

Half of Baileys, please.

Harvey-Bailey Engineering have developed a suspension kit for the 156 which is being marketed through EB Spares. The Editor drives the test car.

Rhoddy Harvey-Bailey has developed suspension kits for various Alfa Romeos over the years, notably the 105 series cars, the GTV6 and the 75; in fact H-B Engineering can cater for most Alfas on demand and I know of at least one Montreal so equipped. Working in conjunction with EB Spares Rhoddy has now developed a kit for the 156.

The kit has been designed to provide good handling allied to excellent road behaviour, bearing in mind that the 156 is predominantly owned by the family man. Unfortunately the trouble with most lowered kits is that in attempting to reduce the amount of roll on turn-in and through corners, the ride becomes too hard for many tastes. Therefore the 156 kit has been deliberately designed to improve control and traction whilst at the same time providing a more settled ride.

In developing the kit EB Spares were able to provide H-B Engineering with various new springs and dampers from stock for comparison while club member Jim Talbott supplied his 156 as the test car. A considerable amount of time was spent in the development stage but as a result H-B Engineering have come up with some specially valved Bilsteins which can be fitted to all 156 models, except versions of the Sportwagon fitted with self-levelling suspension.

The standard 156 has what is sometimes referred to as 'tractor ride height' – in other words you can see the large gap between the wheel and the under-wing. So, working with the German spring manufacturer Eibach at their Leicester plant, Rhoddy has designed a set of springs (painted blue) which lower the ride height of the standard car by 15mm, somewhat like an original sports pack but without the harsher ride generated by the latter.

The kit is available in two stages, meaning an owner can try the dampers, then, if desired, can purchase the springs at a later date as and when finances permit. Jim's car, which is a 'sports pack' 156, has been fitted with the Bilstein dampers but not, as yet, the Eibach springs, hence the title of this review.

The opportunity to try the car for myself came at Beaulieu, the day before Spring Alfa Day and the deluge. I will admit that I was a little sceptical as to how much improvement a change of dampers would make without changing the springs, as the two elements – springs and dampers – will interact with each other. Would 'half of Baileys' fail to quench the thirst for improved ride and handling?

Thinking about it a little more I realised that Jim's 'half' was a generous one as the sports pack kit was already providing the lowered ride height. So what impressions did I form? Straight away you are aware of improved steering precision; 'light and tight' might be an apt description. There is a definite improvement in the turn-in and this is apparent even at quite low speeds. Pushing on through the twisty bits, to the point where the 'standard car' begins to roll outwards at the front, Jim's H-B kitted 156 stays much flatter and retains traction.

During my test drive I managed to find a tightening left-right-left-right sequence which I attacked several times in both Jim's car and my own 'non sport pack' 156. It was bit like driving around a succession of strung out cones and my own car soon struggled to cope with the rapid series of weight transferences. It was hard to keep it all neat and



Jim Talbott's 'sport pack' 156 was used as the test car for the specially valved Bilsteins. (Photo: Chris Savill.)

tidy as the front end started to pitch and roll from side to side. At the same speed in the H-B kitted car I was able to hold the chosen line as the car maintained its grip and rolled far less. Be assured you won't have to do the 'silly stuff' to be convinced, just try tackling a roundabout or two in your normal fashion and you will spot the difference.

One of the problems with the 156 is that the chassis seems unable to cope with a rapid sequence of surface imperfections. Basically the springs are too hard and the car is under damped at anything above slow speeds. Consequently the car hops about in an unsettled manner and is soon out of sync with the road frequency. The 'sports pack' cars are worse than the standard car in this regard and the amount of heave and hop with the GTA can be quite disconcerting. The H-B kit has been designed to address this problem and I found that just the dampers made a sizeable difference. With all 156s you are aware of a pattering going on underneath you and the suspension seems out of breath as it attempts to catch up with the next surface imperfection. Again, I found a stretch of road designed to bring out the worst and believe me the Bilstein dampers considerably reduced this effect giving you a more controlled, level ride.

My guess is that EB's barman will be serving a lot of Baileys and if you've tried a half, your next round will be a pint! *Chris Savill*



The full kit of Eibach springs and Bilstein dampers which are being marketed through EB Spares. (Photo: Kevin Abigail.)