

INSIGHTS AND OPINIONS FROM INSIDE THE CLASSIC MERCEDES TRADE



Good steer

You may regard the steering wheel on your classic Mercedes as merely a device to turn the car into corners, but for steering systems expert **Roger Reijngoud**, it is both an art and a science

At EZ Power Steering, which offers power assisted steering conversions on classic cars, we love the large, thin rimmed classic steering wheel of the type seen on 1950s and 1960s Mercedes. But people change these for a smaller wheel – why would anybody want to do that?

Well, apparently people were shorter 50 years ago than they are now. In some cases our customers can't enter or exit the car easily, or find a comfortable driving position. We have even had people who hit their knees on the back of the steering wheel when releasing the clutch pedal. Another obvious benefit is the more direct feel of the steering – more change of direction for less movement of the wheel.

Replacing a cracked or discoloured original steering wheel with a brand new one really transforms the look of the interior, without the worry of imperfections eventually reappearing, which is so often the case with a restored wheel. Unfortunately some of the smaller wheels seen on classic cars are not period correct, to say the least.

We see small, thick rimmed steering wheels that would be more at home on a PlayStation console or in a hot hatch. When we tactfully point this out to owners, they usually agree that their choice was not optimal, telling us they couldn't find an appealing item that was also suitable for the era. We can offer them a nice Moto-Lita or Nardi with a thin rim, but in some cases only the original style steering wheel really looks right – the Mercedes 190SL, 300SL and Pagoda are three that come to mind.

So we now offer smaller diameter replicas for these cars. Since the main reason for replacing the wheel is functionality, there must be no drawbacks such as poor instrument visibility or difficult activation of the column stalk, and the quality must be equal to or better than that of the original. All our steering wheels are produced in the Netherlands to the highest quality standards,



The original 190SL wheel is wonderful, but maybe too large for some owners?

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with a steel insert covered with polyurethane that is guaranteed not to crack or discolour like the original eventually does.

In the case of the 190SL, the original steering wheel is 44cm in diameter and our replica is 39cm – which gives a much needed 2.5cm, or one inch of extra legroom. The speedometer and rev counter are still visible, and the signal ring for the indicators is easier to activate than on the original. On introducing this steering wheel at the 2012 Techno Classica in Essen, many Mercedes drivers didn't even notice that the steering wheel was smaller until they got into the car.

After having sold the 190SL steering wheels to various Mercedes specialists, we received enquiries for the 300SL Gullwing wheel with its folding hub, and have now put this into production at the request of Kienle, the renowned Mercedes restorer in Germany. We have also had sufficient requests to start prototyping the early and the late Pagoda steering wheels (yes, they are different!).

This will be the most difficult one yet, as

the original is 42.5cm in diameter and the horn signal ring is quite large. This wheel will be produced in 40 or 39cm, as anything smaller looks wrong. A smaller wheel would also block the view of the instruments in between the speedometer and rev counter.

Since the 1.25cm gain in leg space is minimal, we will use an eccentric hub, which lifts the wheel another 1.25cm. It also places the top of the steering wheel in almost the same position as the original, hence the view of the speedometer and rev counter remains ideal. Many new Mercedes cars have eccentric hubs. Some maintain that you should stick to the original, but you can always revert back to it. And many customers tell us how much more comfortable and fun their cars are to drive with our products, and that they often rack up many more miles as a result. 

⇒ *Roger Reijngoud is managing director of EZ Electric Power Steering, based in Leerdam in the Netherlands Tel 00 31 345 633551 Web www.ezpowersteering.co.uk*