Vauxhall Astra Mk 7 1.2 petrol – First Impressions

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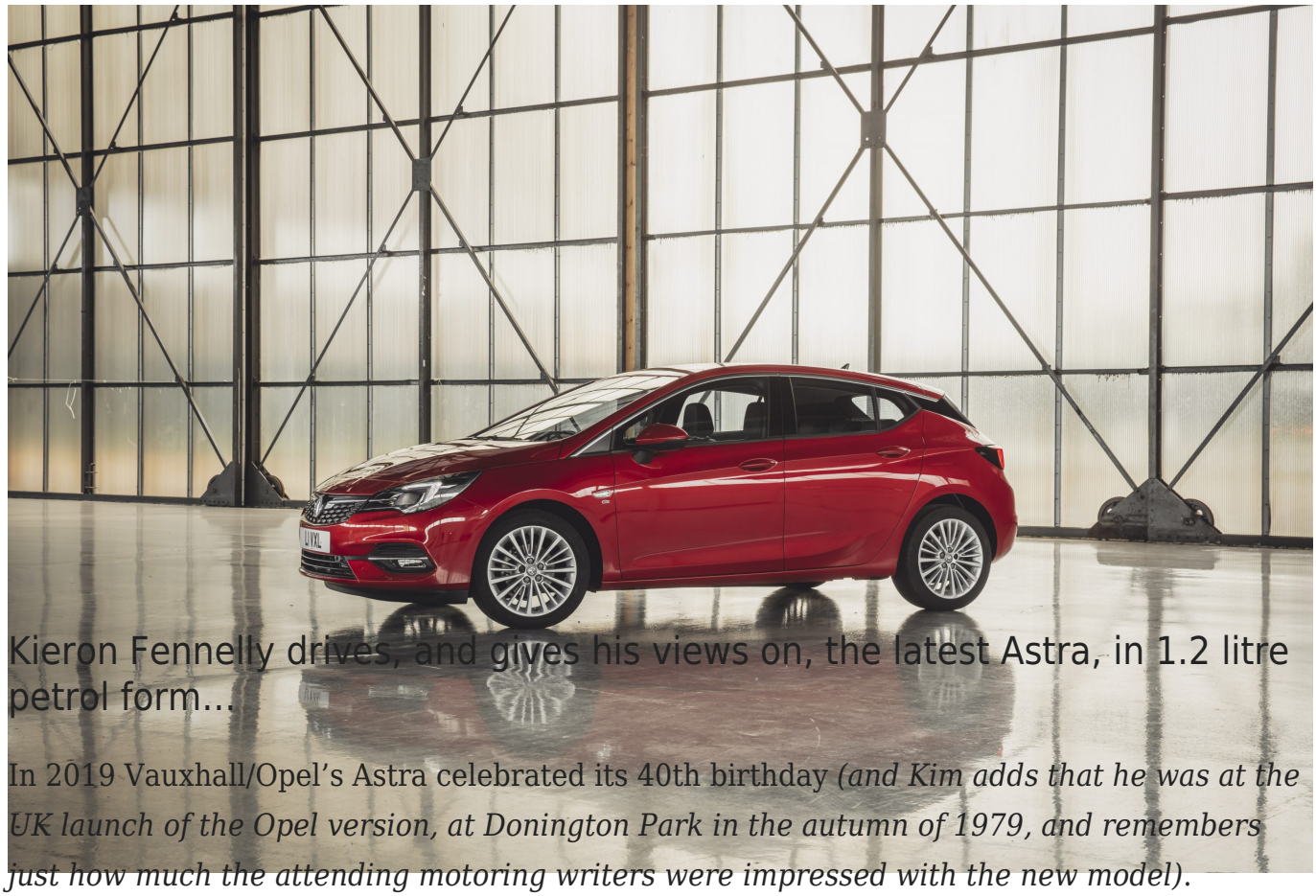

Kieron Fennelly drives, and gives his views on, the latest Astra, in 1.2 litre petrol form…

In 2019 Vauxhall/Opel's Astra celebrated its 40th birthday *(and Kim adds that he was at the UK launch of the Opel version, at Donington Park in the autumn of 1979, and remembers just how much the attending motoring writers were impressed with the new model).*

Many readers might recall the original Mk 1 Astra, immortalised in the 1996 Helen Mirren film, Some Mother's Son which was based on the Maze hunger strikers. That Mk1, General Motors' first foray into front wheel drive, stood out from its competitors, the VW Golf and Ford Escort, its straight lines and flat panels an elegant and handsome departure for a Vauxhall/ Opel known for its conservative styling. Forty years on and you would be hard pressed to distinguish the latest Astra Mk 7 from its Mk 6 predecessor, if indeed you could

identify it at all without looking for the badge, so homogenous and regimented has modern motor car styling become. This is a shame, because bland as most of today's mass-produced cars are, the latest Astra, seemingly unchanged externally, is a worthwhile improvement over the rather average Mk 6.

GM goes to some

pains to stress that the key to the latest Astra lies not just in its entirely new engines, but that the car itself has been re-engineered too, its chassis 'optimised,' damping revised and steering recalibrated. The manufacturer adds that subtle adjustments to styling mean the latest car has class-leading aerodynamics. The intention clearly is to make the Astra both more economical (a claimed 21% CO2 reduction suggests mpg will also be better) and more refined and responsive to drive.

The petrol Mk 7 is said to weigh an impressive 200 kg (441 lb) less than the Mk 6.

The new, twin camshaft, turbocharged engine range comprises aluminium alloy three-cylinder units, petrol and diesel, developed says its maker, long before Peugeot took over Opel-Vauxhall in 2018. The petrols comprise a 1.2 available in three states of tune, 108, 120 and 143 bhp and a 1.4 offered only with a nine speed automatic transmission. The 1.5 diesel comes in two states of tune – 103 and 120 horsepower.

The brake servo receives an electrical assist (as they are now called) Opel explaining that the manifold-less design of the petrol engine (quite advanced engineering in fact) means there is no hydraulic assistance available anyway. This is part of a general trend to electrifying ancillaries which previously used engine power – it began with the fan and now extends to the water pump and steering, all in the name of lighter, more efficient power units. Not so many years ago, you needed a (heavy) four cylinder engine approaching twice the capacity to get the 120 bhp of the Astra's midrange mid range 1.2 and it would also have consumed petrol at twice the rate.

The new Astra's interior has been lightly retrimmed in softer material and buyers opting for the Navi–Pro package get an eight inch screen with voice command, front and rear cameras and a driver's seat which will massage its occupant. Otherwise this is the pleasant, reasonably spacious hatchback with which Astra owners, or indeed anyone who has rented an Avis car, are probably already familiar.

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On the road, the new Astra offers a decent drive. The petrol 1.2, here in its 145 horsepower highest tune version, is quite lively though turbo lag means it barely pulls below 1600 rpm. The driver is reminded if he lets engine speed fall this low speed as the unit becomes rumbly and audibly unhappy. Like virtually all modern cars the Astra's six speed 'box has very high gearing, the result of noise and emissions legislation which renders fifth and sixth suitable only for motorways or fast stretches. It means the lower gears are well spread, rather like four speed gearboxes of old, but clutch and gear change are well coordinated.

The engine revs enthusiastically through its 2,000-5,000 rpm powerband and has that attractive three-pot ‘bark’ which encourages press-on driving if you are so disposed. Fully laden or on gradients are the only occasions when the petrol Astra might feel a little under-engined and in this respect the diesel – which has up to 30% more torque – would be a better bet for some drivers. Indeed the three cylinder oil burner is very smooth and barely identifiable as a diesel, deftly picking up speed when asked and deceptively quick. It is rare that a diesel can even approach its petrol equivalent for refinement, but the Astra’s three cylinder diesel certainly does.

Keen drivers will enjoy the latest Vauxhall: The steering is sharper than before, if still too light, and the Astra is very sure-footed. Chassis control is good, the car feels very stable during fast cornering and neither is it deflected by humps and bumps as it turns. The cabin is well-insulated: ride on rough surfaces is commendably refined and GM’s claims for its

new chassis are certainly borne out.

VERDICT

The Astra is a likeable and practical car, but a traditional hatchback in a marketplace which buys more high-riding and often ridiculous SUVs every year – which usually offer little more than a higher seating position and worse fuel consumption. Certainly few of them will be as good to drive as this Vauxhall. The next generation Astra, if indeed there is one, will surely be very different as Opel-Vauxhall manufacturing is absorbed into the vast PSA empire. If so the Mk7 Astra makes an impressive finale to forty years.

Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Vauxhall Astra 1.2 Petrol 145 PS

Body style: Five door hatchback

Price: £19,185.

Engine: 1199 cc direct injection three cylinder petrol with single turbocharger

Transmission: Six speed manual, front wheel drive

Max power & torque: 145 PS @ 5,500 rpm, 225 Nm (166 lb.ft) @ 2,000 rpm–5,000 rpm

Fuel Consumption: 51.4 mpg / 5.5 litres/100 km (Combined figure)

CO2 emissions: 99g/km

Performance: 0–62 mph: 9.8 secs/ top speed: 124 mph (Manufacturer’s figures)

Kerb weight: 1,120 kg (2,469 lb)