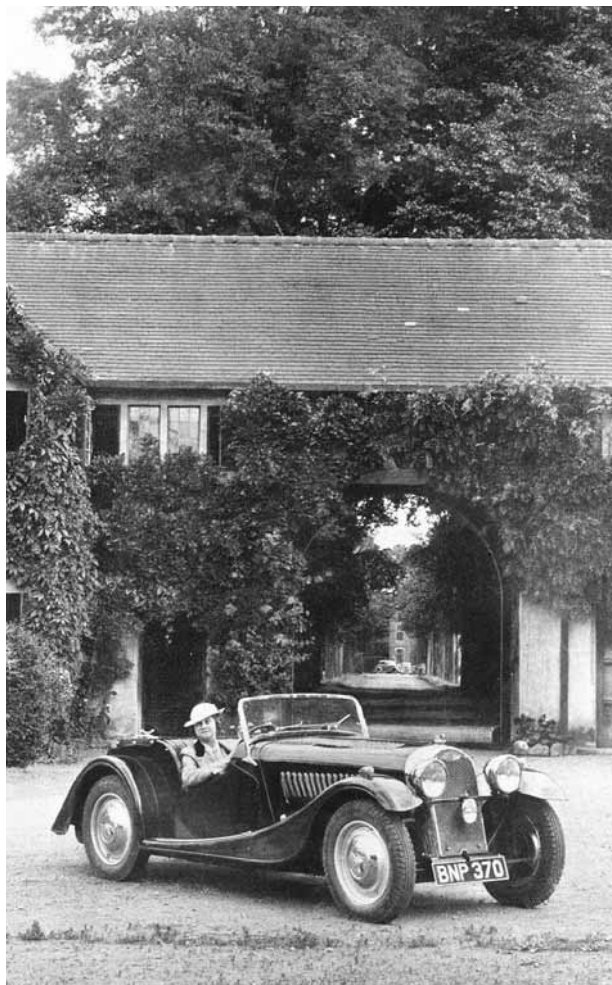


A Very Special Le Mans Car



Morgan 4-4 BNP 370 outside the Gatehouse of Madresfield Court

The Morgan Motor Company is rightly proud of celebrating 70 years of continuous production of the traditional four cylinder Morgan 4 wheeler – an achievement unrivalled by any motor manufacturer.

But is there a car that stands head and shoulders above all others?

A Series 1 Morgan 4-4 carrying the chassis number '259' could be a contender. This is her story.

1937

Chassis 259 was registered by the Morgan factory on 28th April 1937, just over a year since the first Morgan 4-4 had been introduced to a car hungry market. It was fitted with a perfectly standard 2 seater body, Coventry Climax 1122cc engine and 16 inch wheels. It was painted red, registered to the factory as a works car and given the registration plate BNP 370.

Two weeks later, the car began its long and competitive career. HFS Morgan drove '259' in the Edinburgh trial forming part of a 3 car Morgan team. The weather was kind and two of the three Morgan team members 'cleaned' all the hills to take premier awards. HFS made an uncharacteristic mistake stopping astride the wrong line on Tan Hill robbing the Morgan team of a clean sweep.

In August 1937, '259' swapped mud for the glamour of the front cover of The Light Car magazine. The car was shown posing outside the Gatehouse of Madresfield Court – the scene for many an exciting speed trial in the 1920s.

Meanwhile, a certain young solicitor's daughter, Prudence Fawcett was fueling a passion for fast cars and motor racing by attending the 1937 Le Mans 24 hour race. There she witnessed Wimille and Benoist triumph in their Bugatti 'Tank' 57G whilst also taking note of compatriot Kaye Petre driving one of the Austin Seven 'Grasshoppers'. There were no less than 6 women entered that year with the best result being achieved by Madame Largeot sharing a Simca Fiat to a class win.

1938

By the Christmas of 1937, Prudence's mind was made up. By January 1938 she had applied for and received her RAC Competitor Licence and with advice from her friend and Morgan agent, Lancelot Prideaux Brune, decided to enter a Morgan in the 1938 Le Mans race.

HFS agreed to lend her a Morgan and the car was fitted with a large capacity fuel tank, twin fuel fillers protruding through the rear tonneau cover and cycle wings. The Morgan was sent to Prideaux Brune's Winter Garden garage in Holborn, Rivers Fletcher recalling the car arriving with its lightweight bodywork.



Prudence Fawcett and friend sitting on pit wall

The Morgan was entrusted to ace mechanic Dick Anthony. The engine capacity was 1098cc to fit into the under 1100cc class. The Morgan carried the licence plate BNP 370.



Prudence Fawcett and Geoffrey White in BNP 370

The Le Mans 24 Hour race took place on 18th June with Prudence sharing the drive with the Winter Garden garage's Sales Manager, Geoffrey White. Given the race number 40, the entry caused quite a stir in the national press – Prudence being described as “fair and slender” and “good to look at”. Dressed in white overalls with a matching white leather racing helmet, Prudence added a touch of glamour to the macho atmosphere of the paddock.

The race, as so often is the case, was one of attrition. Of the 42 starters only 15 made it to the finish, but there in 13th place and 2nd in class was the little Morgan (behind a French entered

Singer). The Morgan had completed 1,372 miles at an average speed of 57.20mph. Being only one of two British crews to finish, the Morgan received extensive coverage in the Motoring press whilst Prudence, was pictured everywhere. “English Girls Race Lasted 24 Hours” (Daily Sketch), “Girl Novice Cheered” (Daily Express), “Sheffield Girl Amazed French Car Aces” (Sheffield Telegraph), “British Girl Beat Car Aces” (Daily Express again) and “I’m Glad its Over – her Mother” (Sheffield Daily Telegraph!!

The result was soon used in Morgan adverts and the car was immortalised by The Autocar's in house artist, Nevin with the Le Mans Morgan taking centrepiece in a Le Mans 24 hour race montage.

The TT that year was at Donington Park over a gruelling 100 lap format. The 1938 race attracted an international entry and the pre race favourites were the French Talbot Lagos and Delages. With the success of Le Mans still fresh in his mind; HFS entered the same car with Henry Laird. The car retained its 1098cc engine from Le Mans and was entered into the under 1100cc class facing stiff opposition from three Singers, two MGs, two Simca Fiats, a Fiat 1100 and lone Riley Ulster.

Carrying the number 29, the Morgan was visibly unaltered from Le Mans and must have been confident of a successful race. With the skies clear and the track dry, Henry Laird set off on what was to become anything but a simple race. First, the weather deteriorated and by half distance, the track was flooded. Next, the Morgan had also sprung a leak requiring frequent visits to the pit to replenish the radiator. Nevertheless, after 4 hours 43 minutes, the car had completed 93 laps and was placed 24th out of 31 starters. In Class, the opposition had benefited from the wet conditions with only two cars retiring. A Simca Fiat took the class win with the Delage taking overall honours – a French clean sweep.



The Morgan at Donington Park for the TT

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The Morgan's excellent 1938 racing season was rounded off a week later with a Premier Award in the High Speed Trial held at Brooklands. The Morgan, driven by Jim Goodall, lapped at 79.43mph.

1939

In February of this year the Morgan Motor Company introduced a new model, the Le Mans Replica, and used the Le Mans and TT car, BNP 370 in their advertisements. Fitted with a tuned Coventry Climax 1098cc engine, the new model was guaranteed to exceed 80 mph "in full trim".

With unrest in Europe, the prospects for international motor racing looked bleak. However, with Morgan's unqualified success at Le Mans in 1938, HFS could not ignore the chance to compete for the prestigious Rudge Whitworth Biennial Cup.

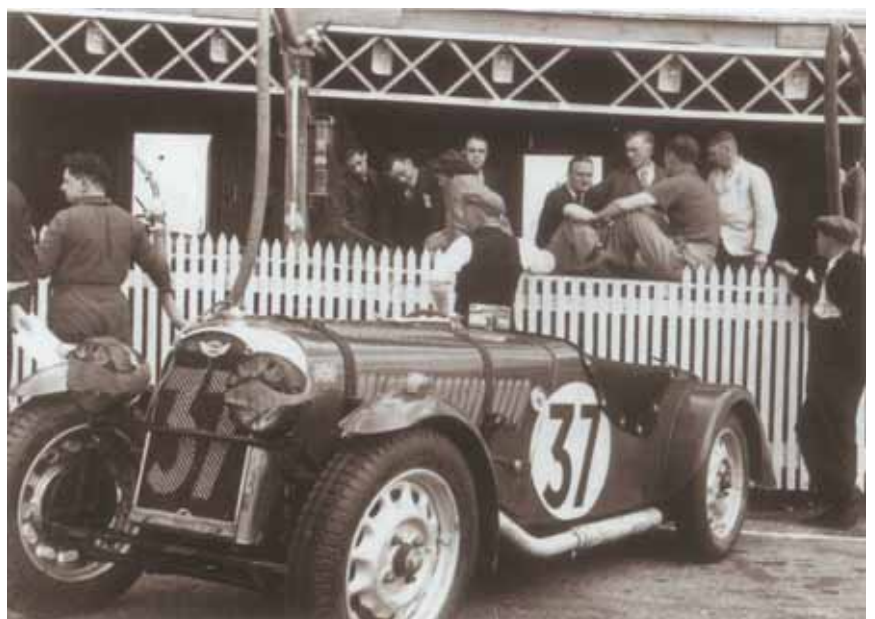


The Morgan en route to Le Mans now registered FXD 280

unique doorless shell, the rear was modified so that the twin fuel fillers now protruded from the rear metal panel and the leaky radiator was replaced and topped off with a mesh covered grill. The engine was extensively reworked boring it out to 1104cc and fitted with three SU carburettors. The dynamo was moved to a special cradle away from the water manifold. The car was to be entered into the under 1500cc class where it was felt it stood a better chance of a class win. Two years to the day of its initial birth, the Le Mans Morgan was re registered FXD 280 but still carrying the chassis number '259'.

Dick Anthony took the Le Mans car to Bagshot Heath where he entered and won the Almond Cup in the NW London Motor Clubs speed trial. The car was passed fit for Le Mans.

The 1939 race was to be held under the threat of war and turned out to be one of the last international races held. The race was run under ideal weather conditions and after a relatively uneventful 24 hours, Dick Anthony was given the honour of driving the Morgan past the chequered flag. The Morgan had completed its 2nd Le Mans 24 hour race covering 1546 miles at an average speed of 64.55mph. The Morgan had finished 15th overall and



The Morgan in the pits at Le Mans

On April 1st, Prudence married her aviator boyfriend and in a pact, agreed to give up motor racing in return for his grounding. The Le Mans Morgan needed a new driver.

To comply with the Le Mans regulations, Geoffrey White was the official entrant to Le Mans but Prudence's place behind the wheel was to be taken by Dick Anthony, again partnering Geoffrey White. The car was assigned number 37.

The car was prepared by Dick Anthony at the Winter Garden garage and was extensively reworked. The body was replaced with a

2nd in class narrowly missing out on the Rudge Whitworth Cup. The class had been won by the British HRG while Wimille and Veyron were triumphant overall in their Bugatti 57 'tank'.

By the end of the summer, Britain had entered the war and the Le Mans Morgan's racing career was cut short. Again, Henry Laird and the Le Mans Morgan had received an entry for the Donington TT race that September but at short notice, the race was cancelled.

Key Events – Pre War

1937	April	First Registered BNP 370 Edinburgh Trial
1938	June	Le Mans
	Sept	Donington TT
	Sept	Brooklands High Speed Trial
1939	April	Re Registered FXD 280
	June	Le Mans

The 1940s and 50s

During the war, the Le Mans Morgan was kept hidden under a sheet in the back of the factory. All motor racing ceased whilst severe petrol rationing was in place. But in 1947 motor racing finally returned to mainland Britain with the new airfield circuit at Goodwood announcing a September meeting. Peter Morgan considered entering the Le Mans Morgan but the complicated triple carburettor set up devised by Dick Anthony was proving difficult to keep in tune and instead, Peter entered the Morgan TT Replica "CAB 652".

Meanwhile the racing prowess of Jeff Sparrowe in a white Morgan Le Mans Replica "JUO 177" came to the attention of the factory. Jeff was hugely successful in JUO in early post war racing taking on the likes of Mike Hawthorn and Colin Chapman. So much so, that on a visit to the factory in November 1950, Jeff was offered the chance to buy the Le Mans Morgan.

Jeff must have been very frustrated with the doorless body which severely restricted a quick entry and exit. So much so that two crude doors were cut into the body – a short drivers door and a longer, more contemporary passenger door.

The Le Mans car's first recorded post war motor sport event was on 29th July 1951 where Jeff entered the Morgan into the Brunton Hill Climb. Sporting the number 18, Jeff took the under 1200cc class with a time of 36.75 secs.



Jeff Sparrowe in the Le Mans car at Goodwood, the car carrying "JUO 177" number plates to avoid road taxes!

The Holly Birkett 6 hour relay race at Silverstone on the 25th August was the cars next outing where together with Bill Allarton, Bill Parkes and John Atkins they formed an all Morgan team. Credited with 34 laps over the scratch team of Jaguars the Morgan team climbed up the order with Jeff lapping the Le Mans Morgan at over 65mph. The Morgan team sat in 2nd place overall running second best to the Aston Martin team and then the Bentleys. During the race, all four cars suffered mechanical maladies but Bill Parkes managed to get his car out for one more lap to secure 2nd place at the flag.

In 1952, Jeff was still racing JUO 177, relegating the Le Mans Morgan to his second race car – it being rather heavy in comparison with JUO. Nevertheless, the Le Mans Morgan was entered for the poorly supported BARC Goodwood race on 17th May coming 3rd out of 5 cars. Jeff took the car back to Goodwood the following month for another BARC meeting fairing little better with The Motor reporting that “Sparrowe’s slow Morgan ran doggedly on 3 cylinders” finishing a distant 4th.

The 1960s to the Present Day

The Le Mans Morgan’s glorious racing career seemed to have petered out and the car was sold. During the sixties, ‘259’ was sold to a succession of private individuals in the South East of England before being spirited off to the USA. For 30 years, the car was largely forgotten and would have remained so but for the painstaking research of Jake Alderson and Chris Chapman for their definitive book ‘Morgan Sports Cars the Early Years’. Not long after publishing their book, ‘259’s owner sadly died and the future of the car became uncertain.

By the Autumn of 2003, the Le Mans Morgan was hidden away in a barn in Connecticut, USA. She was disassembled but with all the major parts easily identifiable and with the log book still intact. Of course the car had to be saved and was safely consigned back to the UK.

The Le Mans Morgan has since been purchased by a Morgan enthusiast and its restoration has been entrusted to Morgan specialists, Techniques of Stotfold, England. The car is to be restored back to its 1939 Le Mans specification after which, it is hoped ‘259’s racing career can continue.

The discovery of ‘259’ would not have happened without the help of the Morgan community across the world, special thanks are due to Chris Towner (USA), Jake Alderson and Chris Chapman (GB), Knut Hallan (Nor) and Roger Tatton (MSCC Archive).

Key Events – Post War		
1951	Jul	Brunton Hill Climb
1951	Aug	Birkett Six Hours Relay
1952	May	Goodwood BARC
	June	Goodwood BARC