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# THE NAME'S BUG, BOND BUG

'What's up, doc' was the question on everyone's lips, as the motor show bunny girls showed off the Bond Bug.

Mike McCarthy looks at Reliant's *Viva Zapata* car ...

I remember the late sixties and early seventies. So do most people over the age of about 30 or so, so I'm not unique. But to me it was a cringingly awful time of long scruffy hair, *Viva Zapata* moustaches, flower-power shirts and flared trousers – and that was just the women. Why even I, the utterly famous Mike McCarthy, succumbed: during a clear-out of an over-filled cupboard the other day I came across my own personal pair of *flower-power flared trousers*. (I tried to give them to the Sally Army, bless their hearts, but even they balked at their vivid hues – purple, orange and lime green predominated – and only accepted them on sufferance, muttering something about maybe being able to dye them ...)

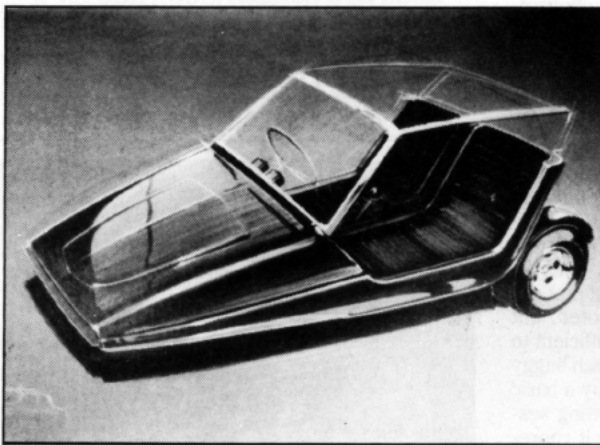
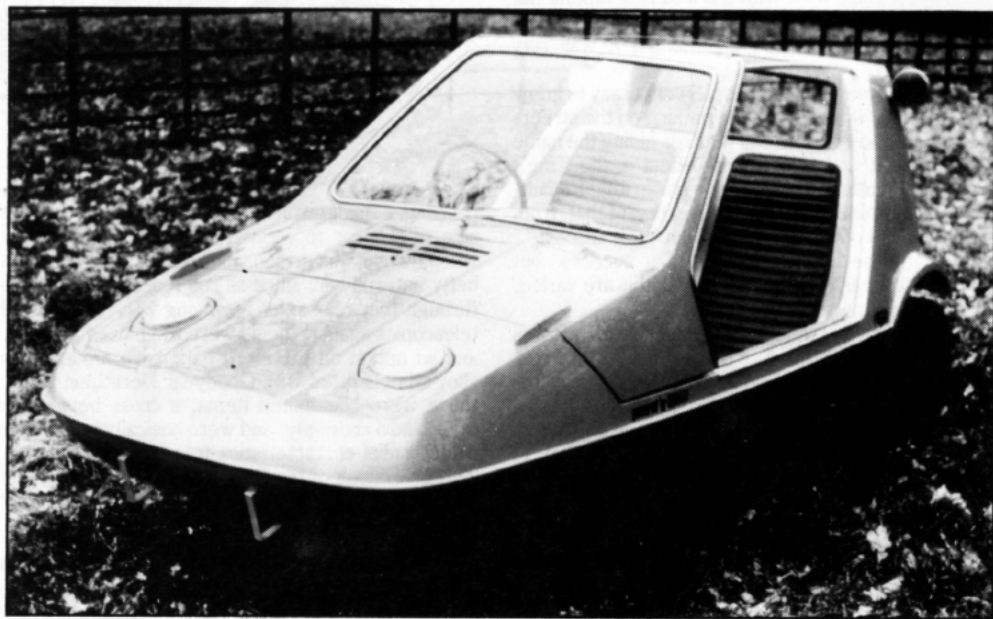
Carnaby Street, that garish, filthy, neon glow of a shopping street, was in full swing, the smell of incense trying, but not really succeeding, to hide the all-pervasive pong of illegal substances. Shops like Lord John and Take Six spawned cheap (and cheaply-made) but wildly fashionable clothes for the masses. They even wrote a song about it – remember *Dedicated Follower of Fashion?*

In hindsight, my memories of it are as an unreal, zany, slightly out of kilter time with, in the background, a sad and seedy feel to it. Nothing it seemed was destined to last, and it didn't; so what the hell, enjoy yourself. It was fun, if weird, to live through. Nothing summed it up quite so brilliantly, so accurately or so succinctly as the Bond Bug.

The fact that it was a three-wheeler was almost incidental. Much more important was the fact that it was painted tangerine orange, a colour so powerful it battered the eyeballs with a club, a sort of day-glo baseball bat of a machine, so dark glasses were almost essential. And then, instead of chrome strips and script there was black: black shadow writing for the name, black stripes that ran vertically up one side, across the top and down the other, a black boot lid and a black bumper up front, not to mention the black upholstery inside. Then there was the up-and-over canopy for entry and exit, unless you were lean and lithe or it was raining, in which case there were those sidescreen doors. It was *wild*, baby, yeah, and so incredibly trendy you wouldn't believe it. And that, I suspect, was half the problem: clothes, pop songs, fashion came and went instantly, while cars had to last a little longer, and pretty soon the Bug was more joke than fun.

The Bug's parentage was as bizarre as the car itself – by Reliant out of Bond. It was as clean a break from tradition as you could get. Ray Wiggin, head of Reliant at the time of its launch: "We – Reliant and Bond, which we'd taken over – were very large in what three-wheeler market there was at the time, and the image of the main-stream vehicle was, shall we say, rather pedestrian. We simply wanted to appeal to another market, and something *avant-garde* but economical and sporty was what was needed. And, at the time, the big motor-bike was regarded as somewhat anti-social, so we thought we'd go for the youngsters buying these machines".

Tom Karen, head of Ogle Design, responsible for its shape: "We'd started working for Reliant back in 1963, and as well as doing all the usual things I had a



Above: The first Bug was actually a spider ... this is an early prototype with pop-up headlamps.  
Left: The initial styling rendering was even whackier, but outline is already defined

habit of throwing new ideas at Ray. He was very receptive and the ideal patron. Now, I felt that post-war British three-wheelers were decidedly dull and down-market, whereas pre-war machines such as the Morgan or the BSA had had quite a good image. It all came together when Reliant bought Bond. Ray wanted to put a lively new model through the Preston factory, thought a sporty model was the way to go, and that opened the door for the Bug. It was going to be something lively, for youngsters who could take advantage of all the benefits of a three-wheeler – lower age limit, cheaper tax and so on. Another useful factor was that the Robin was being developed with a whole new chassis, and a shortened version could be used for the Bug.

"So we threw some way-out sketches at Ray. I think this rather frightened Reliant at the time – remember that what was going down the line was very conventional to say the least. Ray, however,

was, as ever, enthusiastic, so we were given a chassis and built a mock-up to explore the best configurations and arrangements. The whole thing was very compact, as you can imagine. We tried different door arrangements because not everybody at Tamworth went along with the canopy, but a single door has production advantages. We then agreed to build a prototype, which was a bit different from the final thing. The rear suspension was on display, for example, and there were pop-up headlamps. However, this meant that there was no storage space for anything, especially the side curtains, and there was a need for this, so the boot was added, and the pop-up headlamps were deemed as unnecessary expense, so they were ditched. Incidentally, I specified a flat glass windscreen to keep production costs down and I was nearly talked out of it by some who thought it looked awful. However, when it appeared in production, nobody

commented ... One major attraction of the whole thing, of course, was that it was basically a single shell which could be pulled straight from a one-piece mould since there were no under-cuts. It went together very, very elegantly. Reliant evaluated that prototype, liked it, and it went into production.

"It was full of neat touches. The single wiper, for example: common nowadays, daring then. I was also very keen on a single colour which would make it very conspicuous and you'd notice every one: with a big colour option range they'd fade into the rest of the traffic. That was a big innovation, putting all the production into one colour ...

"Another thing was the badging. Reliant were tempted to go for the traditional sort of thing. I put it to Ray that that wasn't the way to go, it needed something different and bold, so we went for the black graphics. The ad agency got very excited indeed about that, what with the lettering around the fuel cap giving octane rating, and next to the wheels giving tyre pressures. They thought it was *very* aircraft!

"When it was launched people went crazy to know what it was – when they were running on the streets pre-launch they used to pull the tape hiding the name off to read it! It had the same effect in the King's Road as a Lamborghini, and for a cheap little Reliant-built fun machine to have that effect meant that, from a design point of view, it was an enormous success".

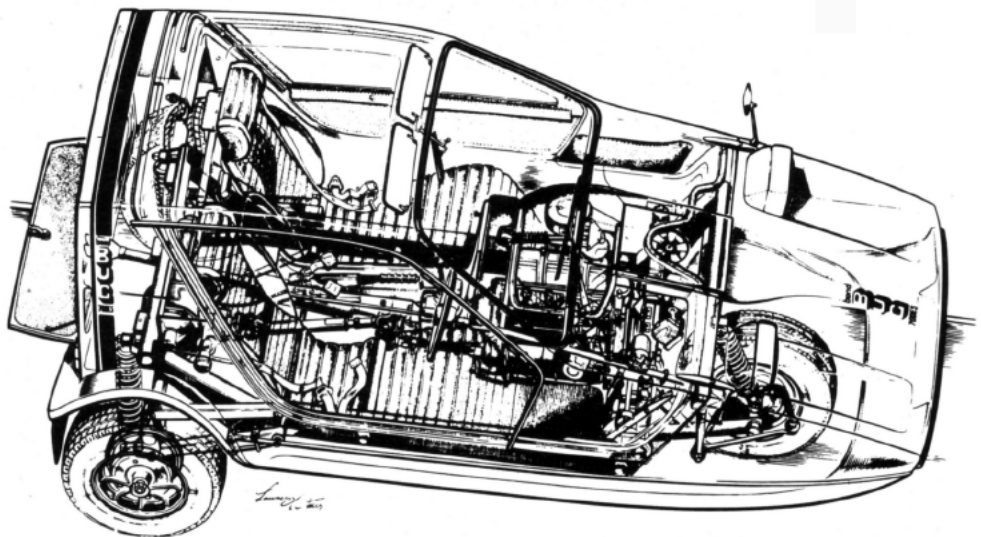
Design-wise it may have been a success, but financially it wasn't. The reasons for this are varied, but the main one was cost. Ray Wiggin:

"There was just too much engineering in it. It was costing us about 90 per cent of the price it would cost to make a four-wheeler, so we had to price it accordingly, which was too expensive."

There were other reasons for its demise. Production had started in Preston but transferred to Tamworth, and neither location really seemed to be able to come to grips with quality. To be honest, they were not very well-made. But possibly the biggest mistake was selling them through traditional Reliant dealerships. The average Reliant owner was as square as square could be, and shuddered at the sight of this strange, bright orange monstrosity, while those to whom it appealed, the flamboyant, rich youth, wouldn't be seen dead buying a car from a shop that sold staid, boring three-wheelers and motorbike-and-sidecar outfits. Image, you see ... Production only lasted a couple of years, and though Reliant didn't make a loss on them, they didn't make a huge profit either, so it just faded away. All told 2562 were made, the last being registered on 4 January 1975 – but by then production had long since ceased.

The rather staid weeklies took to the Bug like a duck to water, with a rather 'chortle, chortle' approach. *Motor* admitted it: 'When we first met our Bug we couldn't resist a chuckle' they noted, but went on to point out that 'At £630 it's not sufficient to view it as just a fun car – you can build a beach buggy for a lot less' and 'For £23 less you can buy a basic Hillman Imp'. *Autocar* had a real side-splitting session: 'The Bond Bug is different because it represents a completely new approach to the economy three-wheeler and it is our prediction that it will become the *Mustang of its class*'. Ho ho. Even better, more rib-tickling, was the final paragraph of their road test: 'The bootlid is a ready-made blackboard for signs like 'Apollo 14', 'I left the other half at home', 'Girl wanted: must be experienced' and 'Don't laugh, madam, your daughter may be inside.'

There was nothing all that hilarious about the mechanicals, which followed accepted Reliant Regal practice. There was a very sturdy chassis consisting of a pair of deep, box-section side-members, up-swept fore and aft, and joined by tubes. The engine was the lovely little Reliant all-alloy 700cc four, giving 29bhp or 31bhp according to CR. The four-speed 'box was also a Reliant unit. Suspension at the front was by a leading arm and coil spring/damper unit, with Burman Douglas worm and peg steering, while the rear axle was extremely well located via four trailing arms and a short Panhard rod on the



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passenger's side, which biased the roll centre to that side of the car to counteract the driver's weight when the car was driven solo. Naturally there was a hefty anti-roll bar, since all roll reactions had to go through that rear axle. Springing was by coils and telescopic again. Wheels were Mini-sized at 10ins, and an option on the more expensive models was alloy wheels fitted with Goodyear Decathlon tyres: these were bias-belted items, a cross between a radial and a cross-ply, and were basically an attempt to get radial characteristics from a cross-ply tyre. Three versions of the Bug were offered, varying in levels of trim, the most expensive – and most popular – being the 700ES.

**"It had the same effect in the Kings Road as a Lamborghini, and for a cheap little Reliant-built car, from a design point of view, it was an enormous success"**



The performance nowadays doesn't seem all that brilliant: *Autocar* wound it up to a rousing 75mph maximum, and it took 23.2secs to reach 60mph from a standstill – but these figures were actually quicker than those of, for example, a Mini, a Hillman Imp or a Fiat 850 ... Ray Wiggin again:

"We actually detuned the Bug for production – the development vehicles were much too fast. I used to drive one from Tamworth to Preston up the M6, in the middle lane, and something like a Cortina would catch me up. I'd put my foot down and just leave him ... It was good for 90 to 95-ish in initial form!" *Autocar* recorded a rather disappointing 35mpg overall, which was explained when they said 'The fun we had with the Bug and the way we drove it to the limit for most of the test mileage took its toll of the fuel consumption'. Since it was capable of giving 70.3mpg at 30mph, and 39.2mpg at 60mph, they really must have clogged it!


With an ultra-low weight, ultra-low centre of gravity, ultra-wide stance at the back and that nervous steering it would scuttle around a corner like a spider on a carpet. But only up to a point: you *had* to remember it only had three wheels, as motoring journalist Stuart Marshall discovered:

"Reliant launched the car at Woburn Abbey. We were given a spiel about it – the car for those who are too young to be square, that sort of thing – and were told that it cornered rather well. I set off as though I was in a Mini-Cooper on the roads around the back of the Abbey with a fellow from Reliant sitting next to me. As we reached the first corner he said, in a nervous Midland scent, 'Eh, sir, remember it's only got three wheeeeeeeee ...'

"We did a complete, 360-degree roll like a Labrador pup on a lawn, and it fell back on its wheels having shed mirrors and handles and things. But – it had retained its structural integrity, as we say nowadays. I turned the key, the engine started, and I drove off, falling about with hysterical laughter ...

"It was, of course, a simple demonstration of weight transfer. On four wheels, you put most of the weight on the outside front wheel in a corner, and of course the Bug didn't have one, just a gaping void."

It was a crazy car for a crazy age, a child truly born of its time, but its time was too fleeting, and as fashions changed so it fell out of favour, as rapidly as flower power flared trousers.

And isn't that where I came in? 

*Top: Cutaway drawing shows sturdy frame, neat packaging, steering system. Left: Bugs Bunny at the 1970 Earl's Court show – journalists said "Ear, 'ear' ..."*