

SOMETHING BORROWED... by Marcus Rowe

There can't be many 80-year-olds who, on their diamond wedding anniversary, decide after the tea, cakes and family photograph albums have been cleared away, that they really rather fancy a spin in a 1934 Morgan three-wheeler. Without a second thought, my grandmother put on her hat, clambered nimbly into the doorless cockpit of the diminutive car and lowered herself into the passenger seat. I squeezed into the cosy space between the steering wheel and the seat, a small portion of the bottom of the steering wheel having been removed by the designers to facilitate entry.

A tweak of the hand throttle, retard the ignition, decompression lever held in the left hand, starter button pushed with the right hand. With the engine now spinning, and hoping I remembered to turn on the fuel tap before I climbed in, I release the decompression lever and a raucous cacophony erupts from the vee-twin JAP. The twin exhausts fire a volley of crackles and bangs backwards, until I manage to arrange the multiple levers on the steering wheel to induce the engine to idle at a more sedentary pace and reduce the exhaust note to a warm burble.

Moments later we are away, skimming along inches from the tarmac, the wind buffeting my face, unprotected by the minuscule windscreen. This assault on the senses invokes a feeling of speed quite unlike anything else, and fortunately it received the nod of grandparental approval.

Roundabouts can be particularly alarming if a change of gear is necessary: a double de-clutch requiring the left hand finding the relevant gear (not in the usual places), while the right wrestles the heavy steering and simultaneously operates the hand throttle which, because it is mounted off-centre on the steering wheel, is never exactly where you left it.

A few months later, having become slightly more adept at the dark art of starting and driving this wonderful machine, I had an entry in the VSCC's Autumn Rally in Cheshire. And why not drive the 115 miles from Oxfordshire to the start, rather than the less troublesome task of loading the three-wheeler onto a trailer and humming up the motorway? I personally can't think of a more romantic way to spend a Friday evening with your partner than to snuggle down into the tiny passenger compartment of the Morgan, hand them an oversized road atlas and tell them to direct you northwards on England's unlit rural A-roads with the roar of two almost un-silenced exhausts hammering through your eardrums.

Of course, within minutes darkness had descended and the Morgan's headlamps put up a noble fight, jousting against the laser-like lances of the oncoming traffic. Until suddenly even more darkness descended as the headlamps died and a quick dive into a side street was required. My long-limbed, unyogalike physique was tested by the positions needed to access the light-switch wiring behind the

Marcus Rowe campaigning his borrowed Morgan on the recent VSCC Autumn Rally (Mike Griffin)



dashboard, while simultaneously avoiding the nearby uninsulated hot exhaust pipe.

The next morning, a few miles from our destination, a sudden desire to list to port indicated a flat tyre and, I thought, game over. Fortunately the RAC took me and the offending wheel to a nearby workshop (Demon Tweaks in Wrexham) to have a new inner tube fitted and we were on the road again.

We joined the rally halfway through the morning's route, having shoehorned ourselves back into the cockpit, along with a large and ungainly Ordnance Survey map. Lack of space for speed-tables meant we were spared the nuisance of timing our progress against the required average speed, a welcome weight off our minds.

Fresh instructions were handed out for the afternoon section, but 15 minutes of plotting time was deliberately not enough to get through them all. Other competitors managed to continue plotting their routes while underway, but deciphering the dreaded circular herringbone instruction proved difficult while being assaulted by wind, noise and discomfort in the Morgan.

Needless to say, we didn't win the rally. We could have made our lives easier by entering an easier class, by driving an easier car or by trailering the Morgan up the motorway. But driving a prewar car isn't about making life easier. The fact that we drove through the darkness, repairing the headlamps and a puncture before we had even started the rally, makes the satisfaction of completing it all the more meaningful.

So how does a young chap such as me get his hands on a highly coveted, recently

restored and downright bonkers Morgan three-wheeler? Enter stage left The Classic Car Loan Project (www.classiccarloanproject.co.uk), founded by Bob Wilkinson with the aim of matching up young would-be old-car drivers with owners who would like to encourage the next generation in a refreshingly practical way.

There is often talk among enthusiasts lamenting the lack of young people getting involved with their hobby, so the Loan Project has taken matters into its own hands and resolved to get more youngsters into the driving seat. There is a good number of prewar cars in the scheme, including Austin Sevens, Model A Fords and a trio of Morgans. The fact that these early cars have formed the backbone of the Loan Project, and that there has been no trouble finding custodians for them, is certainly good news for our pastime as a whole.

The loan agreement involves the lucky young enthusiast looking after the car for a year without charge (other than covering the costs of insurance and routine maintenance), and having a secure garage in which to store it. The owner, or someone more local, will offer technical support if necessary and the borrower will provide updates on the vehicle and any adventures undertaken with it.

It is truly a privilege to be allowed to look after one of these cars. And the owners derive immense satisfaction from sharing their brilliant machines with people who may never have dreamed of being a passenger in such a car, let alone driving one for a year. I would encourage anyone with a spare (roadworthy) old car lying around to get involved with the Loan Project and share the joy of driving it with the next generation. ■