

The long and short of it

Whether you're a traditionalist or a modernist, the Meyers Manx offers something for everyone

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What with this year (2014) being the 50th anniversary of the Meyers Manx, we thought it apt to look at how far Bruce Meyers' humble Beach Buggy has come in half a century, and who better to go to find out than Mark Dryden at Flatlands

Engineering in Norfolk. Mark has been building show-winning Buggies in this country now for many years, and has honed his art to the point where, with just one assistant, he can assemble a turnkey, short-wheelbase Buggy in a week. That's not your average 40-hour week, admittedly, and Mark's the first to admit it's only possible because of the investment he has made in stock and a chain of trusted suppliers and services he can rely on, but it does sum up the whole ethos behind what started out as a cheap, quick to build, fun car movement. While Bruce Meyers wasn't the first to

build a stripped-down car for blasting around the sand dunes, he was the first to marry the inherent benefits of the lightweight, self-contained, air-cooled Volkswagen chassis with a pretty-looking, glass fibre body. In actual fact, he didn't use the Beetle floorpan at all on his first run of Manx Buggies, just the main chassis components bolted to a monocoque tub, but he quickly developed that into the traditional Buggy layout of a separate body bolted to a shorted floorpan. In doing so, he started what rapidly became the biggest single fad the VW scene has ever seen.

And while there has been a resurgence in interest in traditional, 1960's and '70s-style Beach Buggies in recent years, there has also been a shift change in motoring laws and safety legislation across the globe, which is what led Meyers to, as he put it, "address the limitations of the original Meyers Manx." Those were primarily a lack of space, a lack of safety provision and the inaccessibility of some mechanical items.





> 1600cc twin-port motor has been rebuilt by Alex Bruce to stock specs and 'sensibly' detailed. It uses a Split Bus oil bath air cleaner and deep sump as it will see plenty of heat and sand in Tenerife. Both cars have chromed Manx Sidewinder exhausts

His answer was the Manxster 2+2, a completely updated, long-wheelbase Buggy with room for, as the name suggests, 2+2 people, an integrated, six-point rollcage structure with side impact bars and provision for seat belts, and an opening engine lid and bonnet.

Alternative thinking

With the introduction in the UK of first SVA (Single Vehicle Approval), and its replacement, BIVA (Basic Individual Vehicle Approval), Mark feared the writing might potentially be on the wall for the traditional style of Buggy with a cut 'n' welded floorpan. "I started looking around at an alternative Buggy we could offer – one that used an unmodified floorpan and wouldn't have to go through BIVA. The Manxster 2+2 was, in my opinion, the only good looking long wheelbase one round. Because the basic kit is more comprehensive, they are more expensive to build, and we're finding they attract a different kind of customer – generally older people, not necessarily in the VW scene as such, who prioritise practicality and safety over looks."

So, with one of each kind of Buggy in matching RAL blue gel coat finishes in the Flatlands Engineering workshop at the same time, we were keen to find out just how different the owners are. Mark: "They're both overseas buyers, the short-wheelbase Manx was built for an old customer of ours and has now been shipped out to Tenerife, while the Manxster is for a car dealer in Switzerland. He actually chose the colour and had a lot of input into the overall look of his car, even going as far as ordering the seats in the States and having them shipped direct to me. To be honest, they were the one part of the build I was a bit concerned about as I thought they were a bit bulky. Plus, we've learned from building Manxsters that you really need to use fold-forward seats in the front or it makes access to the rear seats a bit difficult, to say the least."

▲ Stock four-bolt steels aren't something you'll see on a Buggy too often. These are off-the-shelf 5.5s on the front and widened sevens on the rear

Mark liked his choice of colour so much that he ordered a Manx-style body from one of his suppliers in the same colour, and when his customer approached him about building a "basic, no-frills, reliable Buggy" he could hire out on Tenerife, that body fell into the mix.

Mark: "He asked me how much it would cost to build a real basic Buggy, and I said I didn't know exactly, but that we'd build it and see. He left the spec of it pretty much up to us and, fortunately, it came in at a price he was happy with, so he said he'd have it." Although Mark was reluctant to reveal exact build costs

as he stressed it is entirely down to the customer's choice of components, when pushed he did say he thought it would be possible for someone to build a similar SWB Buggy for around the six grand mark, if they were prepared to put in the legwork and clean up old parts and make them work. "You have to remember though, we've got chassis already shortened and painted in stock, refurbished and powder coated original components on the shelves, our line of stainless products we have developed over the years and I have a list with Ben at VW

Heritage, so I can call him up and ask him to send me a Buggy package – that's all the new bearings, seals, track rod ends, steering box, master cylinder etc. I need to put one together. And we always do that as I won't cut any corners on the mechanical side of things. If you have to pay for parts to be blasted and painted, or pay someone to shorten a chassis for you, you could easily end up spending more." Let's not forget, it's also harder and harder to find cheap donor Beetles these days.

TECH INFO

BODY: Authentic SWB Manx-style body, RAL blue gel coat

ENGINE: rebuilt 1600cc twin port; oil bath air cleaner; dynamo, Manx Sidewinder exhaust

GEARBOX: stock 1300, new bearings, re-shimmed, media blasted

SUSPENSION: Stock balljoint front beam with adjuster; stock 4-bolt drum brakes

WHEELS AND TYRES: 5.5 and 7 x 15 4-bolt steels, 195/60 and 235/70 x 15 tyres

INTERIOR: Not much, but padded Buggy buckets for a little extra comfort



▲ Stock balljoint axle has been rebuilt with all new parts for longevity, and adjusters to fine tune the tyre-to-wheelarch gap. Polished stainless front nudge bar was a later addition requested by the car's owner

▲ Budget didn't stretch even to chrome tail light housings, but silver paint gives a similar effect. Note these units have to be modified to fit the body as neatly as this

> Interior couldn't be more simple if it tried – late model steering column, single stock gauge in the dash, stock shifter and a Grant 12½-inch steering wheel. Oh, and no wipers



“It would be possible to build a similar SWB Buggy for around the six grand mark”



▲ 1776cc motor has a few extras like the Pertronix Flamethrower dizzy, but this is Flatlands' basic level of fit and finish. Neat, huh?

◀ 5-spoke pervs might be surprised to hear these are Torque Thrust Ds, not IIs, but have since been discontinued in chrome. Tyres are 215/60 and 275/60s, what Mark calls the standard size for Manxsters

Despite the same colour gel coats, there is a clear difference in the styling of the two cars – the Manxster using a full complement of Auto Meter gauges, chromed American Racing Equipment wheels, Poly Performance Mastercraft suspension seats and a VW Heritage-supplied 1776cc dual Weber-fed motor, while the Manx has four-bolt steels with hubcaps, a single stock speedo, basic Buggy seats and a rebuilt, but internally stock, 1600cc motor. Underneath, however, is a different matter – apart from the small matter of a missing 14½ inches out of the Manx's floorpan, both are remarkably similar in specification. Both use VW Heritage heavy duty replacement floorpan halves, both have stock balljoint front beams and swing axle rear suspensions and both have standard VW brakes all round – the Manx relying on drums at all four corners, the Manxster discs at the front. To make the most of the extra power from the 1776, the Manxster also benefits from a rebuilt gearbox from VW Heritage with a 4.125 ring and pinion. As with the Manx, the brief was for a drivetrain that was reliable and not stressed, only this time with a little more power than a stock 1600. "It's a great little combination," Mark says. "If you put your foot down, there's enough there to make you smile, but they're totally reliable and not mega expensive either."

Back scuttling

It'll come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Flatlands Engineering's work that, despite the obvious differences in budget, the two cars are similarly detailed throughout, and both stand up to close scrutiny from lying on your back underneath, should you be that way inclined. "Whatever the budget, I won't compromise on quality," says Mark adamantly. "So all the replaceable

▲ Manxster body is designed to take flat, aftermarket, elephant's feet light units. You might choose to change those...

parts are new, they've both got nicely detailed 'pans and parts like our stainless steel headlights, coated pushrod tubes, heatproof paint on the barrels and neatly trimmed tinware on the engines. What the short-wheelbase one hasn't got is chrome – that would have pushed the budget!" he laughs.

The bottom line, I suppose, is you pays your money and you takes your choice. Though it is true to say the Manxster shown here cost a little over double that of the Manx to build, it is an entirely different product.

Even without the fancy chromed wheels and bigger engine, it's the result of nigh on half a century of beach Buggy development, and what it lacks in cute looks it offers in other, more practical ways. Mark: "For a Buggy, or any plastic-bodied car, it's really quite sturdy and inflexible. The rollcage ties into the front beam and the rear frame horns and sandwiches the body to the 'pan." And with the added benefits of seat belts, headrests, wing mirrors and side impact bars, there's no doubt it feels a whole lot safer place to be out on the road. The really great thing though is that these days you have the choice. Despite initial worries, and not a little scaremongering on the internet, it is still quite feasible – and legal – to put a short-wheelbase Buggy through a BIVA test and come out smelling of roses. But if you don't want the hassle of that, or just fancy a bit of the bigger Buggy experience, the Manxster 2+2 could be the one for you. ■

Thanks: Just Steve, for holding the fort while I wander round the countryside in the van collecting and dropping off parts.

TECH INFO

BODY: Manxster 2+2 body, RAL blue gel coat

ENGINE: VW Heritage 1776cc; twin Weber 40IDFs; Manx Sidewinder exhaust; breather box kit, full flow oil filter

GEARBOX: Stock rebuilt unit with 4.125 ring and pinion from VW Heritage

SUSPENSION: Standard balljoint beam with adjusters; VW discs / drums; all hubs drilled to Chevy 5 x 4¾ stud pattern

WHEELS AND TYRES: 6 and 10 x 15 chromed American Racing Torque Thrust Ds; 215/60 and 275/60 tyres

INTERIOR: Poly Performance seats; Auto Meter Traditional Chrome gauges; Grant wood rim

“The result of nigh-on half a century of Beach Buggy development”