

The Seventieth Birthday of an Icon

By Mike Trippitt

Have you noticed how many campervans there are these days?

In public car parks, down residential streets, and along the new carriageways of the A14, VW campers are everywhere. The number of campervan conversions registered with the DVLA each year has grown enormously in the last 10 years. In excess of 4000 are registered annually.

More and more families and couples are choosing a campervan as their second vehicle, and to take them away from their hectic lives.

At Needingworth and Wyton two local businesses convert new and nearly new Volkswagen T6 Transporter vans to modern, state-of-the-art campers. There are dozens of such businesses nationally. VW campers in all their forms can be hired for memory-making holidays and weekends all over the British Isles.

But the lineage of these modern leisure vehicles, some costing upwards of £35,000, goes back to war-torn central Europe, and to three men whose names are less than familiar.

From 1945 under the supervision of the British Army, Germany's decimated motor manufacturing industry was rebuilt. Led by Briton Major Ivan Hirst, Volkswagen emerged from the ashes of the Nazi regime to produce 1000 of its T1 family saloon cars (soon known as the Beetle) every month.

A Dutchman called Ben Pon, who ran a family car business at the end of the Second World War, became Holland's main VW importer. Whilst on a visit to the Volkswagen factory, Pon had the idea for a small van that would give trades people something to carry equipment and tools.

On 23rd April 1947 Pon sketched a design and made notes. The simple concept had a box rather than a saloon

body on a VW chassis, a driver above the front axle and an engine over the rear axle. His scribbling would become the blue print for a generation of travellers.

Pon took his idea to Major Hirst and though initially rejected by the officer's superiors, Pon persevered. When Heinrich Nordhoff succeeded Hirst at the helm of VW, the project began and on 8th March 1950 production of the VW T2 van, based on Pon's original design, started.

Over the next 25 years close to 1.5 million VW T2 vans were made, and under Nordhoff's leadership Volkswagen rose to the third largest motor manufacturer in the world.

The T2 became ubiquitous. Called variously Transporter, Kombi, Microbus, Splitscreen and Bay, T2 vans have been used as workhorses, fire tenders, ambulances, taxis and minibuses.

But it is the conversion of this quirky and rudimentary box on wheels into the campervan that has earned its place in history. Embraced by the Beat generation that spawned the hippie movement the VW campervan gave travellers, that had neither the heart nor feet to walk the world, the opportunity to travel and rebel.

From the sixties until production ceased in 2013 hundreds of thousands of VW T2 panel vans were converted to campers. They have featured on the big screen and in celebrity life.

As Volkswagen developed their range of commercial vans - the T25, T4, T5 and the current T6 - so too individuals and businesses around the world converted them to campervans. Though other makes of panel van are also converted, VW has become synonymous with the camper.

As enthusiasts celebrate the 70th birthday of the iconic T2, and Britain's campervan economy continues to boom, is there any better way of embracing the spirit of the sixties and escaping the pressures of today, than on the open road in a campervan.

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