Volkswagen’s iconic Transporter clocks up 70 years

Published: May 25, 2020

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Online version: https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/volkswagens-iconic-transporter-clocks-up-70-years/



Transporting through time... or a transporter of delight – by Dave Moss.

In this feature Dave describes the history and development of the VW Transporter, and looks at contemporary competitor vehicles...

(Photographs from VW, also Audi – DKW images, and as individually credited).

Europe has produced some much loved, long lived, and high volume cars in over a century of existence, but very high – and continuing – commercial vehicle production numbers are comparatively rare. The 70th anniversary of what has in recent times became known as the VW Transporter range was celebrated in April – a unique landmark in a still unfolding story which began at the end of the Second World War.



70 years apart but both VWs built with the same purpose!

In September 1945, the Volkswagenwerke factory in Wolfsburg was near-derelict. The formidable challenge of restarting vehicle production was overcome through the enthusiasm, determination and resourcefulness of British Army Officer Major Ivan Hirst, with the building of the first post war “Type 1” cars – later familiar as the “Beetle” – on December 27th 1945. A near-superhuman battle to resurrect a moribund factory, source parts, and motivate a recalcitrant workforce was involved, but in 1946 over 10,000 cars were built, and within a year, production and quality levels were sufficient to begin exports under the official European Recovery programme.

Though some mystery lingers over exactly what happened next and when to bring the “Type 2” into existence, some facts are known. Major Hirst is on record saying that a lack of suitable site transport to move bulky and heavy items around led him to arrange assembly of

some flatbed vehicles, which became known as “Plattenwagen.” These were forward platform trucks simply constructed on “necessity being the mother of invention” principles, with front wheel steering and rear engine. Photographs exist, and it’s speculated that Kubelwagen or Type 1 running gear probably underpinned the design.

We also know that, before the war, Dutchman Ben Pon and his brother Wijnand had begun running their father’s Amersfoort-based firm, which reputedly sold everything from cars to sewing machines, and which they evolved into “Pon’s Automobielhandel” – a vehicle dealership. Tradition has it that Ben Pon visited Wolfsburg early in 1947 to negotiate importing the Type 1 for sale in the Netherlands – and that during that visit, a Plattenwagen inspired him to sketch a forward control, rear-engined commercial vehicle. Photographs exist of that sketch, included in Pon’s notebook dated April 24 1947, but after this the story becomes less clear.

Folklore suggests that Pon’s sketch was accepted by the company as the basis for its next production vehicle. Given that forward planning structures – if they existed – were then probably quite casual, it’s just feasible that a particularly persuasive Pons produced his idea at exactly the moment when company thoughts were considering the question “what next?” – and he met an open door. Yet authoritative research has established that both a works council and Volkswagenwerke senior board of control were functional by 1946; suggesting its acceptance is unlikely to have been that quick – or that easy. There is another issue: Could the entire concept of VW’s first all-new product really have emerged from a non-German outsider? ..

Considerable research over the years has revealed few other clues on ideas, planning or timing relating to a second product line. Major Hirst also throws more confusion into the mix here, as he’s on record saying that “Pon wanted the Plattenwagen for Dutch Companies, talked to Nordhoff, and out of that came the Transporter…” Neither the implied timetable or known facts really stack up against logic here. Ralf Richter’s carefully researched story of Ivan Hirst’s life and times at Volkswagen and beyond, published in 2003, suggests that Heinrich Nordhoff did not appear as even a possible candidate for General Director at

Wolfsburg before Autumn 1947 – and didn't assume the post until January 1st 1948. So why, if Pons' sketch and ideas existed as dated in April 1947, were they not presented to Hirst around that time, rather than to Nordhoff at least six months later?

Accounts suggest Nordhoff was a strong willed, knowledgeable and capable man, who quickly developed a passion for and ambition to create a new identity for Volkswagen as a powerhouse of German efficiency. From his arrival, Hirst was on borrowed time, though a lengthy handover of control ensued before he officially left Wolfsburg. These timescales suggest Hirst and the management boards may have known more about Pon's ideas than has surfaced, but progressing was slow, and so Pons approached the new General Director on his appointment, for another attempt at moving his ideas along.

Whatever the real story here, some fast work certainly followed: Nordhoff approved the Type 2 for production on May 19th 1949, only a month after Hirst departed, and the first vehicles were reputedly available by November. Series production of a panel van with a 4.6 cubic metre (162 cu.ft) loadspace, and a "Kombi," with twin side windows and two rows of removable rear seats, began on March 8th 1950.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

According to the Pons' website, the prototype's aerodynamics resembled a proverbial brick, with an initial 0.75 Cd figure. The now-famous split windscreen was allegedly among various improvements which reduced it to 0.44 for production vehicles. This surely helped the rear-mounted 25 hp flat-four petrol engine make slightly less modest progress – despite having to cope with an unladen weight around 990 kg (2,183 lb) and payload up to 750 kg (1,653 lb).



A Microbus variant appeared in May 1950, helping towards 8,000 Type 2 sales that year. In 1951 the leisure and family oriented Samba-Bus and Camper arrived, and later an ambulance derivative – with one of the earliest tailgate-type rear doors. A dropside pickup truck with 4 sq m (43 sq ft) loadbed followed in August 1952. This core range brought rapidly rising year on year demand, and not just in Germany. Exports overtook German home market sales in 1954, the year the 100,000th Type 2 left Wolfsburg, and the engine was upgraded to 1200cc and 30 hp. Around 80 vehicles a day were then being built – in 30 different variants – alongside the type 1 saloon. Growing demand brought capacity problems at Wolfsburg, and in January 1955 the Supervisory board decided to build a new custom-designed factory at Hanover-Stöcken, where Type 2 production began just 15 months later, in April 1956.

September 1957 saw the first split-screen Type 2 commercials built overseas – using locally sourced components – by Volkswagen do Brasil SA in Sao Paolo, South America. They were very successful, and a version remained in Brazilian production until 1990.

The millionth example was completed at Hanover in 1962 – though as the 1960's unfolded, the Type 2 was growing noticeably long in the tooth. Power was lifted to 34 hp, but performance remained modest, and well short of modern competition from several world famous names – spearheaded from 1965 by the new Ford Transit. Yet this was the Type 2's golden age: Almost 800,000 examples were built in seven years, and the leisure-oriented versions – fitting today's "lifestyle vehicle" definition – became export bestsellers. In the US, cult status was achieved by the many-windowed camper and station wagon versions, which became preferred transport for those captivated by the late 1960's "flower power" era – and are still sought-after even today.

Worldwide, around 1.8 million examples of the Type 2 had been built when it was mostly replaced by the more spacious, technically advanced, safer and distinctly heavier – but still rear-engined and underpowered – second generation T2 in Autumn 1967. Factory variants included panel vans, Kombis with side windows, and standard and deluxe Microbuses, plus crewcabs and pickups – and as before, some derivatives proved popular for conversions by external suppliers. The T2 built on its predecessor's success, and was again widely exported. Around 3 million examples were made – in Germany until 1979, and in countries such as Argentina (1986) Mexico (1996) – and Brazil, where production ran until 2013.



Despite numerous improvements, sales of the new T3, launched in 1979, were initially hampered by continued inadequate performance, not helped by unladen weight increasing to 1385 kg (3,053 lb), and payload to over 900 kg (1,984 lb) – while the most powerful 1970cc engine mustered just 68 horsepower. VW addressed the long-standing performance deficit from 1981 onwards with the range's first diesel engine, followed by several more powerful petrol units, eventually including fuel injection and a turbo-diesel variant. The 6 millionth vehicle milestone was passed in 1986, and over 1.2 million T3 versions had been sold when the T4 – the first to formally carry the Transporter title – replaced it in 1990.

Much has changed in both leisure and light commercial vehicle markets since then, led by ever tightening competition and the rise of MPV and latterly SUV sales. Celebrating their 70th anniversary, today's Transporters are a world away from the original 1950's concept,

having moved, not without controversy, from air cooled to water cooled power units, and rear engine, rear wheel drive to front in-line and V engines with front and sometime four wheel drive – while improving on space, versatility, comfort, flexibility and all-round appeal. Seventy years on, and over 12 million units down the line, today's T6.1 includes digital age equipment like intelligent driver assistance systems, and technology, infotainment, and connectivity facilities – and more – of which the 1940's engineers that turned the Type 2 from sketch into reality could only have dreamed…



A 21st Century 'BlueMotion' Transporter.

Did the VW Type 2 have things all its own way..?

The aftermath of war generated demand for commercial vehicles to aid reparation and re-establish, then later develop, local and regional supply lines as businesses began to function and grow. Thus in the 1950s and 1960s the VW Type 2 was never alone, with various

European makers launching directly competing vehicles. Yet none ever matched the Volkswagen’s enduring elixir of eternal youth – and most are now long forgotten…

FRENCH COMPETITION

In France, the wartime CPV front wheel drive van was built by Chenard-Walcker from 1946. Its original 1021cc 26 hp/26.4 PS two-cylinder two-stroke engine was replaced by a 30 hp/30.4 PS four cylinder 1133cc Peugeot unit in 1947, after which, as the marque descended towards bankruptcy, Peugeot stepped in. The CPV became the Peugeot D3 from 1951, updated into the D4 with more body types and a 40 hp/41 PS engine soon afterwards. Diesel power arrived in 1959, and production continued until 1965.

The forward control Renault Estafette came late to the party in 1957, offering 600 and later 800 kg (1,323 and 1,764 lb) payload capacity. It had a front mounted 31.6 hp/32 PS petrol engine and front wheel drive, and output was up to 53 hp/54 PS when replaced by the new Trafic in 1980. A consistent seller in Europe, it survived well into the 1980s in Mexico.



A 1964 R2132 Estafette, photo courtesy ‘AlfvanBeem’.

GERMAN RIVALS

Until the 1970s the Type 2 had a clear run against big-name German manufacturers. Opel focussed on heavier commercials, and after 1955, Mercedes Benz, who built some box van and platform trucks on their wartime 170V saloon chassis, concentrated on larger vans… Though some interesting remnants eventually came their way…. .

Several nowadays unfamiliar German names built forward control vans intended to compete with the Type 2 Volkswagen, and questions linger about how this story might have ended if their makers had installed more suitable engines than the widely utilised diminutive two-

stroke units. From 1950, Gutbrod Motorenbau GmbH offered their bulbous looking forward-control Atlas 800 or 1,000 kg (1,764 or 2,205 lb) payload light commercial panel vans and flatbed trucks. Powered by a 20 hp/20.3 PS twin cylinder 576 cc two-stroke, the range expanded rapidly, to include low load height box-body trucks, microbuses, ambulances and double cabs. Even a hearse was briefly listed – probably appropriate as Gutbrod was bankrupt by 1953, despite having reputedly built some 11,000 Atlas models..

Bremen based Goliath-Werke was part of the Borgward group, specialising largely in three-wheeler vehicles from 1928. Its first post war light commercial was the 1951 four-wheel, forward control GV800, powered by a 465 cc 16 hp/15.2 PS two cylinder two-stroke engine – to shift an 800 kg (1,764 lb) payload in box van and pickup formats. Upgraded in 1953 to the GV Express, a Kombi bodystyle was added, and a choice of 688 or 886cc engines, then a four-stroke 1093cc flat four from 1957. Borgward collapsed in 1961, taking Goliath with it.

Hamburg-based Vidal & Sohn Tempo-Werke offered Tempo-badged tricycles and three wheelers from 1924, with the forward control, front engine, front drive 1,000 kg (2,205 lb) payload Matador panel van and platform truck arriving in 1949. Powered by Volkswagen's 25 hp/ 25.4 PS flat four engine, sales began strongly, with exports reaching India and Australia – but in 1951, on launching their type 2, VW halted engine supplies. Tempo somehow continued production using proprietary two-stroke units, eventually replaced by BMC's ubiquitous 948cc "A", and later "B" series petrol engines. The Matador had another UK link: it was built under licence by Jensen Motors between 1957 and 1963.

Though more variants followed – including the Viking, an 850 kg (1,874 lb) offshoot which added a minibus derivative – Tempo struggled until absorbed by Hanomag AG in 1966. The sprawling Rheinstahl-Hanomag-Henschel combine was in turn taken over by Daimler-Benz AG, which discontinued the Matador and Viking in the 1970s, though many of their key mechanical and styling elements quietly underpinned some Mercedes-Benz light commercials for years afterwards.

From 1949 the forward control, front wheel drive DKW F89L range – often known as the

Schnellaster – offered a 750 kg (1,653 lb) payload van, bus or pick up. Compact and innovative rear trailing arm suspension provided a completely flat load floor, reputedly just 40 cm (15.75 in) above road level. Initially powered by a transverse 684cc, 19.7 hp/20 PS two cylinder two-stroke engine, an 896cc three-cylinder longitudinally mounted unit. replaced it in 1954. Many regard this vehicle's innovative space efficiency as the birthplace of modern MPV design thinking, though with DKW irrevocably wedded to two-stroke engines the F89L never challenged the Type 2's success.



DKW Schnellaster F89L (1949), the first automobile to be produced at Ingolstadt.


BROWN BOVERI
BBC HAUSHALT-GERÄTE
BROWN, BOVERI & CIE
Aktiengesellschaft
BÜRO FRANKFURT
BBC
R42-6797

1955 DKW rapid delivery van, three cylinder two stroke, 900cc, 32 bhp.

However the general concept endured, with manufacture continuing in Argentina for some years after DKW disappeared in 1966. Before then, a rebodied successor had been designed and built by DKW's Spanish subsidiary – with a Mercedes-Benz diesel engine providing a new lease of life. 1970s developments saw updated variants – still with DKW roots – built in Spain by Mercedes-Benz, initially for southern European markets as the N1000. Sales were later expanded across Europe – and beyond – as the MB100, until replaced by the unrelated Vito range in 1996.

BRITISH COMPETITORS

In Britain the revisited 1939 Morris Commercial 15-20 cwt PV was strictly the first postwar British-badged forward control van to appear, though plenty more echoing the Type 2 format belatedly followed. Nobody risked a two-stroke engine – or a rear mounted, air cooled flat four, so payloads were heavier – with more pulling power . The 1949 Morris Commercial J type set the ball rolling, with the not-quite-forward-control Bedford CA following three years later – and the BMC J2 in 1955. The Ford Thames 400E followed in 1957, the Standard Atlas 15/20 in 1958, and the Commer FC in 1960.

Though most of these became export success stories, and some were built abroad, none matched the reputation, longevity or cult status desirability of Volkswagen's Type 2. The Standard Atlas was produced in India until 1980, while the Thames 400E was replaced by Ford's upstart new Transit in 1965. The Bedford CA ran until 1969, and the Austin-Morris J series matured into the larger JU line, discontinued in 1974. The Commer FC survived a manufacturer takeover, being built as the Dodge Spacevan until 1983, benefiting from repeat Post Office and BT fleet orders.



A late example of Bedford's popular CA van (Photo copyright Kim Henson).

References for the VW Type 2/Transporter story



Volkswagen UK

The Irish story is more comprehensive – but not quite the same…

VW Irish link

Everything you could possibly need to know about individual Type 2 and Transporter variants is here – right down to paint codes…

Just Kampers comprehensive information

The Wikipedia entry is here:

Wikipedia Volkswagen Transporter

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