

Huge wheels for a 'Prairie Schooner'



The Maxwell was one of the first cars to have an electric starter. Pictures / Jacqui Madelin

Kit Maxwell may be right when he calls 100-year-old cars an illogical obsession and he should know as he has two: a two-cylinder 1909 Briton and this 1913 Maxwell tourer, one of two in existence and impressively modern - it even has electric start.



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"This and Cadillac were the first" - he points out the massive flywheel - "and that's the generator, it doesn't have a regulator, just a cut-out so I have to switch the lights on during long trips."

You don't bend down to look under the bonnet -- this car is huge, around 2.4m high and 5m long, the bonnet level with my collarbones and riding on wheels advertised at a yard in height - or 0.9m - shod with 36-inch tyres and designed to cross prairies.

"They were called Prairie Schooners," Kit says.

This car's first owner - a farmer, who never drove it and instead used a chauffeur - parked it in his barn in 1923, and there it stayed until the second owner bought it in 1964, in complete and presumably running condition, if in need of a clean and tidy.

It's since had a new roof top, seat covers, woodwork and paint, but the fixtures and fittings, the running gear and engine are mostly original, although tidied and maintained. The leather straps encasing the roof brace cables are well oiled and fastened by meticulously clean nickel fittings.

"The roof acts like a parachute so I usually roll up the rear blind," Kit says, before showing me the original Jiffy storm curtains, the "clear" panels now too browned with age to see out of.

Kit imported the car from the US in 2007, stumbling upon it when researching some family history. It had been in a museum for 15 years, but the collection of 70 vehicles was being sold after its owner was jailed for "inland revenue sins".

The car is powered by a six-cylinder 37kW (50hp) engine that features a wee funnel arrangement next to each spark plug, which you prime by filling with petrol to assist winter starts. "The car came in left-hand or right-hand drive and the engine used was completely different, a mirror image casting. The exhaust manifold is a cast part of the engine, it's a huge casting," he says, patting it. No wonder the motor alone weighs nearly half a ton.

There's a three-speed crash gearbox "so you double declutch for everything", with the transaxle out the back - visible by lifting the carpet and the solid oak trapdoor beneath it.



Kit Maxwell bought the car from a museum that had been forced to close.

Kit climbs up through the passenger door - the driver's side is obstructed by the vertical gear-change and park brake levers - and after pressurising the fuel tank via the vertical lever by his left knee, he fires her up with ease.

Then I climb up, the door closes with a satisfying thunk (metal sprung dampers stop it from rattling), he releases the brake, and we're off.

Talk about a commanding driving position, you look down on everything, but it seems relatively easy to drive, once you get used to the quirks.

There are two dials on the steering wheel, one the hand throttle, the other the magneto advance and retard - full advance for the motorway, retard for hill work or round town. And on the steering column, just behind the wheel, there's the choke, "and the carb flooding tickler for cold starts".

The rest of the controls are on the floor - the oil indicator and light switch, the amp meter and petrol tank pressure dial, the odo "which lies like hell" and clock, the exhaust bypass "to make more noise" and the coil starting switch, the starter and of course the clutch, footbrake and accelerator - the cigar lighter was missing when he bought it.



A fire extinguisher is the only modern touch to the interior

It sounds complicated, but most of it can be ignored during everyday driving, and he uses it several times a month in the summer, sometimes just for the supermarket shop. It must cause a stir in the Pak 'n' Save carpark.

Hitting a speed bump we bounce entertainingly for some distance - the suspension's effectively cart springs with no shock absorbers. It'll do 80km/h, he says, and he should know -- it's been all over the upper North Island, those 37kW propelling 1.9 tonnes with surprising ease. It stops rather well via 432mm drum brakes, too.

Kit's got the original brochure. It was US\$1975 new, it says, and "the sweetest-running thing on wheels".

I was impressed by Kit's easy gear changes but he's cheated, he says, replacing the clutch's leather facing with a composite lining.

Factory's 97 years



Maxwell Automobiles was founded in 1905 by Jonathan Dixon Maxwell - formerly of Oldsmobile - and the Briscoe brothers, and in 1907 built what was then the largest car factory in the world, in New Castle, Indiana.

In 1910 it merged with Gray, Brush, Columbia and Stoddard-Dayton.

The company went into receivership in 1912 and was bought by Walter Flanders - ex EMF and Studebaker - who branded all the cars as Maxwell and moved the company to Detroit.

Walter Chrysler bought into it in the 1920s, forming Chrysler Corporation in 1925.

Maxwell was duly absorbed, though it is credited with spawning the first Plymouth, and that first Indiana factory continued building Chryslers until its closure in 2004.

- [NZ Herald](#)