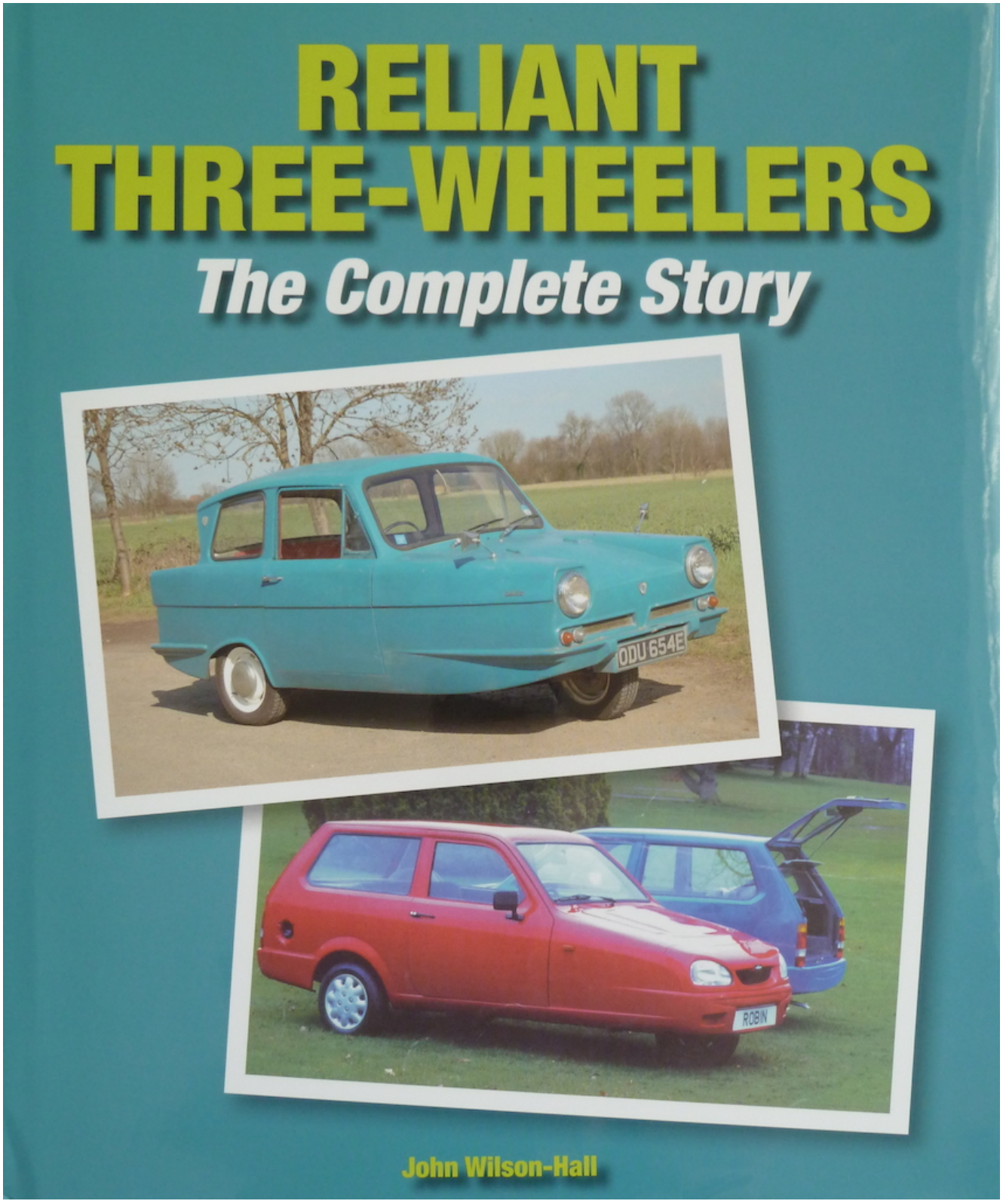
Book Review – Reliant Three-Wheelers; The Complete Story

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Reviewed by Kim Henson.

Title: Reliant Three-Wheelers; The Complete Story

Author: John Wilson-Hall

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Three wheels on your wagon?

Three-wheeled vehicles have been part of the British motoring scene for over 120 years, and the Reliant company was a mainstay in this market from the 1930s to the start of this century.

Favourable UK laws meant that for most three-wheelers, road tax rates were (and remain) considerably lower than for equivalent four wheeled vehicles, and the holder of a full motorcycle licence could drive a three-wheeled car or van without the need to pass an additional driving test. In turn, this led to many such vehicles being purchased by people moving up from a motorcycle or from a motorcycle and sidecar.

Of all three-wheelers produced in Britain, those manufactured by the Reliant Motor Company were the most like a conventional four wheeled car or van. All but the earliest examples featured four cylinder, four stroke water-cooled engines, and with a traditional rear wheel drive set-up, the power being delivered to the rear wheels via a four speed

gearbox and a short open propeller shaft. Most alternative three wheelers relied on single or twin cylinder air-cooled motors, and were less powerful.

Saloon version Reliants featured four seats and later examples (from the early 1960s) had a particularly spacious luggage boot. For those Reliant buyers who had previously relied on a motorcycle and sidecar for family transport, this meant that the cars had special appeal, for now all the family could travel together, with full shelter from inclement weather, and they could also carry all their luggage in a roomy, dry compartment.

It is true that until the 1970s Reliants were fairly basic in terms of specification and fittings, to the point of being austere. However few people realise that in order to qualify for the road tax and driving licence concessions already referred to, the company had to build their vehicles with an 8 cwt weight limit, so, for example, even the spare wheel had to be an 'accessory' rather than part of the vehicle's standard kit…

In his fascinating book, John Wilson-Hall charts the history of the Reliant company and its three-wheeled products, from its beginnings in the 1930s, when its first vehicles were three-wheeled delivery vans, to the boom times of the 1960s and 70s when the Regal saloons and vans were very popular and made money for the company. Indeed it was the profits from the three-wheelers that made possible the development of cars such as the four wheeled Scimitar GTE (etc.).

The story tells of the use of Austin Seven-based sidevalve engines (significantly improved by Reliant) until 1962. It goes on to cover the development by the company of their own all-aluminium overhead valve four cylinder motors, used from 1962 onwards. It was remarkable that a comparatively small firm like Reliant could design and build its own power units. Indeed the company was the first British firm to produce in volume all-aluminium power units.

Covered in detail too are bodywork construction methods, involving lightweight materials including aluminium and, from the mid-1950s, glass-fibre.

In addition to the vehicles, the book provides in-depth insight into the background against which they were produced, and the personalities involved in the firm.

It also describes in detail the move from Regals to Robins and Rialtos, and then tells of the sad decline of the company as it was passed from owner to owner, until eventually the last of the three-wheelers was produced in 2002.

In addition, space is given to the Reliant Owners' Club and its activities, and there is also discussion within its pages about the prejudice in some quarters against three wheelers, and their safety aspects. It is especially interesting to read how the 'Top Gear' programme had to resort to using heavy weights on one side of the vehicle, plus a smaller diameter rear wheel on the same side of the car, to make it roll over for the camera…

Of course it is easy, for those who wish, to make fun of the three-wheeled Reliants. However for many families they provided (and can still provide) reliable and ultra-economical, cost-effective motoring (most versions are quite capable of returning 60+ mpg, and Reliants have been doing this since the 1950s!).

It is interesting to note too (and this is mentioned in the book) that most Reliant owners are very happy with their vehicles. Of course, driving a Reliant requires a slightly different technique, compared with a four wheeler (and some appreciation of the fact that there is only one wheel at the front…) but most owners find them fun to drive, and with their very tight turning circle they are especially easy to park and to manoeuvre.

The current, and increasingly strong, demand for Reliants today is no doubt partly due to the use of a yellow Regal Supervan that featured in the BBC's 'Only Fools and Horses'. Indeed the asking prices of Reliant vans have risen rapidly in the last few years, with saloon values also rising on a similar trajectory. So for those who have kept their Reliant three-wheelers for some time, and who may wish to sell, perhaps they will have the last laugh, at least in terms of cash!

VERDICT

A thoroughly enjoyable read, full of interesting information and made even better by the many historically-important photographs used throughout the book.

If you are an enthusiast of Reliants, or simply interested in finding out more about the unusual, innovative and very British vehicles that the company produced, I recommend it whole-heartedly.