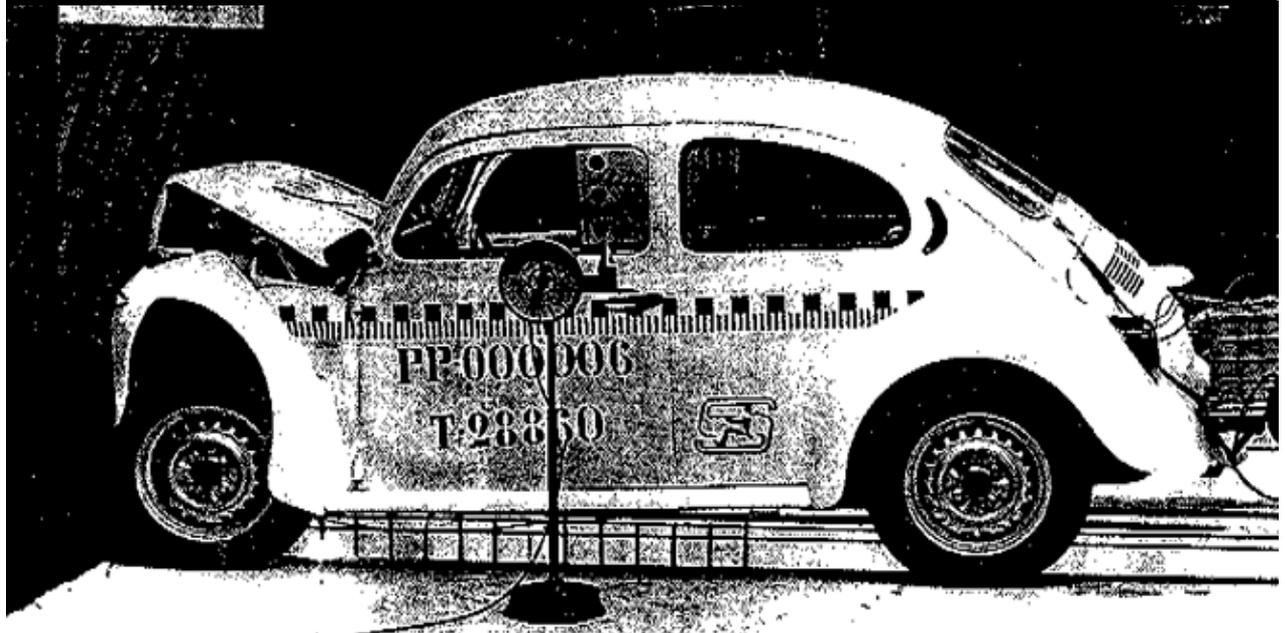


Classic Cars & Safety



In January 1963, over a year before the Mustang made its public appearance, Mr. R. C. Lunn, a Ford engineer, delivered a technical paper to the Society of Automotive Engineers on the subject of an experimental model of the Mustang which was being displayed in various parts of the country. ...They showed a glimpse of what the industry could do in the elementary stages of safety design. [These were] a “fail-safe” dual braking system, integrated headrests to prevent or minimise neck and spinal injuries, a roll-bar to strengthen the roof structure in the event of roll-overs, a steering column preventing rearward displacement into the driver during a front-end collision, a collapsible steering shaft, provision for shoulder harness and lap belts, strongly anchored seats, and bucket seats with lateral holding power. In the production-model Mustang which was introduced in April, 1964 (and of which nearly half a million were sold in twelve months) every one of these features had been eliminated.

Ralph Nader
Unsafe At Any Speed

In theory, classic cars are a poor risk when it comes to road safety. They have few modern safety features, and are likely to pose a serious risk to the driver in certain situations. For example, if you have a serious head-on collision in a very old VW Beetle, the steering shaft is likely to go straight through the driver like a spear (later ones are safer). The same goes for old Holdens, Vauxhalls, Morrisies etc.

Crashtesters at NRMA in Australia recently pranged a mid-1970s Holden Kingswood, a Mitsubishi Sigma and other cars from that era to compare their safety with that of current models. The tests showed that, in a frontal crash, the driver of a 1977 Holden Kingswood is more than five times more likely to suffer serious injury than the driver of a current Commodore. An older Corolla driver is two-and-a-half times

as likely to suffer life-threatening injury compared with the driver of a new Corolla, as is the driver of a twenty-year old Ford Falcon.

However, the most at-risk classics are the very small cars like Minis & Fiat Bambinas. These don't have the body weight or strength to compensate for lack of other safety features.

• Note: the Volkswagen Beetle crashing at the top of the article was actually undergoing a crashtest, which it passed. However, a late model Beetle was tested alongside more modern VWs and came out rather poorly.



So should classics be included in the list of potential death-traps?

The answer is yes in theory and a very cautious no in practice.

In terms of modern safety features that help you survive an accident, classics are at a severe disadvantage. Further, being a safe driver is not always enough to protect you from an accident.

Often the people who get hurt in a crash are not the people who caused it. So, regardless of how fond you are of your old Morris Minor, be aware that if you're out on a trip and a drunken driver comes speeding around the corner on the wrong side of the road and hits you, you're probably dog tucker.

The people most at risk are the young, the inexperienced, those driving smaller cars and those who drive a classic as an everyday vehicle. Regardless of the points in favour of classics below, beware of putting yourself or someone you know into this potentially unsafe group.

However, insurance companies offer extremely good rates of insurance for classic car owners simply because they are generally a good risk, and here's are a few points in favour of classic car safety.:

1) Classics are generally driven less than conventional cars.

Many classics rarely see the road. Some, such as vintage cars, usually get driven only on weekends and holidays. Even 'living classics', that is, classics which are driven as everyday vehicles, tend to do far less miles than the average new car. Less miles means less risk.

2) Classics tend to be heavier than some modern cars.

If you are driving a big old Holden, Chevrolet or Mercedes, you are likely to be driving a car considerably heavier than the average small car. This may partly compensate for lack of crumple zones and other modern safety features;



The most at-risk classics are the very small cars like Fiat Bambinas & Minis. These don't have the body weight or strength to compensate for lack of other safety features

the bigger vehicle is usually the winner in an accident. On the other hand, however, the smaller classics may actually weigh less than many modern cars. (The idea that old cars are heavy & that modern cars are lightweight dates from the 1970s and is simply not true. A Morris Minor 1000 four-door weighs in at 738kg. By comparison, a Mazda 121, one of the smaller modern cars on the road, weighs 805kg. A current model Toyota Corolla sedan weighs about 1200kg and a Range-Rover weighs around 2500kg).

3) Classics tend to be driven very carefully.

If you've just spent five years and \$10,000 restoring your granddad's old Ford, you're hardly likely to go screaming round town having drag races. People love their classics and so tend to go to a great deal of trouble to avoid accidents. Further, because older cars tend to have poor handling and braking compared to modern cars, owners tend to drive slower and with a great deal more caution.

4) Classics tend to be more visible.

Try changing lanes in rush hour traffic in a modern Jap car and everyone will just ignore you. In a classic other drivers tend to notice you more and tend to give way more, partly out of respect, partly out of fear (because the cars now regarded as classics were once simply cheap wrecks for broke drivers, they have a well-earned reputation for making big dents in shiny new cars – hence they tend to be given a wide berth).

5) Classics can have some safety features upgraded.

You can't build crumple zones into your old Holden, but you can put in decent (ie., webbing-grabber) seatbelts and airbags which will improve your chances of surviving an accident. Further, classics will often benefit from minor safety modifications such as brake boosters, better headlights and the like •

