British cars on the market and rather presumptuously felt they could do better. Their first stumbling block, however, was a dearth of craftsmen in Cape Town

who could shape and build aluminium bodies (whereas they were two a penny in the UK and Italy).

After completing his apprenticeship as a mechanic, Willie was uncertain about a future direction and consequently his mother funded a trip to the UK where hopefully 'his engineering talents might be recognised'. In England, Willie found the solution to the car body problem - a new material called 'fibreglass'.

After qualifying as a mechanical engineer, Bob van Niekerk joined an engineering works in Cape Town, but, intrigued by Willie's discovery, resigned from his job, sold his car, boarded the Arundel Castle and headed for the UK where

he met up with Willie. The pair then rented a basement flat in London's Earls Court.

Another player in this story is Verster de Witt (born on December 5, 1927, in the Orange Free State). After matriculating and as a gifted artist he moved to Cape Town where he studied fine art under Maurice van Essche. He soon realised there was no money in fine art and joined Metal Box as a commercial artist. In Cape Town he met Willie when they both took part in rallies.

At the same time, Verster married Joan Peters, a concert pianist. Shortly after their marriage Joan received a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Music in London. Verster accompanied his new wife to London where they rented a flat in Earls Court close to that of their two compatriots. Verster hot-footed it to Rootes in Coventry where he immediately landed a job as designer and stylist, where, among his first projects was the Sunbeam Alpine. Naturally, he spent every weekend in London with his young wife.

There they were visited by Willie, who had previously met Joan in South Africa, and Willie told Verster about his sports car dream. Even though Willie had a few thousand pounds available from his family, Verster understood the high cost involved in designing and developing a car and had scant faith in the project. However, he relented and agreed to provide initial sketches from which Bob and Willie could make a quarter-scale model from modelling clay.

As an aside, that first winter in London was freezing and the gas heater in the flat consumed shillings at an alarming rate. To overcome the problem they made a shilling mould, poured in water and froze it. Luckily the ice 'shilling' was heavy enough to trip the meter's mechanism and, although naughty, this was a prime example of "boer maak 'n plan"!

Bob and Willie worked on either side of the model which of course created two different shapes. Each

weekend Verster would visit them and rant about 'non-complementary and inharmonious lines'. It must be borne in mind that Bob and Willie were mechanical engineers and by their own admission not stylists. Eventually after 13 models had been built Verster took charge and created the final shape of the Dart.

The next phase was to fabricate a full-scale plug from which production moulds could be made. For this purpose a garage was rented in Glenelden Mews in Streatham and Verster produced full-scale drawings. Hardboard sections were cut out to create what's commonly called an eggcrate structure. The plug was covered with layers of plaster of Paris that required hours of shaping and sanding to create a smooth surface from which perfect production moulds could be pulled.

In the meantime, Willie had developed an aversion to freezing British winters and returned to South Africa to establish a company to produce 'their car' leaving Bob behind to complete the moulds. Finally, Bob boarded the Cape Town Castle on April 4, 1957, and the moulds followed shortly after on the Arundel Castle as 'personal luggage'. The rest, as they say, is history.

After much deliberation the company name Glassport Motors (Pty) Ltd was incorporated and shortened to GSM. After some 20 names were considered for the new car the name Dart was chosen as it was concise, short and described the shape of car. However, when production was set up in West Malling, Kent, in 1960 the name Dart could not be used as Daimler had secured it for its SP250 sports car. Consequently the name Delta was chosen.

Thanks to Verster de Witt's being the common denominator between the designs of GSM Dart and the Sunbeam Alpine it could be said that there was a symbiotic relationship between the cars. The tail fins prove the point. 