On a wing and a prayer?

Submitted by Noel Bryen

Having rebuilt more Mogs than I care to remember, I thought there wasn't much more I could learn about cowled radiator front wings, but alas, I was wrong again.

This most recent educational experience began about 12 months before the Morgan Muster (remember that?). Well, Michael Watts decided to do a quick rebuild on his 1971 4/4 so that it would look pristine for the display at Bathurst. The intent was good, the timing less than perfect.

Michael's Mog had been through a bit of a tough life prior to his ownership, and when he bought it from Ken McGuinness in the early 90's neither of the doors were fitting correctly, there was no trim installed and the front end of the car always looked a bit lop-sided. We knew the car had been accident damaged early on and that it had been rebuilt, but that was all we knew. Despite this, the car was sound, the price was right and it drove very well.

As is usual with these things once the car was dismantled, one thing led to another, resulting in the need for some chassis and crucifix straightening, lots of new wood in the frame, some new panels and before you knew it, 2003 was here. Michael was doing the majority of this work at home, and had finished the woodwork and re-skinned the body, which was finished and bolted back in place on the chassis, with doors repaired and refitted. The rolling chassis then made an appearance at my place for some paint work.

From previous experience I knew that having replaced lots of timber in the frame, repaired the inner guards and realigned some crinkles in the chassis, the last items that were going to fit would be the bonnets, so a dummy build was necessary to make sure everything was going to fit prior to finishing and painting.

By this time the wings had been stripped back to bare metal and primed, so previous accident damage and wear and tear was plain to see. Overall, both wings were in good condition so we approached the assembly with high expectation. The fact that the bulkhead showed signs of severe panel beating around the steering column area confirmed that the car had been accident damaged on the right hand side/front, but we didn't link this damage with the apparent good condition of the right hand front wing. In other words, it had been replaced.

The left wing went on without too many problems and seemed to fit quite well. The right also went on OK, but the balance of the car just didn't look right, no matter how much pushing and shoving we did. Heights from ground level were correct, but still there was something just not right. The photos attached probably don't allow a good comparison, but the right hand wing (the one without the headlight pod) is ¾ inch higher between the top of the wing (where the sidelight mounts) and the level of the inner guard behind the headlight pod. The height between the top of the wing and the inner guard on a "low" wing is about 1 ¾ inches and for a "high" wing it is about 2 ½ inches. The car had been like this since Mike owned it, but no-one had ever noticed – the car didn't look right but that was all we could say about it. From the drivers seat the front left wing always looked lower than the front right, (which it was) so we assumed the chassis or crucifix was bent (they both were). On a "normal" Mog, (is there such a thing?), it is possible to see the left hand front side light from the driver's seat – not so on Michael's.

So, the puzzle now was, what model Morgan did this "high" wing belong to? My immediate thought was that it belonged to a high-line Plus 4, but now I am not convinced. On checking Alby, his wings were low, even though he is a high-line Plus 4, but this was not conclusive since his front wings were new in 1994 and the factory could have made (and probably did) whatever they felt like on the day. John Hurst provided a clue, as his Plus 4 has original wings from 1960, and lo and behold if his wings aren't high, so I thought the mystery was solved. I have since measured Ian Southwell's '63 Plus 4, also a high line model, and his wings are also high, but to add further confusion, Ken Ward has a '63 Plus 4 4 seater which has low front wings.

However, the position of the headlight pod provides another clue as to the model of the wing. All (pre '68) Plus 4's have the headlight pod between the wheel arch and the inner guard, as do Series V 4/4's, whereas post Series V 4/4s and all Plus 8s have the headlight pod embedded into the wheel arch. This occurred as a result of

road regulations in various countries where a minimum distance between headlights forced the factory to move them further apart. And by the way, there are at least two versions of headlight pod position with regard to how far they are embedded into the wheel arch. From the early '70's they appeared to reach their maximum distance into the wheel arch, but for a few years in between some of the pods were further inboard by about ¾ of an inch. Well within factory tolerances I hear you say? No, I believe it was deliberate. As the car grew in width in the 80's and beyond, particularly the Plus 8, the distance between the headlights also grew further apart, but this was achieved by increasing the distance between the wheel arch and the inner guard, rather than moving the headlight pod itself.

What to do about the problem? We couldn't carry on with the rebuild like this, as we needed a matching pair. Naturally, Ken Ward was my first port of call, as I knew he had a few wings kicking around in his rafters. This only added further confusion to the problem. Ken had four brand new, (or should I say, unused) wings which had been bought at various times over the past 30 years or so and have never been fitted to a car. When I laid them out on the ground, there were two matching pairs, one high pair and one low pair, but both had their headlight pods embedded into the wheel arch by the minimum amount rather than the maximum amount that we needed. In other words, we would have to buy a pair from Ken, increasing both the cost and the fitting time, as fitting a brand new wing is not a simple task. The confusing part is that all of these wings have been purchased at different times, and all had been ordered as 4/4 wings, so it would appear that there are some model 4/4's that have high wings with headlight pods only partially embedded into the wheel arch. To compound the problem, Ken also has two pair of Plus 8 wings, one set from a '68 (Moss box) model and the other from a '74 (Rover box) model and both are high, and both have their pods embedded into their wings by the minimum amount, so this could be one of the answers. I have since measured 4 Moss box model Plus 8's and a few post Moss Box models and they are all low, so I am now thoroughly confused. There doesn't appear to be any rhyme or reason, but neither should there be, otherwise we would probably start thinking that the Morgan is a "normal" car and buy a Holden instead.

I don't think the factory really has it under control either, because in 1991 when John Hurst first bent his 4/4, he ordered a wing from the factor quoting year model and chassis number and the one we received was the right height, but the headlight pod was too far inboard. To solve the problem we swapped the new one with a second hand one from Ken's rafters. After the second prang in '93, we went through the same process with the opposite side, but this time John drew several sketches showing the correct position. When the wing arrived, we were not surprised to still find the headlight pod in the wrong position, but this time it was too far forward. That was a permutation we hadn't considered, and was when I taught myself to un-braze the pod and re-braze it in the correct position.

The other interesting point here is that Melvyn Rutter, who is renowned for being able to supply virtually any part for any model Morgan, doesn't list the high wing as a variant in his cattle dog, nor does he list the variant in the horizontal position of the pod, so as far as he is concerned these two wings don't exist. Melvyn lists the following:

+4 '54 low pod

This would be the interim model when the pods were very low and is easy to distinguish.

+4 54-56 – standard pod

+4 and 4/4 56-63

+4 and 4/4 63-68

I am not sure of the difference in these wings other than the increase in width of the car over the years. I know the 60 +4 model is about 2 inches wider than the early 56 model, but I am not sure of any differences between a '62 model 4/4 or +4 and a 64 model. The low line variant of the +4 came in at this time, but this had no affect on the front wings that I am aware of. Obviously, Melvyn Rutter knows more about these things than I give him credit for!!

4/4 69-97

This covers the period where the pods were inset into the wings, but does not include the variant at the beginning (69/70) where they were inboard by at least 3/4 an inch further than the later models.

+4 85-92

This is too modern for me! The next time I see Todd Hamilton's Plus 4, I will be taking notes.

+8 68-70

+8 70-73

+8 73-76

+8 77-97

Again, I think overall width is the major difference in these wings, but I don't claim to be an expert on +8s. The late 70's models don't seem to roll over at the front as much as the earlier models, making the wheel arch appear to be less round, but I haven't investigated these very much. As mentioned above, I know of a '68 model and a '74 model that both have high wings. The other difference in the earlier versions of the +8 was the need to inset the right hand wing to allow the alternator to fit. I checked a couple of late model Plus 8s (post '95) at Christmas in July this year and discovered that this is no longer done, as they are now wide enough to fit the engine in easily without having to modify the right hand wing, so there's another one that Melvyn doesn't list.

So, how many different cowled radiator front wings are there? I used to think there were nine. Now, I start losing count at 14.

So, there you go. I just thought I would share this bit of technical trivia with you, and if ever you need a front wing for your cowled model Morgan, remember, it isn't as simple as you might think.