

# Swiss Rolls

It's clichéd but it's true: Graber's bespoke special-bodied 3-litre Alvises were the exquisitely-crafted aristocrats of Swiss coachbuilding. Jon Pressnell examines nine of the 126 made

**H**ermann Graber was the man who kept Alvis alive as a car manufacturer from the mid-'50s onwards. For a hardly-prolific coachbuilder in Switzerland to be held responsible for saving one of Britain's most respected marques might seem far-fetched, but the Bern craftsman and Swiss importer/distributor for Alvis was the right man at the right time, with the right product.

That product was a sports saloon based on an Alvis TC21/100 chassis and first shown at the 1955 Paris *salon* as the latest in a line of Graber bodies on the Alvis chassis. At the time Alvis had ground to a halt as a motor manufacturer: with its previous bodybuilder, Mulliner of Birmingham, taken over by Standard, it had quietly stopped making cars the previous year, while pondering the next move. For a while this looked like being an all-new V8-powered saloon designed by Alec Issigonis and having Pressed Steel coachwork. But by June 1955 this had been abandoned as being unviable – both in terms of Alvis's finances and in relation to the volumes sought by Pressed Steel before accepting a contract to build the body.

Seeing Graber's simple, low-slung and elegant two-door saloon at Paris – complete with miniature Alvis-style grille – presented the company's management with a solution. They bought rights to the design, and a set of body jigs, and enlisted a Loughborough builder of coaches, Willowbrook, to manufacture the car as the TC108G – with chassis built up by the Alvis service department.

This small-scale operation resulted in only 16 – some say 17 – vehicles, sold at a high £3500; however, it planted the seeds of the Alvis car's survival into the late '60s, for it led in 1958 to the introduction of a revised model, to be produced at the Park Ward works in London.

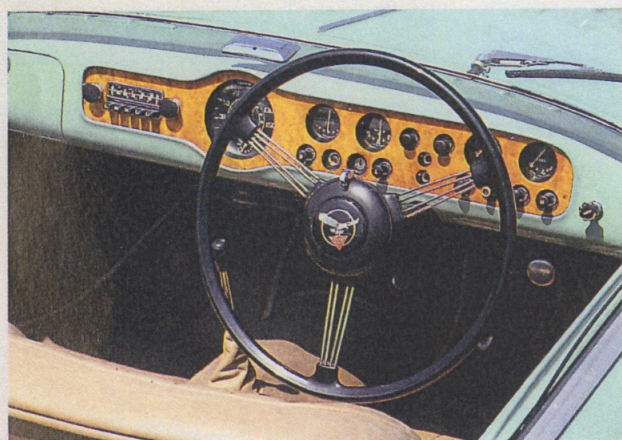
An impressive 1459 of this retouched Graber design were made between 1958 and 1967, as the TD, the TE, and the TF. Meanwhile, though, Hermann Graber continued to make his own bespoke Alvises, in small numbers, mainly for











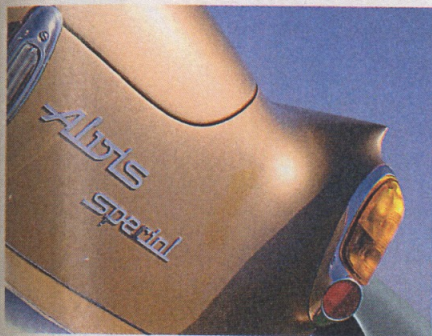
**Above: differing tails on two TC108Gs; note Rolls lamps and handle strake on cabrio. Left: TC21 cabrio dash is as TA21 coupé's. Right: 'Panoramic', with new-for-1959 bonnet scoop**



**Below: 1959 TD21 displays tighter glasshouse and slender fins. Right: dash is of TD21 cabrio, anticipates that of the Park Ward TF**





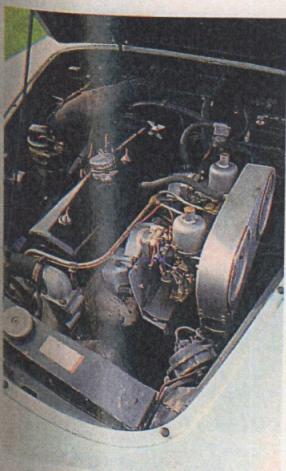


**Above: TC21/100 'Special' cabrio has some clues to later cars in its lines. Right: map pockets (here on 'Panoramic') are Graber constant**



**Above: 'Panoramic' displays fins and Rolls-Royce lamps, which disappeared in 1961/62**

**Right: TA21 coupé of 1953 was preceded by three TA14s and three TA21 dropheads by Graber. Below: engine is of TD**



wealthy Swiss, and with no two cars identical.

In their handcrafted detail these Graber-built Alvises are a fascinating tribute to the talent of their creator, but are virtually unknown in the UK. It was thus a major coup when the combined forces of Graber registrar John Fox and Swiss specialist Christoph Grohe succeeded in bringing together no fewer than nine examples at last year's Alvis Owner Club International Alvis Weekend.

Here they all are, from the 1953 Geneva *salon* coupé which established the style through to one of the last Graber-built TFs: admire the steady evolution of a style, and the beguiling attention to detail, of some of Europe's last coachbuilt grand tourers.

### 1953 TA21 coupé

### 1954 TC21/100 'Special' cabriolet

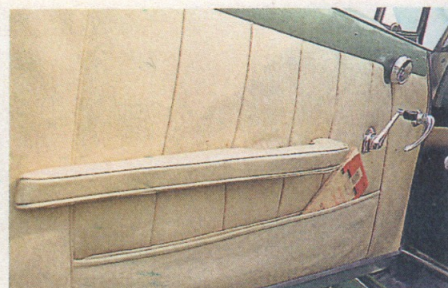
Graber bodied nine TA21s, and before that three TA14s. Nick Simpson's gold car is the only TA21 bodied as a coupé rather than a cabriolet, and is the 1953 Geneva *salon* car. In common with all but one of the nine, it retains the upright Alvis radiator; the odd car out was given an egg-crate grille on the lines of that fitted to the TC21/100 'Special' cabrio shown, which belongs to Mark Hargreaves. Nick's coupé clearly shows the starting point for the TC108G style: the next stage was a lighter design shown in 1954 and featuring a cross-hatched rectangular grille and a three-piece wraparound rear screen, this 'Graber Special' being followed in 1955 by a sleek two/three-seater 'Graber Super Cabriolet'. Interior details on Nick's TA21 which remain constant through to the very last Graber Alvises include painted door cappings with coachlining, vertical fluting to the door trims, winding handles for the quarterlights, and fan-like ruched seat-back pockets. Mark's cabrio, one of eight built on the TC21/100 chassis, shares the coupé's detailing, including the veneer instrument panel set into the metal dash, but in place of the closed car's spacious four-seater configuration the cabrio offers two occasional rear seats. These can be removed, converting the back into a generous luggage platform hidden by a rigid tonneau.

### 1955 TC108G coupé

### 1955 TC108G cabriolet

John Fox's coupé is one of two built specifically for Alvis - out of 15 TC108G coupés and nine TC108G cabrios made by Graber. It differs only in detail from the Willowbrook cars, notably in its use of separate round rear indicators and TC100 rear lamps rather than Rover P4 combination units. Inside, the back seat is more sculpted, and the dash - in the same style as in the cabrio - is in metal rather than the glass-fibre used by Willowbrook. Christoph Grohe's cabrio started out as a coupé, but in common with at least two other closed TC108Gs was converted to an open car by Graber. Noteworthy details are the Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud rear lamps used by Graber until around 1962, the rectangular auxiliary lamps, and the regular Alvis grille. This last item wasn't a constant on Graber's 108Gs, some examples having either a different style of vertical-bar grille or a finely criss-crossed unit; on some cars the fog/spots were recessed into cooling grilles, too. The chrome strake forming part of the boot-handle fitting anticipates the use of this device on Park Ward cars; unlike these, however, there is no



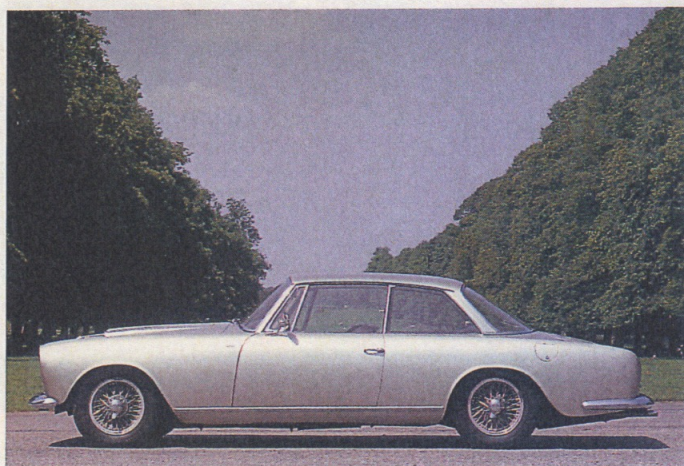


**Above: vertical flutes, painted cappings are typical Graber. Right: hood on 'Panoramic' superbly crafted**



**TD21 'Special' (above, foreground) shares front with TE21 'Super' behind, but tail and cabin treatments differ**

**Left: TC108G has pre-binnacle style of dash. Right: TF has Italian feel; round horizontal tail lamps used**



vertical swage on the rear wing – although some Graber 108Gs had either this styling feature or an angled chrome strip in the same place. In 1957 the coupé style was revised by Graber, the reverse-rake C-post and panoramic rear window giving way to a more restrained and tighter-drawn glasshouse.

### 1959 TD21 'Special' coupé 1964 TE21 'Super' coupé

John Fox's TD21 displays the tighter glasshouse introduced on Graber's coupés in 1959 – a move which gave the cars a leaner look but made them more two-plus-twins than four-seaters. John's car is apparently unique, though, in that it combines this glasshouse and the 1959-introduced fins with the broader and lower style of radiator publically premiered two years later at the '61 Geneva *salon*. The side vents and the bonnet scoop were not invariably fitted during this period – it depended on the owner's preferences. In contrast, Bert Kramer's 1964 car has a more rounded roofline with a more generous rear to the glasshouse; it also has triple round rear lights and an absence of fins, features which started coming through in 1961 or thereabouts. The grille is as on John's TD, and in common with the 11 other TEs bodied by Graber the headlamps are of the stacked Mercedes type. Alvis and Graber experts argue endlessly over what constitutes a 'Super' and what constitutes a 'Special', so let's not get drawn into that one.

### 1959 TD21 'Super' Panoramic

One of 51 TD21s bodied by Graber (including two four-door saloons), this Geneva show-car is one of four or five built with this special type of drophead bodywork. The lined top incorporates an electrically-operated vertical rear window, and folds beneath a metal tonneau; there are winding side windows. The plush interior has a TF-style instrument binnacle in front of the driver, and is one of perhaps only two Graber-built Alvises with full-width wood trim for the dash – complemented by equally unusual wood door-cappings; the fit of the wood is exquisitely precise. This was a fertile time for Graber, in design terms, and the 'Panoramic' displays two features new in 1959: small rear fins and a pronounced bonnet scoop. The side air vents were first seen in 1957.

### 1962 TD21 Series II 'Special' cabrio

Owned by Raoul Roth of Basel, this cabrio shares with the 'Panoramic' Graber's upright type of grille – whereas the 'Super' tended to have the lower and broader grille. The heavily-rimmed stacked front lamps were an intermediate phase on the way to the 1963 introduction of stacked Mercedes-style units behind a common glass. The rear fins have gone by now; in 1960/61, however, they were still present, in conjunction with the same frontal treatment as on Raoul's car. Frontal treatment aside, the cabrio is much as a Park Ward car, but lacks the rear wing swage of the British-

built Alvises. As on all Graber-constructed cars, the panel fit and the fit of chrome trim is extremely fine, items being hand fabricated to fit exactly, without leading, filler, or the use of rubber gaskets. One consequence is low wind noise, thanks to the precise fit of the panels and the windows.

### 1966 TF 'Super Sports' coupé

The last style of special Graber coachwork for the Alvis was introduced in 1964, on the TE chassis – in which guise the cars retained under-cover Mercedes-like headlamps rather than the recessed heavily-bezelled single lamps seen here. Alan Stote's car is one of only six TFs to carry this new type of body – and each of the cars is unique in its detailing. Separate bucket rear seats are a feature, while externally the cars use two horizontally-set round rear lamps either side – Austin A40/A50/A90 units. **CLASSIC**

*Grateful thanks to John Fox and Christoph Grobe for their help with this feature. Christoph Grobe is a dealer specialising in cars with Swiss coachwork and more particularly in Graber-bodied Alvises. He speaks English, French and German, and can be contacted at Vers-chez-Vincent, CH-1182 Gilly, Switzerland, or by phoning 010-41 21.824.23.74 or faxing 010-41 21.824.23.75. John Fox is on 0673 862347, while details of the Alvis Owner Club are available from Charles Mackonochie, on 0892 832118.*