

[The Success and occasional failures of Mercedes Benz cars](#)

Mercedes Benz with its beautiful designs and precision engineering is in many ways representative of the great achievements of the German motor industry. However it has not always been plain sailing for Mercedes, they have gone through some very difficult times; one such occasion was quite recently, when there were so many concerns about Mercedes reliability that contract hire and leasing companies were reluctant to recommend Mercedes. There was some evidence of contract hire brokers switching potential Mercedes buyers into other marques, such as BMW and Audi. The Mercedes model that was most criticized in the motoring press was the M Class.

In a survey carried out by The Consumer Association in 2003, Mercedes was downgraded by two categories, from best to average in reliability. Although to be fair all the German manufacturers came in for criticism, they said, "No major German marques have escaped the steady decline we have noticed in recent years". Interestingly the manufacturer that received the most complaints from those surveyed was Volkswagen.

The BBC's Top Gear carried out a survey in 2004; in which they placed the M Class last out of 142 cars surveyed. Since then Mercedes have been making great efforts to restore their good name and reputation and to once again have the Mercedes Benz name associated with high build quality and reliability.

What became known as the world's first car was patented by Karl Benz in 1886. Benz was based in the town of Mannheim, he called his car the Benz Patent Motorwagen. It had just three wheels similar in width to today's bicycle wheels. The ride was bumpy and the passengers were as exposed as much to the elements, as if they were riding a bicycle. Driving at night would have been hazardous, as there were no light on the vehicle.

Although Karl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler, who was also carrying out similar work to Benz, were only about 100 Kilometres apart, neither was aware of the other's work. And at about the same time Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach also invented a vehicle powered by an internal combustion engine. It was called the Daimler Riding Car and was used for testing their internal combustion engine, that became known as the Grandfather Clock, so called because of its upright cylinder. Although the vehicle was called a car it was in fact a motorcycle, the world's first motorcycle. It had just one cylinder and a top speed of about 13 Kilometres per hour.

When Daimler and Maybach completed their vehicle that they called the motorised carriage in 1886, they again used the Grandfather Clock engine. They had added 5 Kilometres per hour, the top speed was 18 Kilometres per hour. This vehicle had four wheels, which made it the world's first four wheel car. The so called Wire Wheel Car that was produced by Daimler and shown at an exhibition in Paris in 1889, caused quite a stir. Seeing this vehicle on show at the exhibition is believed to have encouraged the French to start manufacturing their own vehicles.

In 1890's Karl Benz was building two, three and four seater vehicles but now with four wheels. He had developed the steering system so that the two front wheels could turn on a different radius, making the car much more stable.

The pace of development was fast in 1894 Benz introduced the Benz Motor Velocipede, it was a two seater vehicle with a top speed of about 20 kilometres per hour. It was the first car to be produced in any serious volumes he sold 1200. Benz then produced a motorized bus, it was a lovely looking vehicle but not terribly successful; a combination of poor road conditions and its very narrow wheels made it fairly impractical.

Daimler launched a belt driven car in 1896, now with two cylinders but still it could only achieve 18 mph. Daimler's truck, a flat bed truck, was the world's first. It was rather odd looking but nevertheless very popular in spite of its fairly limiting top speed of 11kph. They were used by German breweries for beer deliveries, some were exported to England. Also in 1896 Daimler brought out a vehicle capable of carrying loads of anything up to 500kgs. It had a rather strange appearance, looking a little like one of the covered wagons you would see in films portraying the Wild West.

Benz's new vehicle in 1899 was called the Dos a Dos, it could achieve speeds of up to 35 KPH, which was fast. It was a 4 seater, two of the passengers would sit facing the rear of the car.

In 1890 Daimler died, leaving control of his company to Wilhelm Maybach. Emil Jellinek a highly successful businessman and motor racing driver had been pressing Maybach to produce cars that were more modern and faster. Jellinek asked Maybach to name the cars after his daughter Mercedes and this was the start of the Mercedes car.

A number of more modern and faster cars were produced by Daimler, in the early 1900's. There was the 40 horsepower Mercedes Simplex that succeeded the 35 horsepower model. It was a single seater car with a top speed of 80 Kilometres per hour by now the car had 4 cylinders. One of these models is believed to be the oldest Mercedes still in existence.

In 1905 Benz produced the 18 hp Double Phaeton and two years later the 75 horsepower Mercedes Double Phaeton was launched. It had 6 cylinders and was really very fast indeed at over 94 kph. Both Benz and Daimler started to do well in motor racing.

When the First World War started, car production ceased and the factories started producing materials and military vehicles, for the war effort. This was also the case in Britain. When the war ended, the German economy was all but destroyed; Inflation was virtually out of control and there was a severe shortage of fuel, these were very difficult times for Germany. Cars became very expensive to buy; a luxury tax had been imposed on cars and very few people could afford to buy a new car. Nowadays motorists in the UK can acquire a new Mercedes on contract hire, for a monthly payment of around 300, how things have changed.

It is said that in 1924 Daimler made an approach to Benz and proposed a merger but it did not go ahead. However during 1924 economic conditions were taking their toll on both companies and a merger agreement was signed by the parties and was finalized in 1926.

When car production started again, the Mercedes two seater sports car was launched. It had a supercharged engine and a top speed of over 108 kilometres per hour. During 1927 Mercedes Benz started production of the Model S touring car, the S stood for sport. The vehicle had six cylinder and an amazing speed of over 160 kilometres per hour. 1928 saw the introduction of the SSK Sports two seater, it was designed for hill climbing races and was even faster at over 190 kilometres per hour.

The model 550K was launched by Mercedes Benz in 1934. There was a version called The Special Roadster, the maximum speed was 160 kph. It was a spectacular looking vehicle that most people even today would consider to be an elegant and beautiful car. At the time the car cost 28,000 Marks, which was a considerable amount of money.

The 550K was followed by the 540K, a car not dissimilar in design but 10 kph faster. Mercedes were also manufacturing the Mercedes Benz 770, a very large luxury car. The vehicle was a favourite with Germany's captains of industry, in which they would be chauffeur driven. At the time manufacturers did not seem concerned about the very small numbers that they produced of a particular model, before bringing out the next model, about 420 of the 540K were produced and Mercedes manufactured less than 120 of the 770.

During the Second World War Mercedes Benz become embroiled in controversy, with accusations of forced labour being used in their factories. Because Mercedes were part of the German war effort, the allied forces heavily targeted their factories. At the end of the war virtually all their factories had been destroyed. With hardly any machinery remaining and no raw materials available things looked bleak. However by 1948 they had re-started production. 1951 saw the launch of the Mercedes Benz 300 saloon, it was a prestige car and over 4500 were sold. Mercedes also produced the 300S convertible.

The 1950's saw the launch of the famous Gull-Wing 2 seater hardtop, which took the motoring world by storm. Its distinctive Gull-Wing doors opened up into the roof. With the doors open they did look remarkably like a gulls wings, the design was far ahead of its time. Many were sold in America although it really was very expensive, believed to have cost around \$10,000 at the time. Nevertheless a very good investment; a 1955 model was sold at auction in Sydney Australia in 2006 for \$777,240 Australian Dollars, \$720,000 usd. The Gull-Wing was succeeded in 1957 by the 300SL an open sports car also very much in demand in America. It was very fast with a top speed of just under 250 Kilometres per hour.

As far back as 1960 Mercedes were testing vehicles and transmitting the data to a specially adapted vehicle. It may seem strange in the current high tech world of today but the data was transmitted by way of a very long cable running from the test car to the other vehicle, which would drive behind it, hopefully keeping up.

During 1963 Mercedes Benz launched the 230SL, the first sports car to have a crumple free zone. It was not particularly fast compared with some of the previous models; it had a top speed of less than 200 Kilometres per hour. It was however hugely popular selling, nearly 20,000 models. Mercedes had come a long way from the days when they were making just a few hundred of each model. In 1978 Mercedes Benz introduced anti lock brakes (ABS). In 1981 they were the first manufacturer to introduce the airbag. One can only speculate on the number of lives and serious injuries, those safety features will have saved over the years.

When Mercedes Benz launched the 190E in 1982, who would have thought at the time, that 638,000 would be sold over the course of the next eleven years. During the 1980s and 1990s Mercedes were enjoying considerable success. In 1998 the company merged with The Chrysler Corporation of America and Daimler Chrysler was formed. As is so often the case with these mergers/takeovers, it didn't work out and Chrysler having initially invested \$36 billion sold 80.1% of the company for \$7.4 billion in 2007. The purchaser was Cerberus Capital Management.

Mercedes are now concentrating on their build quality and restoring confidence in the marque and in turn contract hire and leasing companies are confident in recommending Mercedes Benz to their clients. Soon they will hopefully be once again, classed as best for reliability.

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