

## Pedal power



# A boyhood re-collected

Meet the millionaire who was so taken with pedal cars in his youth he now owns 400 of them. He talks to **David Bradford**

When entrepreneur Phil Collins happened upon a toy E-type Jaguar at an antique dealer in 1986, it reawakened in him a boyhood yearning that had lain dormant for more than 40 years. He snapped up the Sixties-built, pedal-driven replica for the princely sum of £22 and with that, he was hooked.

Four-hundred purchases and 25 years later, Collins has assembled the largest collection of pedal cars in Britain. Now he has put them on display in a specially converted Edwardian mill in East Sussex.

The millionaire collector, 60, exudes a restless, youthful energy and has a mischievous grin to match. He remembers, as a boy, making his own toys from whatever scraps of material he could find. Collins was raised on a council estate in Brighton, the youngest of eight siblings. His father was a

chef whose income rarely stretched to family amusements, beyond the occasional ride on Brighton's beachfront railway. It was there that a tantalising vision planted itself deep in the youngster's mind.

"It was 1955, when I was about five, having a trip on Volk's Railway, from Palace Pier to Black Rock [now Brighton Marina]. All along the seafront, in the crescent and the mews properties, where the upper class lived, we'd see children driving around in their pedal cars."

If class and economic barriers did not rule out joining in, ill health soon would. Collins contracted polio and spent the next two years in hospital, much of the time bed-ridden. When he was finally discharged, aged seven, his legs were held in callipers ("primitive iron rods with a plastic hoop at the top").

He left school at 14 and got a job in a spectacles factory, until the monotony drove him in the

direction of Brighton racecourse and work as a stable lad. A stint as a jockey was brought to a premature end by persistent injuries. It was not until the mid-Seventies, in his mid-twenties, that Collins started to make serious money. Having worked for three months "for nothing" as a glazier's apprentice, he set up his own glazing business.

"I would work on Good Friday, Easter Monday, whenever... I was earning £400 to £500 per week... I went out and bought a miner's lamp – and a lot of the blokes laughed at me – but I would be glazing in the dark."

Collins accrued a level of affluence his childhood self could not have imagined. He was finally able to afford all the toys he had never had, even if they had gained

value as collectables. During the Fifties, the target market for pedal cars was exclusively high-end. The top-selling model, Austin's J40, cost more than £20 – equivalent to more than £1,000 today. None the less, the J40 sold in huge numbers: more than 40,000 had been produced by 1971. Even Prince Charles had one: a 1953 photo depicts the five-year-old playing in the pedal car as the Queen watches over him.

It should not surprise us, perhaps, that so many ordinary people were prepared to spend so much on children's cars. The historian Tony Judt noted how society prides itself on its latest and greatest form of transport as a "symbol and symptom" of its modernity. Cars were not new in the Fifties, of course, but they were finally available to the swelling ranks of the middle class, and came to represent individual freedom, status and success. Wanting the best for one's children could mean only one thing: cars of their own. The J of Austin's J40 stood for "Junior", the design closely aped the full-sized A40, and the advertising slogan promised a car "just like father's".

The earliest pedal cars date from the early 20th century and were privately built to the specifications of

a few (very wealthy) individuals. By 1910, mass-produced models were available from toy manufacturers including Lines Bros of London, which created the famous Tri-ang range. Most pedal cars follow the same basic design: the pedals are mounted to a sprocket on the front axle, which drives a sprocket on the rear axle via a bicycle-type chain.

They are substantially faithful to real cars, mimicking their bodywork contours and using the same materials. Just how young children

*'When I come down in the morning, I come down to play'*

managed to propel 100lb (45kg) of metal, leather and rubber – by sheer leg strength, without gears – remains one of history's secrets.

Despite their heftiness, toy cars are, for Collins, much wieldier and more gratifying than real ones. He has owned several collectable full-size cars, including a Ferrari Dino and an Aston Martin DB7 ("They spent more time in the garage than on my driveway, so what's the point?"). The only one he fell in love with was a 1970 Lotus Europa, which he still owns.

When pinned down on why miniature cars have taken over his life, Collins hesitates and appears momentarily thrown. "When I come downstairs in the morning, I come down to play." The mischievous grin is back. "It isn't about business any more. This is my retirement."



● The Mill Toy Museum, Northiam, East Sussex, opens 10am-5pm, Tuesday-Sunday; [www.themilltoymuseum.com](http://www.themilltoymuseum.com)

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## Behind the scenes at the museum

### Curator Phil Collins' top five exhibits

**1 E-type Jaguar:** circa 1965. Collins' first pedal car. Bought for £22 from a local antiques shop in 1986.

**2 Lines Bros Tri-ang Streamline:** 1936. One of the museum's rarest exhibits. Only 200-300 were produced.

**3 Austin J40 Roadster:** circa 1955. Britain's best-selling pedal car from 1949-71; more than 38,000 manufactured.

**4 'Rocket' (maker unknown):** circa 1870. Wooden go-cart/proto pedal car, built in France. Propelled using handles, not pedals.

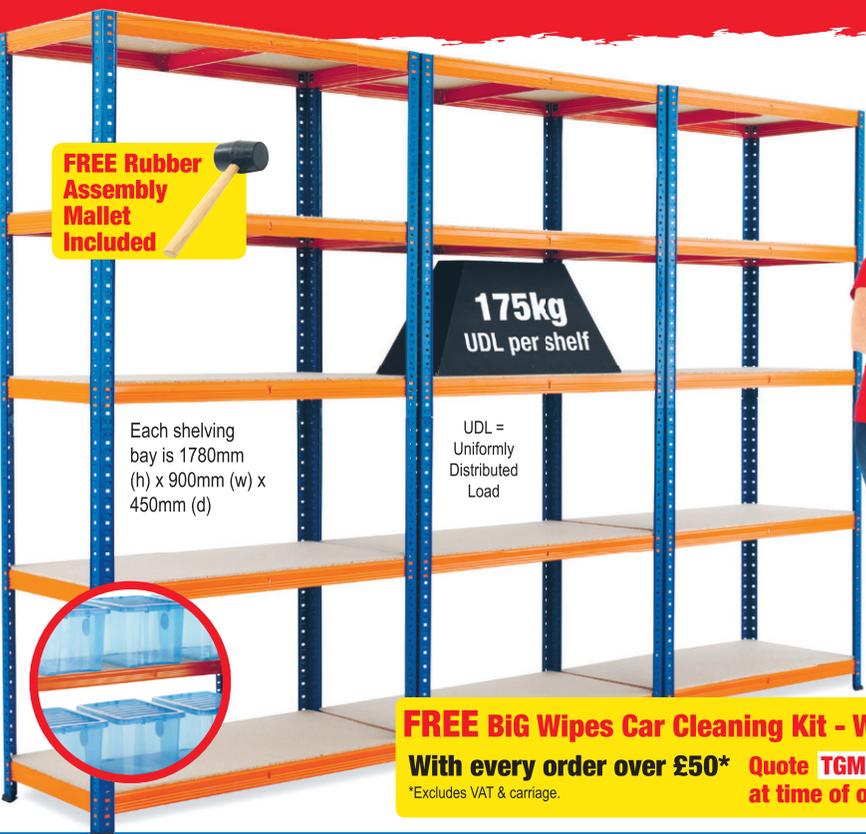
**5 Morgan Three-Wheeler:** Modern-built. Number 62 of 200 produced by Morgan.



Power to the pedal: Phil Collins in his museum, far left. His favourite cars include junior versions of the Morgan three-wheeler and Jaguar E-type. A VW camper van, below left

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