



Disaster! The Rover V8, that ambassador of torque, the legend of hi-po delivery, the master of the deep rumble, is dead. And, along with it, has died Morgan's venerable Plus 8, a stalwart of the company's line-up since 1968. Is it doom for the world's most traditional car maker?

Charles Morgan and co, of course, say not – and here's the reason for their confidence, a very early pre-production Morgan Roadster, powered by a Ford V6. This is the first time any magazine has driven the car, and it's not in the usual controlled environment, high-budget launch. They've simply left the car with us for a few days, with a casual promise that someone will be along to collect it when we're done.

Morgan V6 Roadster

This is great news because no Morgan, new or old, can be evaluated in a rushed day of testing and photographing. On first acquaintance, a Morgan is cramped, noisy, bouncy and (at £35,000 for this one) over-priced, with little other than quaint lines to overcome those not insignificant disadvantages. But soon you realise that, at the very least, your typical Morgan is actually quite nippy. Most are positively fast. It takes longer to learn to live with and indeed love these characteristics, and to work out that a Morgan is great fun.

The Roadster is all these things. But before we get too far into that, it's important to understand just why it needs to exist at all, so here's the history: Morgan latched on to the Rover V8 as soon as it appeared in the Rover P5B saloon (Rover having famously adapted it from a Buick design). In doing so, they became the first sports car makers to make use of the engine, which is now so well known as the motivation for a generation of TVRs, Marcos, and so many more potent machines.

It transformed Morgan's classic four-wheeled fare, which had always been defined by buzzy four-pot engines. Suddenly,

here was a sports car with effortless torque, startling acceleration and an exhaust note to die for. And all without adding up-front weight to any significant degree. Ever since, the Plus 8 has been the most hairy-chested of Morgans, only recently matched by the altogether different Aero 8 model.

Inevitably, though, time and legislation has caught up with the Rover V8. It will no longer meet modern-day emissions laws and Ford no longer has a need for it, not even in its Land Rover subsidiary.

So, what could Morgan do? Ford US has a fine V8, but that's a much larger, heavier beast than the old Rover, and would never have fitted under the slender bonnet of a Morgan. The Malvern company's Aero 8 is powered by the BMW V8, as used in the Range Rover, but that's too expensive for the cheaper Plus 8 equivalent. So Morgan have decided to lose a couple of cylinders, drop a little weight and gain a handy 30bhp by slotting in Ford's well-thought-of 3-litre, 24-valve Duratec V6. Relatively speaking, it was an easy swap, although the engine's characteristics have been re-mapped with help from Ford,

Below

New Roadster leads the Plus 8 through sweeping bends.

Wheels might patter but progress is swift.

'Its 0-60mph time of 4.9 seconds and top speed of over 130mph should be enough to deafen and batter even the hardest into happy submission'





‘So here I am sitting in a narrow seat, a wooden wheel close to my chest, a tiny screen right in my face and the door fighting with my elbow...’



Left

Roadster's interior is narrow but well-built. Push-button switches and Smiths dials are arguably the best versions seen lately.

different set-ups for alternator, drive pulleys and the induction systems have been implemented, new bulkhead, side valances, gearbox chassis rails and engine bay chassis rails have been modified and a new propshaft and differential fitted. The gearbox is the five-speed AJ unit used in modern Jaguars.

And now back to our test car. To my eyes, it seems overdressed, with its polished stainless steel wire wheels (a £2000 option) and subtle silver paintwork crudely contrasted with dark red hood and interior. That impression never really left me, especially when the altogether more elegant Plus 8 that you see here was brought in as a reference point.

But actually I can understand why Morgan would want the hood to stand out, because it represents a change that, to Morgan owners, is almost as crucial as the engine swap – it's the quick-lift version that was introduced last year, and it promises a massive improvement over the old hood with its multiple fiddly fasteners and constant threat of pinched skin. In a week of stormy showers, we came to appreciate it.

Inside, there's Morgan's new dashboard (introduced with

the Commemorative Le Mans models in 2002) and deeper, reclining seats. But this is all fluff, important but not crucial to the big question: what happens when I turn the ignition key. Well that's easily answered, and it's not a big deal. The engine starts immediately and just as quickly finds a gentle idle speed with little more than a whisper from the engine bay or the exhaust. It sounds like a typical family saloon, utterly true to its Ford Mondeo roots.

Does that sound like a criticism? Well it is and it isn't, because although the appearance of the Plus 8 late in our test period reminds me just how meaty the Rover V8 can sound, it's also throbbingly wearisome after long periods.

So here I am sitting in an extremely narrow seat, with a wood rim steering wheel close to my chest, vintage style, a tiny windscreen (swept with three tiddly wipers) right in my face and the cutdown door fighting with my elbow. And I'm making comparisons with a Mondeo! Well, it's all relative, but if we're talking ease of control, then the Roadster is capable of making the grade. The accelerator is light, the clutch medium in rate

Morgan V6 Roadster

‘Owners must learn its foibles and come to enjoy them, to master them in a way that a typical modern car never demands’

(if a touch over-sprung) and the engine highly responsive. Initially, this makes for anything but an easy drive, as the engine spins up and down so easily on its super-light flywheel that progress through the gears is jerky and embarrassingly unsteady in a car that weighs just 940kg, less than half that of the Mondeo which donated its engine. Within a few miles of quick learning though, progress becomes more dignified.

Otherwise, this is typical Morgan. There are no squeaks or rattles from the running gear or the traditional ash frame but Morgan’s famous sliding pillar front suspension and leaf spring rear is hard and tends to exaggerate all movement: driver and passenger sit almost directly over the rear wheels, and so feel every bump through their backsides. While the front, seemingly a long way off from the cockpit, gives the impression that it’s bouncing up and down around the fulcrum of the rear axle, as though a particularly large bump would have the front wheels heading skyward in a full drag strip-style wheelie.

Of course that impression’s nonsense but there’s no denying that the hop, skip and jump of the front wheels comes as a shock sometimes, particularly through tight corners. The steering does nothing to comfort the newcomer to the Morgan

experience, acting on a high ratio so that the steering wheel needs a fine heave, and then rewards with a shockingly direct response. It soon becomes clear that, as new as this car may be, its owners must learn its foibles and come to enjoy them, to master them in a way that a typical modern car never demands. What’s also clear, though, is that the better weight distribution of the V6 in the Roadster means that handling is just a touch more nimble than the Plus 8’s, more akin to a four-cylinder 4/4’s handling (that’s a good thing).

Amid all this, there’s the engine itself to learn and evaluate. What quickly becomes really striking about the Ford V6 is its willingness to rev, pulling smoothly but hard all the way, but really hitting its peak at well over 4000rpm. Maximum torque occurs at 4900rpm, while maximum power is reached at 6150rpm – whatever your head for figures, the result is that the Roadster accelerates strongly and cleanly at any revs but takes a thrashing to achieve maximum performance. And driven like that, it lets out a yelp from the intake system that makes up for the overly-quiet exhausts.

How different this makes the Roadster from the outgoing Plus 8. Local Morgan club rep Peter Taylor has brought along his

Below

Roadster’s red hood folds down easily and, once down, will lift off the rear deck with a pull on a catch to access storage area.





SPECIFICATION

2004 Morgan Roadster

Engine	2967cc, 24-valve, quad-cam, V6. Electronic fuel injection, catalytic converters
Power	223bhp @ 6150rpm
Torque	206lb ft @ 4900rpm
Transmission	Five-speed all-synchromesh gearbox driving rear wheels
Suspension	Front: sliding pillar with coil springs and gas-filled telescopic dampers. Rear: semi-elliptic leaf springs with gas-filled telescopic dampers
Brakes	Front: discs and four-pot callipers. Rear: drums
Performance	0-60mph 4.9 seconds. Top speed 134mph
Price	£35,000 plus options



Above

New V6 sits well back, giving better weight distribution than the Plus 8. Bulkhead is cut back for clearance.

Left

Rover V8 installation isn't as neat as the V6.

Below left

Plus 8's interior has the earlier dashboard.

November 2000 Dark Aubergine Plus 8 for an informal comparison, and unwittingly proves a point as he eases into the Octane car park: his arrival is announced by a gentle woofle of exhausts that the Roadster can't match in standard trim.

Looking over the Plus 8, other differences are obvious. The optional (£352) bumpers change the appearance, giving the look of a wider, lower car, while the alloys are less frivolous looking than the Roadster's optional wires. The old-style hood, too, while hard work to manoeuvre, sits lower on the windscreen frame and the rear bodywork, giving a more rakish, low-down look.

A drive in the Plus 8 only goes to underline the differences. The V8 is effortless, lazy even, accelerating the car almost violently hard without any need for more than 4000 revs. Plus 8

specifications vary over the years but the latest 4-litre version produces 190bhp at 4800rpm and, crucially, 225lb ft of torque at just 3500rpm (the optional 4.6-litre gave a stonking 260lb ft).

With the same weight as a Plus 8, a little less torque but a lot more power, the Roadster will be faster when worked hard. And it is supremely fast, capable of surprising many with its claimed 0-60mph time of 4.9 seconds and top speed of over 130mph – which should be enough to deafen and batter even the hardest Morganites into happy submission.

That performance, though, is cleaner in delivery and capable of achieving an easy 30mpg (a Plus 8 struggles to achieve mid-20s) with far fewer damaging fumes. There are no glitches in its power delivery and there's no reason why it shouldn't start

Below

Grippy tyres and less torque means that the Roadster is less likely to slide on wet roads than the hairy Plus 8.

immediately, every time. Its temperature needle doesn't budge once past the first ten minutes of warm-up, while there's always a nagging doubt in the Plus 8 owner's mind that this could be a traffic jam too far for the cooling system. Similarly, brakes and heating (including an electrically heated screen) are superb in the Roadster.

Such is my love of the V8 experience that I was convinced that the V6 would struggle to win its way into my affections, and what I'd really like if I was to buy a new Morgan would be the lazy power and happy rumble of the V8 coupled with the longevity and glitch-free high performance of the V6.

Accepting that legislation has eliminated that possible combination, I'd be more than happy to settle for the V6 but I'd be tempted to seek out a set of 'not for road use' exhausts for an extra dose of character and political incorrectness.

It's clear though that Morgan has done what it does best – surviving with only a tiny nod to the dubious art of compromise – and produced an appropriate successor to the Plus 8.

'What I'd really like would be the lazy power and happy rumble of the V8, coupled with the longevity and high performance of the V6'



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At 4pm on June 12, all being well, a great British underdog (one with a wood-framed body at that) will start what most enthusiasts regard as the greatest race in the world, in the company of Audis, Lolas, Porsches, Ferraris, Corvettes and other lavishly-financed machines. That underdog is the Morgan Aero 8 LM GT; the race is the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

It's been a long and rocky road to get this far, a road littered with the detritus of misfortune. But the heaving crowds at the circuit will appreciate the efforts of the Morgan entry. Those who venture over to the Mulsanne straight should catch a sight of the Aero 8s storming past at more than 190mph, while pit-lane observers will see a small but dedicated team assisted by Morgan race preparation legend Chris Lawrence.

But the car is the star at Le Mans and the Aero 8 is as worthy of appreciation as its rivals in the GT class. It's a highly developed machine, but not as far removed from the roadgoing Aero 8 as you might expect, with around 65% of components unchanged. GT homologation insists on that.

All the same, the Le Mans version will be producing something in the region of 480 to 500bhp at 8000rpm, against the 325bhp of the road car. It will run an American Jerico gearbox and a BTR limited-slip differential, KW suspension, Yokohama tyres and Magneti Marelli data-logging. With all this, the team is confident that the car will be capable of keeping up the pace for the full 24 hours. It's cost them an estimated £400,000 in development to get this far – chicken feed by Le Mans standards but a fortune for a low-volume manufacturer – and plenty more in race support and personnel costs.

This is a development programme that can logically be traced back to just over ten years ago. Or, if you have a feel for history, two landmarks in the life of the Morgan Motor Company: the first is the entry of a privateer (with factory backing) for the 1938 Le Mans in a 4/4 model, the second the

Below

Test day at Le Mans. Teams battle to qualify drivers and set up cars. It was a difficult day for Morgan.



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UNDERDOG DAYS

After a year of disappointments, Morgan is ready for Le Mans. The Aero 8 LM GT is good for 190mph, the Brits are there to cheer it on. So, how did they get this far and how will they do?

Words: David Lillywhite Photography: Darren Maybury, Morgan

Morgan at Le Mans



Left
Following the crash, Aero 8 needed a high speed rebuild. Other pictures show slightly less frantic moments...



class win by Morgan tuner Chris Lawrence in the 1962 Le Mans, this time in a works-prepared Plus 4 Supersports.

Lawrence retained his links with the factory and his expertise spiralled, to the point at which we can fast forward to 1992, when he and Charles Morgan began to sketch ideas for a Plus 8 racer using an aluminium honeycomb chassis. This was further developed into an all-aluminium chassis for 1997, and used as the basis not only for a GT2 race car but also a prototype road car... the basis for the BMW V8-powered Aero 8.

With the road car in production, Chris Lawrence went on to develop a racing version of the Aero 8. It was unveiled at the Autosports show in January 2002 where, to the shock of all those involved, the first car was immediately snapped up by racer Richard Stanton – who then announced that he wanted to race the car at Le Mans in the GT category.

Incredibly, the car was ready for June 2002 and, amid great enthusiasm from the crowd, it started the legendary 24 Hours race at a reasonable pace, lapping steadily – while inside the cars, drivers slowly cooked with the intense heat soaking into the cabin from the engine compartment and transmission tunnel.

Then, after 17 hours, engine problems experienced during development resurfaced, and the Aero 8 was out. It was disappointing but the team had learnt a lot and the publicity generated was invaluable. Back at the Malvern factory, the knowledge and enthusiasm for the Le Mans campaign couldn't be allowed to just ebb away. Morgan's experienced PR man, David Dowse, was appointed team manager and a team of employees were assigned to build a new car for 2003, led by none other than Steve Lawrence, son of Chris.

Much of the development work concentrated around reworking the front end to get more cooling air in and more heat out. By March 2003 the car was ready and the team

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confident. But then, disaster! The ACO (Le Mans organisers) refused the team an entry. Reasons were never given.

Out of the resultant despondence grew a defiance and a belief that the work must not be wasted and the car not allowed to sit around until the 2004 Le Mans. The team looked about for other opportunities to race, and homed in on the 24 Hours of Spa.

First, though, the team took the car to Donington for an FIA race, only to be disallowed with homologation problems. But it got to Spa, only to be shunted heavily from behind by a Porsche. The race was over. And now the car was damaged too.

It wasn't until November 2003 at the new 1000K race on the Bugatti circuit at Le Mans that things finally came together. The Aero 8, rebuilt and further developed, finished seventh in class, between the two TVR entries and ahead of several Porsches. The team was jubilant, for the accepted wisdom was that strong performance would bode well for 24 Hour acceptance. Another strong performance followed, this time at Sebring in March, where the team had just one problem with the car – a drooping mirror. It was clear that not only had reliability improved but that the heat problems had been solved too.

So, the wait was on. At last, on March 25, the Le Mans 24 Hour entries were announced – and Morgan was on the list!

Testing at Le Mans took place on April 25, with drivers Adam Sharpe, Neil Cunningham and Keith Ahlers aiming to complete the ten laps needed to qualify. In fact, Adam and Neil did qualify but a series of misfortunes – a steering rack failure, a broken driveshaft, a crash, a snapped wishbone – meant that Keith ended up disqualified. This means he won't be allowed to drive and Morgan need to find a driver who has pre-qualified.

But that blow aside, the team, the factory and the enthusiasts are jubilant at the prospect of returning to Le Mans. If you're there, be sure to cheer them on.