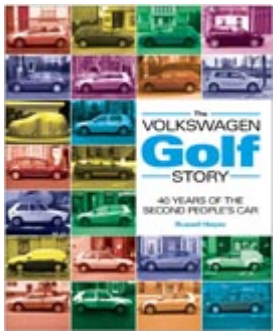
The VW Golf Story

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Russell Hayes
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Russell Hayes's encyclopedic yet extraordinarily entertaining History of the Cortina appeared in 2012 on the 50th anniversary of Ford's famous saloon. Now Hayes has done it again, this time with the VW Golf, arguably a much more significant car.

He shows how the Golf grew out of VW's stillborn small car project with Porsche as the Wolfsburg colossus groped its way inwards manufacturing a modern vehicle. The subtitle is 'Forty years of the second people's car' and Hayes deftly explains how much of the Golf's unexpected success is based on its classlessness, a characteristic that would apply to virtually no other car. He explains too how careful parts sharing with VW's newly created subsidiary Audi-NSU not only helped to pitch the Golf competitively, but also spawned a very successful seam of complementary models, indeed a veritable supporting cast comprising the Audi 50, and VW Polo, Passat and Scirocco. Ironically this extended range was planned at the outset because VW really had no idea how its conservative buyers would take to its Beetle replacement. In 1974, particularly in Germany the front-engine front-drive design was still radical and a difficult communications concept for VW of all manufacturers,

because for decades it had vaunted the advantages of its rear engined, radiator-less automobiles.

Quoting widely from the press sources and VW insiders, the author devotes a chapter to each subsequent Golf generation and shows how it compared with competitors. Hayes is especially good on engine development, showing how for example VW's first diesel unit produced more power from its 1.5 litres than the 2.0 or 2.3 litre four cylinder offerings from Mercedes and Peugeot.

The author is equally convincing when he describes the almost accidental way in which the Golf's sporting potential was sported by certain of its engineers who nevertheless had to marshal their arguments carefully to persuade a reactionary board to sanction the GTI, the doyen of fast hatchbacks. Hayes uncovers all sorts of fascinating subtexts, notably from the early days. Tuner Oettingen manufactured a 16 valve head for the Golf, but the model was limited to 5000 units because its specification caused production delays and it was subsequently sold only in France where presumably demand would be more manageable. More intriguing still is the Citi Golf, built at VW's South African plant at Uitenburg, which used essentially the Mark 1 body until 2009.

Fundamentally, the Golf is an engineering story; previously Hayes showed how the conventionally and cheaply engineered Cortina was built to a price and for twenty years, thanks to cleverly evolving styling and astute marketing, it dominated its home market. In contrast the Golf is an engineer's car: VW had the good sense to recourse to the Italians for basic styling, but its engineering integrity was entirely in-house (with considerable input from the wizard Ferdinand Piëch). The Golf established an entire segment and today even in its seventh incarnation, despite competitors that are closer now than ever, remains the exemplar.

Kieron Fennelly