

2014 Morgan 3 Wheeler review

Flaws or character? The two-year-old Morgan 3 Wheeler has been revised to take into account customer feedback

The Morgan 3 Wheeler has been updated to improve its steering response, refinement and rigidity Photo: ANDREW FOX

By Andrew English

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While the **Morgan** family squabbles over who controls the iconic car maker founded in 1909 by HFS Morgan, the company's 180 employees are keeping their heads down and continuing to build and develop the cars. None more so than Morgan's most popular model, the 3 Wheeler.

Two years old, with 1,000 delivered, the Morgan 3 Wheeler has been the bomb. Amid all the feuding, it's worth recalling that while bigger car makers abandoned plans to build their own 21st-century tricycles, it was Morgan that had the gumption – and the authentic history – to get on and build the 3 Wheeler.

However, there have been complaints about the design and the reliability of this swiftly developed machine. Bump steer (a tugging at the steering wheel when the front wheels travel up and down) has been reported. There have been a tiny number of cases where cracks have appeared in the four-beam front chassis, while in extremely severe conditions Morgan's own test vehicle has experienced overheating problems. What's more, the bonnet is fiendishly difficult to fit, the driveline bevel boxes can be noisy and the Harley-Davidson-style mechanical torque compensator in the bellhousing squeaks like a trapped budgie.

Was the vehicle put on the market too quickly? Insiders say yes, and Steve Morris, Morgan's managing director, tacitly acknowledges the point. "We were really a victim of our own success in that we went from zero to 600 orders in a matter of a few months," he says, "and then had that pressure from dealers and customers saying, 'I want it.' Do you succumb to that pressure? Sometimes you do."

Morgan's 3 Wheeler is based on Pete Larsen's Liberty Ace trike, which in 2008 we were the first press to test drive and subsequently advised Morgan on its suitability as a base for the 3 Wheeler.

Just as Larsen intended with the Ace, the 3 Wheeler's layout is much like the original Twenties Morgans, with a tubular steel spaceframe using independent front suspension, with a large-capacity V-twin engine across the body. Morgan selected an S&S unit after Harley-Davidson mysteriously pulled out. The S&S X-Wedge is a two-valve, fuel-injected, dry-sump engine, with 56.25 degrees between the cylinders for cooling purposes. It displaces 1,982cc and punches out almost 80bhp and 100lb ft of torque, with peak revs at 5,200rpm.

The drive runs out of the back of the engine into a bespoke driveshaft damper, a diaphragm clutch and a five-speed manual transmission from the Mazda MX-5 sports car. It then turns through 90 degrees into a toothed belt drive to the back wheel, which is suspended on a trailing arm.

Over the top sits an all-aluminium body styled by Matt Humphries. It's more bulbous and bug-like than the original Morgans, but the cockpit is spacious enough for two adults and the pedal box is adjustable. Humphries's details are gorgeous, from the centre dashboard with a covered starter button (the bomb release for a Eurofighter), to saddle-leather panels, hinge restraints and comfy leather seats. The detachable 14in steering wheel allows easier access, and there's a lengthy list of extras, including bespoke paint and trim, to make your Morgan more special.

New for 2014 is a steering modification to get the track rod ends flatter in a bid to at least partly cure the bump steer (it costs £198 as an aftermarket part). A fan that sits between the cylinders to assist with cooling the backs of the heads is £150.

The Quaife rear bevel box is isolated from the chassis (with a torque arm) to reduce noise, and costs £474. Only available on cars from this year (so far) is a strengthening A-frame, welded into the top two chassis members behind the engine, while that horrible chirping driveline compensator has been replaced with a clever reworked cushion drive from Centa Transmissions of West Yorkshire. There are also revisions to the exhaust and heat shield mountings, and a new range of paint and trim finishes including low-consumption heated seats at £217.

While these modifications should address most of the complaints, there's also a new focus on quality – and not just that of the vehicles.

“We are looking at the quality of all the cars we currently make,” says Morris. “Every part of that quality, from the parts and build, to the communications, how we deal with spare parts, even how we raise an invoice. I've now got nominated people in every part of the business to look after the dealers and their queries, for example.”

In November Morgan had its first-ever worldwide dealer conference. From this month we understand that customers are being invited to the factory to discuss their experience with management. There's even a new 30-month, 30,000-mile warranty – it's not exactly Kia's seven years, but it's a start.

Stair-rodging rain, a chill that creeps under your collar and blinding spray greeted me as I drove out of the Malvern factory just a few days before Christmas. Yet in spite of the weather, it's pretty hard not to smile when you're driving a 3 Wheeler.

The engine is in a soft state of tune, yet the gentle exhaust note belies the quite serious grunt that's available. The V-twin is rubber-mounted, as are the exhausts, so you see a lot of movement, but the cabin and controls are stock still. On the move, however, the outgoing car would be humming, whirring and ringing along at low speeds. With the new isolated bevel box and driveline damper, it's now mercifully quiet.

You still need 1,800rpm on the dial to prevent the driveline snatching (the 3 Wheeler redefines throttle control) and the belt drive still moans like the wind in the pipes, but it's better by a factor of 100 per cent.

The ride quality always was remarkable, but on some cars the steering twitched and writhed a bit over bumps. Mark Reeves, Morgan's engineering chief, explains that the earliest cars were fitted with Suplex dampers, which didn't have the angled track rod ends, but a replacement damper rode a bit higher, which gave an excitable reaction at the wheel. That's (virtually) all gone now, with the steering wheel less twitchy, and providing a more accurate picture of what's going on at the road surface rather than the peculiarities of the wishbone suspension geometry. It's also more controllable on the limit, although to be fair the outgoing machine wasn't bad in that respect.

These are not dramatic changes. They don't alter the absolute brilliance of the 3 Wheeler, or its sheer laugh-at-the-moon fun, but they make it a slightly better and more robust machine. It's how Morgan survives (as it will) the current civil war and how it treats its dealers and customers that will be the acid test of the current management.

A good start might be offering the steering and cooling upgrades as a free service upgrade for existing owners but, either way, let's hope that 2014 proves a better year for Morgan, its dealers and its drivers.

THE FACTS

Morgan 3 Wheeler

Engine/transmission: 1,982cc V-twin petrol, five-speed manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive by toothed belt

Price/on sale: From £31,140/now for delivery in spring

Power/torque: 80bhp @ 4,500rpm/100lb ft @ 3,250rpm

Top speed: About 125mph

Acceleration: 0-60mph in about 6.5sec

Fuel economy: About 35mpg

CO2 emissions: N/A

VED band: N/A

Verdict: Just as madcap as the first 1,000 3 Wheelers, but now an altogether better, more refined and robust machine

Telegraph rating: Five out of five stars

Pictures: ANDREW FOX

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