

Belt UP!

The case for putting seat belts in a classic is made by Nick Larkin, who finds out how specialists tackle the job

Photos by Glyn Barney



Above, cleaning out the thread in factory-drilled mountings
Left, a vast range of webbing material and colours is available

RESTORING

SEAT BELTS



'It's perfectly safe not to have belts – providing you don't have an accident'



Right, the owner of this Mini walked away after a smash, thanks to his seat belt

SEAT belts aren't original. 'You don't have to have belts in a pre-1965 car, so why bother?' They can trap you in a smash.

These are all old excuses, regularly trotted out by those who steadfastly refuse to belt up in their classic, their argument often backed by the sentiment that the car is used only for 1500 miles a year in any case.

Well, it's perfectly safe not to have belts – provided you don't have an accident. I've always believed in having them fitted in all the classics I've owned, not only in an attempt to save my own bacon in a smash, but also that of a front seat passenger. If unbelted, they are much more likely to suffer serious injury or worse than the driver, who at least has the steering wheel to hang on to. As we will see, though, this can create its own problems.

One of our favourite office arguments – or rows – is whether you'd be better off in an accident if you were driving a sturdy monocoque classic such as a Hillman Super Minx or an Austin A90, or a modern creation laden with crumple zones designed to absorb the impact. Additionally, if your classic was in a smash with a

new car, would those same crumple zones benefit you too?

Whatever your views on this, one thing remains certain. A fifties Austin, for example, is not

a happy place for the unbelted to have an accident. The driver's chest and other tender bits lurk inches from a large, unyielding steering wheel, attached to a long metal column which can act like a spear. The passenger faced an equally unpleasant liaison with a bare metal dashboard or glass windscreen.

Even if you're only using the car for an odd show, when obviously the chances of having a serious accident are much less than an everyday-use vehicle, you never know when an artie advancing from behind might think you were going faster than you were, or that Metro driver crossing the dual carriageway in front of you might think you were progressing more sedately.



Above, original-style buckles have been remanufactured
Right, webbing is threaded through mounting on our Victor



There are obviously cases where not having a seat belt would mean you could be thrown from a car to safety, but you'd most likely be badly injured and could well land squarely in the path of an oncoming vehicle. A belt could mean your remaining conscious, and therefore able to get out of the car.

If you really must cite originality as a reason for remaining beltless, remember that many cars, even from the early sixties, had factory-fitted anchorage points for belts!

BELTS IN BRITAIN

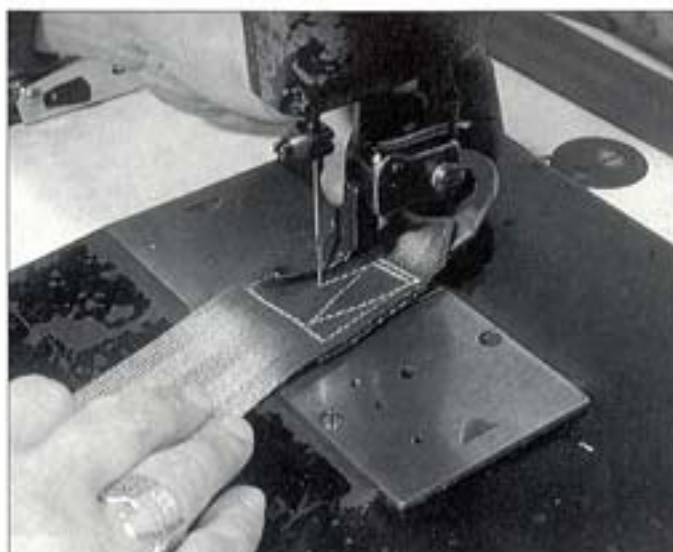
'CLUNK, click, every trip', is, nearly 20 years on, still one of Sir James Savile OBE's most remembered utterances, along with 'now then, now then', 'guys and gals' and noises of deep inhalation on atrocious cigars.

How many lives this classic road safety campaign saved is difficult to say, but few who saw it in the mid-seventies have forgotten it.

Although belts were firmly established in the USA and Scandinavia by the mid-fifties, British motorists didn't really get a chance to belt up until 1957, when Cricklewood-based Delaney Gallay discovered their potential when testing its well-known Good Companion car heaters in Sweden.

They began manufacturing belts themselves, as did parachute makers Irving, Britax, Kangol and other well-known names followed, until, at one stage, there were more than 60 firms involved.

By the early sixties BMC and Vauxhall were putting seat belt



Left and above, belt webbing is carefully stitched to British Standard pattern

mountings in their cars, though Ford took some time to follow.

Manufacturers were hard at work publicising their wares and newspapers were besieged with photos of smashed-up cars, with captions bearing testimonials from motorists who claimed, often correctly, that the belts had saved their lives.

A particularly disturbing photograph was used in publicity by Delaney Gallay: it featured an A35 with the windscreen bearing a perfect facial imprint of the woman passenger who had smashed

into it in an accident.

The January 1962 issue of *Which?* strongly advocated belt wearing, revealing that a 'first survey' of their effectiveness in Britain showed they would reduce the likelihood of death and serious injury by 60 per cent, a figure also proven in Sweden.

Early offerings included the now outlawed single-strap lap belts, the diagonal-and-lap belts common today, and a harness with straps over each shoulder.

Inertia-reel belts followed by the mid-sixties, initially with a

locking mechanism operated by a ball bearing which, under sudden pressure, would push a plate above it which would lock the belt in place.

Manufacturers were forced by law to fix front belt anchorage points by 1965, and belts themselves had to be installed from the following year, nearly two decades before their use became compulsory.

FITTING UP

MY recently acquired 1962 Vauxhall FB Victor certainly wasn't going to escape the seat belt treatment, particularly as the car is in everyday use. To find out more about which belts to choose, and how to fit them, the car was submitted to one of Britain's biggest and longest established specialists, Quickfit Safety Belt Service Ltd.

The firm was set up in 1960 by Bill Quick, who previously worked for Delaney Gallay and realised there was potential for a mobile fitting service. Quickfit, sited at Harrow since 1964, now make, recondition, supply and fit thousands of belts a year for everything from Aston Martins to minibuses. Original, unused MGB belts are available from stock, and all classics are catered for.

Bill says he has worn safety belts ever since they became available, a philosophy



Above, ends of webbing are sealed using a heat gun



Above, Bill Quick pictured in a 1961 pro-seat belt publicity picture at the wheel of his accident-damaged Herald

which was to prove correct in 1961: 'My wife and I were in our Triumph Herald when we had a blow out, the car went out of control and overturned. We both escaped with bruises and I'm sure we would have been seriously injured had we not been wearing seat belts.'

Quickfit can supply both fixed-length and inertia-reel belts. Bill says the fixed, static belts can work well, provided they are adjusted correctly, though inertia-reel belts have the edge on safety.

I opted for inertia reel. Quickfit makes the belts look as period as possible, the company being able to make them up in any of more than a dozen colours and materials, so it wasn't difficult to choose something which this Vauxhall might have had fitted in '62. The effect was further enhanced

Right, this mock accident featured in television commercial. Far right, poster was meant to shock people into seatbelts

with original-style Britax fastenings, which have been remanufactured in the USA.

Reconditioning belts is a major part of Quickfit's business. Inertia-reel mechanisms, buckles and webbing can be overhauled or replaced. The firm carries a lot of original, reconditioned and remanufactured spares.

As Bill points out, there can be a problem with originality - often dealers, rather than manufacturers, fitted belts in

new cars, meaning any one of a dozen or so makes could have been installed. 'There isn't really an original belt for your car, as such,' he said.

Making up the belts is a skilled task. First, the webbing is cut to size and the ends are sealed with a heat gun to stop them fraying. Belts are in two parts: on the driver's left side is the stalk, anchored to the transmission tunnel, and on his or her right is the lap and diagonal, attached to the B-post.





webbing are to registered British Standard patterns. Next, the opposite end of the webbing is threaded through the buckle and stitched.

The procedure to make up the lap and diagonal is similar. The webbing is threaded through the tongue and the top anchor plate, through which it slides freely. Then the opposite end of the webbing is fed through the spindle of the inertia-reel mechanism.

Luckily, the Victor was manufactured with all the necessary belt mounting points,

both on the B-post and on the transmission tunnel. The anchor plates were simply bolted into the mounting points which had been waiting for them since 1962.

The B-post in a Victor doesn't have trim on it, so it was a simple matter of removing plugs from the mounting point holes. The rubber floor covering had to be drilled through to get at the fixings on the transmission tunnel.

Generally, B-posts are hollow, and access can normally be gained from the top.

'The Victor was manufactured with all the necessary belt mounting points'

Two holes for the mountings are drilled into the D-post, and then a bracket is dropped inside the post on a wire, then bolted and riveted into place. Holes are then drilled into the transmission tunnel to take the other mounting point.

Quickfit can normally fit belts within a couple of hours where mounting points are fitted and, depending on the materials chosen, expect to pay around £90 to have inertia reels fitted if

all mounting points are present, and anything up to £150 if mounting points are made.

Whatever the cost, we couldn't put a price on the extra safety of the belts as we headed for home along a damp, dark, lunatic-laden M25.

Quickfit Safety Belt Service Ltd is at 39 Kenton Park Parade, Kenton Road, Harrow HA3 8DN. Tel 081 907 1162.

● A Department of Transport spokesman has backed the call to fit seat belts in classics: 'The benefits of seat belts are now widely acknowledged by the public. Since the wearing of seat belts became compulsory in 1983, at least 200 deaths have been prevented each year. Although the fitting of belts is not required by law in pre-1965 cars, it's advisable that owners fit them. The message is simply that seat belts are safer.'

Our thanks to the Department of Transport for some of the archive photos used in this feature.



Top left, belts saved a Scottish MP and his wife, who escaped from this 70mph smash with only minor injuries

Left and below, original B-post mounting points finally in use after 30 years

Right, final fitting up and adjustment

