



I Went to “Where They Make ’Em”

By Dave Doroghy

We all have preconceived, sometimes romantic, notions of what we expect certain events or places to be like. Norman Rockwell-style Christmases with freshly fallen snow, and Brady Bunch-like family summer vacations with perfect weather are a couple of unrealistic, clichéd examples. So often we are let down because reality doesn't even come close to our lofty preconceived notions.

My expectations were sky-high in the summer of 2004 when my friend Keith and I went to tour the Morgan factory in Malvern Link, U.K. What a refreshing experience, to have what you conceived in your mind a place to be like, actually match up to what it was like.

It is said that the town of Malvern Link got its name from the Victorians, who used to “link” up more horses to their carriages so they could be pulled up the hill that runs through the town's centre. Isn't it fitting that the small town in Worcester County where Morgans are built is so aptly named after horsepower, transportation and innovation?

Before describing Malvern Link and the Morgan factory visit, I should start with the journey that started from London. Keith and I departed from Paddington Station at 9:30 on a First Great Western train and headed north. The two-hour trip was “easy-peasy” as the Brits would say. Slowly we left the busy industrial, commercial and residential environs of the world's greatest city en route to the bucolic rolling hills of the Cotswolds. I love train travel in England: the elevated old wooden station platforms, the conductors blowing their whistles, and the stoic and proper sound of the station announcer's voice over the loudspeaker announcing the train's arrival. Train travel in Britain, like Morgans and everything else in the U.K., is quirky and oh, so interesting.

After two hours we arrived in Malvern Link, a charming and quaint little town nestled in the countryside. While taking a lovely walk through the town, I couldn't help humming the Beatles song Penny Lane to myself, and thinking I had been planted into the middle of it. ... Penny Lane there is a barber showing photographs, of every head he's had the pleasure to have known, and all the people that come and go, stop and say hello, on the corner is a banker with a motor car, the little children laugh at him behind his back....

My only disappointment was that during our walk through town I didn't spot one Morgan. The preconceived notions that I talked about earlier had me dreaming of a town

where everyone happily drove around in nothing but brand new Plus Fours, Plus Eights and Aeros.

During our visit to Malvern Link, we stayed overnight at St. Just Bed and Breakfast, a Georgian-style residence built in 1859. The bed and breakfast featured on the Morgan Motor Car Company's official website, which is the Link Lodge, was booked up, and someone else recommended this one. It was a great spot, less than a five-minute walk to the factory. The gentleman who ran the place, Tony Ditchfield, was a car enthusiast and he had a friend who was a test driver at the Morgan factory. Over breakfast, sitting in the charming and tastefully decorated dining room, we talked about the positive impact the small factory has had on tourism and on the overall economy of the area. Tony reflected on the long-term stability Morgan has brought to the little town and how not much has really changed in Malvern Link over the last 50 years.

After breakfast we went off on foot to find “where they make 'em.” When we arrived, there was no big monolithic sprawling plant, no smokestacks or big staff parking lots, no fancy edifices or big signs, just a couple of nondescript, quiet, low-profile old brick buildings where they turn out a couple of these beauties every day.



A small hand-painted sign, next to a well-kept flower garden, pointed to the visitors' area. After we signed the guest book, the friendly elderly receptionist explained that the tours were self-guided and that we were welcome to stick to our own pace and stay as long as we like. She asked where we were from and when I said Canada, she told me she had a cousin from Alberta and she wondered if I knew him. As we left the visitors' area to enter the factory, she told us not to be shy and to ask the workers on the floor lots of questions. Then she pointed to a thick, dark-red stripe just outside her door that would weave through dozens of rooms, guiding us down dark hallways and past all sorts of interesting sights, smells and sounds. This thick, dark-red painted stripe on the factory floor would take us back in time to a world when things like craftsmanship, pride in what you built and quality really mattered.

Looking back now, I realize the tour was set up a bit backwards. The first room we visited was where they

(Continued on page 9)

(Continued from page 8)

stored the cars that had been completed. It was called the Dispatch Department. In that one room, all shiny and sparkling in the British sunlight that streamed through the dirty old window panes, sat a gaggle of Morgans: brand-spanking-new cars destined to make their way around the world to deserving owners who had patiently been waiting for years for them to be put together. Only people who have a true interest in Morgans will appreciate the exhilarating feeling you get standing in the middle of twenty brand-new Plus Fours, Plus Eights and Aeros. It was like having a Morgasm!



From there we followed the dark-red line to the Chassis Erecting Shop. No comment.

All along the way we talked to the workers. They were a friendly bunch, mainly men, and lots of men with beards, who seemed to really care about what they did. When I asked one guy how long he had been building Morgans, he told me for over 35 years. He went on to tell me that his dad raised a family of five kids on the wages he made in this factory. Apparently his dad had begun working at the factory shortly after the Second World War and he helped two of his sons get jobs there. His dad had spent most of his Morgan career working in the wiring department.



When we walked by the lunchroom, some of the workers were taking a tea break and eating biscuits. It was there that we saw a bunch of newspaper articles tacked to a cork bulletin board. Some of them were from the local Malvern Link newspaper, paying tribute to workers who had spent their entire lives working at the Morgan factory. Also on the bulletin board were a variety of letters from satisfied Morgan owners from around the world, thanking particular workers. I also read a birthday card sent from a Morgan owner to one of the guys on the shop floor who helped build his car.



As we carried on and went by the wood mill area, the smell of the ash frames was in the air. The sound of hammers pounding nails rang in my ears. At the Final Finish and Trim section it smelled like paint. Every department we visited had a sense of purpose and a unique quality all its own. And every department we visited seemed to be manned by competent, motivated, jovial workers plugging away at a steady, comfortable pace.

The workers didn't seem to be suffering from the stale drudgery or repetitive boredom I associate with most factory jobs. I felt I was just in a big room with a bunch of skilled guys who really cared about carefully putting to-

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from page 9)

gether cars they loved. There was no assembly line, no mechanical robot arms, no noisy machines stamping out parts. The Morgan factory, like the cars themselves, was loaded with character and charm. The place was steeped in tradition and ran at its own patient pace. A two-cars-built-a-day pace. It was a restful, simple and happy enclave or retreat from the hectic, fast-paced word of London, just a few hours down the track.



The other day I was making an eastbound left turn off First Avenue onto Boundary Road in Vancouver. My 1966 Plus Four has a black plastic toggle turn-signal switch inconveniently located right in the middle of the old wooden and weathered dashboard. As I hit the low-tech switch I thought to myself, I wonder if that guy's dad had anything to do with hooking up the wires that are making my tail-light blink? When the switch engaged and the indicator started to flash, I did the math. Let's see, the timing would work out – 41 years ago his father, an electrical craftsman in his own right, would have been working in the Morgan factory in the wiring department. He must have carefully soldered the wires together that would now help me safely negotiate my turn. Then I smiled and shouted out loud to myself in my car, in my best imitation-British accent, "Well

done, old chap, your factory certainly exceeded my expectations, cheerio!"

Footnotes

1. Question) Many people (both here and while I lived in England) have told me about a TV show they saw on the BBC that was about the Morgan factory. More specifically, it was a business documentary about a management consultant who visited the factory to give advice on increasing productivity and Morgan profitability. I am told that at the end of the show the Morgan management politely ignored many of the consultant's suggestions, claiming that they preferred to continue to conduct their business in the "old-fashioned way." Has anyone seen this show? Can someone tell me how I can get my hands on a copy of it? If you know anything about this, please email me at doroghy@hotmail.com.

2. Question) In my article I refer to a group of Morgans as a "gaggle." I just made that up. What do you call a group of Morgans? A pod, a pack, a herd? I'd be curious about your thoughts on the most appropriate collective noun.

