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VWs prominent at SMMT Motor Caravan Test Day

Motor caravans were also in the spotlight recently at the first Press Test Day organised by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. Some 40 motor caravans were on show from about ten manufacturers, all SMMT members, and many of the models were available for test drives on an eight mile circuit near Beaconsfield, Bucks.

For VAG the timing of the event was perfect, for they had just increased to four the number of manufacturers whose products carry their approval. Joining approved convertors **Autohomes (UK)** and **Devon Conversions** are **Richard Holdsworth**, who have been building on the VW for 15 years, and **Auto-Sleepers**, who produce models on both the Transporter and the LT.

With their new briskly-performing and refined water-cooled Transporter models Volkswagen, who in the early 1970s enjoyed a share of the motor caravan market running at an astounding 70%, look set to regain some of their earlier prominence.

The new 1.9 litre engine, delivering 60 bhp in standard form or 78 bhp when fitted with a twin-choke carburettor, gives performance to enable the VW to keep up with its old rivals from Bedford, Ford and Leyland (Freight Rover) as well as with newcomers such as Renault's Trafic and the Talbot Express (or Fiat Ducato, when it wears its other badge).

For some this SMMT Test Day was the first opportunity to try out the new generation Volkswagens, and I heard plentiful praise not only for performance but also for the outstanding quietness of the new vehicles. While the Trafic and the Express are both quiet to drive by comparison with all earlier commercials, the new VW is quieter still.

Perhaps the flat-four, water-cooled engine is no less noisy than the power units of its rivals, but the engine is still where Dr Porsche prescribed, and so the sound is still left behind.

As a basis for comparison I took out the Caravelle — the de-luxe, executive microbus version of the new Transporter — for my first test circuit.

The new engine and front-mounted radiator have added only 30 kg to the vehicle weight (and that evenly distributed) and have in no way upset the superb handling of this 'Mk 3' version of the Transporter which appeared in 1979.

The all-independent coil spring suspension, and even weight distribution between front and rear, give roadholding which is not bettered in the commercial class, and ride comfort to match. Like its torsion-bar sprung predecessors, however, the latest Transporter is still able to revel in off-road conditions and protect its occupants from the worst effects of quite atrocious surfaces.

Change-up points on the speedometer of the 78 bhp, 5-speed VW I found marked at about 20, 35, 55 and 75 mph. Yes — 75 mph and still a gear to go! Unbelievable to those who have lived with the Transporter for years. The change points came up remarkably quickly, and could be exceeded by a few mph before the rev limiter came into play and the power abruptly ran out.

This 'engine protector' is still a feature of the new engines, but with the power and speed ranges now available it need no longer be the inhibitor of overtaking which it was with earlier generations of the Transporter. Only in first and second gears is there some natural tendency, soon overcome, to run over the limit. In the



CHRIS BURLACE reporting

higher ratios one can feel that there is nothing to gain by hanging on to a gear, and the thinking driver should never be caught out.

Volkswagen's performance figures do not seem exaggerated. I found that the claimed 0—50 mph acceleration time of 15.1 secs (half-laden) for this version of the Transporter could easily be bettered by over 1½ secs by the Caravelle with only the driver on board.

Similarly the claimed top speed of 81 mph, for both the 5- and 4-speed 'vans with the more powerful engine, also seemed academic, judged by the feel of the test Caravelle. One VW-approved motor caravan constructor spoke in a press release of the 'indecently fast' 78 bhp VW, 'Capable of cruising all day at 80 mph and with an indicated top speed of 90'.

As impressive as the get-up-and-go of the Caravelle was its quietness, the exceptional qualities of the basic vehicle being enhanced by the very high standard of trim. Cruising on a light throttle, I had to listen hard to make sure that the engine was still there, its steady note only just audible above muted wind and tyre noise.

The new VW had confirmed its qualities on the road. What of the many conversions on offer and their suitability for the 'nomad' of the eighties?

No. 1 in the sales charts for the first quarter of 1983 has been the *Kamper Mk 2* from Autohomes. I like the big elevating roof, with solid, insulated sides, giving exceptional height and spaciousness in the upper berth, a 6' by 4' double. Down below, layout is conventional with

the storage and kitchen unit along the offside, but well subdivided to give convenient access.

There's the usual sink and drainer, two-burner cooker with grill, and a fridge as standard. There's also room to store a couple of gas bottles (useful if the optional blown-air heater is specified) and a special niche for a chemical toilet.

The comfortable bench seat is quickly transformed to a 6'1" x 4' bed, while behind it are wardrobe, storage drawers and the usual big well for storing bedding.

The well made furniture in the latest *Kamper* is finished in an attractive wood-grain laminate with neat plastic edging. Warm, velvet-like upholstery and colour coordinated curtains give a cosy feel to a practically designed interior. Prices start from about £9,560.

I took the 'cheap' version, with 60 bhp engine and 4-speed box, up the road and was again impressed by quietness, not only in the base vehicle but also in the absence of creaks and rattles from the caravan fittings. It wasn't a flyer like the 78 bhp 'van, but still way ahead of the old 1600 air-cooled, nearer to the former 2-litre models.

IMPROVEMENTS

Devon Conversions, the best known name in VW motor caravans, have been keeping a low profile but now, after a takeover by two former executives of the company, are making a comeback with an interesting new VW conversion.



The Devon *Sunrise* employs the popular layout, (kitchen and storage unit along the offside) of the long-running *Moonraker* from the same stable, but there are a host of improvements.

Kitchen equipment is first class, with a 2 cu ft Electrolux fridge and a smart, stove enamelled sink and 2-burner-and-grill cooker from the Optimus range. Worktops and tabletop are in a leather-effect laminate, the tabletop being

carried on a cranked leg giving a variety of possible positions.

The rear seat in the *Sunrise*, just about the most comfortable and luxurious to grace any VW, is upholstered in rich gold Dralon with buttoning. Behind it is the wardrobe on the offside, a storage well, and overhead a spacious locker. I was disappointed to find no trim around the windows in the caravan area, and no opening window unless specified at extra cost.



Up aloft, Devon's *Double Top* side-lifter roof continues, but with the option of an insulated skirt fabric. Among other options are swivel cab seats with a second table, luxury cab trim, underfloor heater, and mains electrics package.

The *Sunrise* is a good looking product which should put Devon back in the hunt, although it is on the pricey side, starting at £10,164. The *Moonraker*, looking more spacious thanks to the use of lighter materials, continues from £9,742.

Auto-Sleepers describe their VW conversion as a 'camping car' — not so much, I feel, because it lacks any of the amenities of a full motor caravan but because it is the ideal dual-purpose vehicle with all the comfort and driving qualities of a good passenger car.

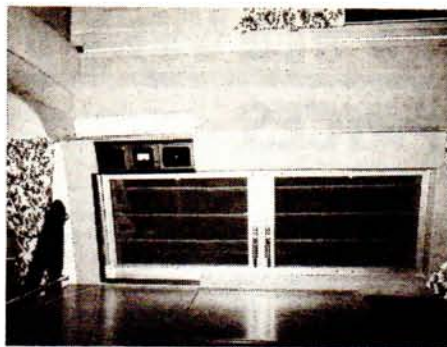


The company's quality is second to none in the motor caravan world, with immaculate, light oak cabinetwork, neat and thorough trim and superb upholstery, making them the yardstick against which others are inevitably compared.

Auto-Sleepers' VW layout is a variation on the common theme. The offside kitchen unit is kept forward and compact to allow space for a U-shaped seating plan to the rear. Worktop space is created by arranging for the cover of the sink/drainage to hinge forward over the driving seat. Another good feature is the louvre window, with flyscreen, adjacent to the kitchen area.

A 1 cu ft fridge is standard; there's a good kitchen cupboard, a large, shelved cupboard behind the passenger seat, and a spacious wardrobe in the nearside rear corner. The storage well behind the rear seat is furnished with a neat, carpet-trimmed cover, while pigeonholes set in the curve of the roof provide a handy place for oddments.

The Auto-Sleeper provides the usual 'downstairs' bed, 4' by just over 6', above the engine deck by re-arrangement of the seat (not quite such a straightforward operation as in some conversions). Up aloft in the solid-sided elevating roof is a second, firm-based 6' double berth. There may be a slight tangling of legs with four at table on the U-shaped seat, but otherwise it's



hard to find anything to criticise in this conversion.

Upholstery is immaculate in a soft but durable gold-coloured fabric, there's full carpeting and a very high standard of trim which leaves only small areas around the side door and tailgate windows as painted metal. The price tag comes as a pleasant surprise — only £9,240 on the 60 bhp, 4-speed Transporter.

Fourth of the approved convertors, Richard Holdsworth Conversions, showed one of their well established *Villa* models at Beaconsfield, but still on an air-cooled base vehicle (the conversion will be unchanged on the new VW).

The *Villa* follows the conventional layout, with main bed over the engine and kitchen/storage unit right along the offside. The rear seat quickly converts with a rock-and-roll mechanism to make the 6'2" by 4'2" bed, while a rear facing seat beside the side door has a fold-out section to make the fourth place at table.

Furniture is of all-plywood construction surfaced with a rich walnut-patterned plastic laminate, and is finished with smart hardwood edgings and pulls to drawers and cupboards. Buttoned Dralon upholstery, practical carpet which can be sponged clean, and generously cut Dralon curtains complete the attractive interior.

I liked the practical arrangement of storage for easy access, and the air of spaciousness afforded by the *Giant-Riser* elevating roof with its concertina plastic sides which fold away neatly and automatically as the roof is lowered.

At no extra cost the *Villa* can also be fitted with the Holdsworth *Hi-Flyer* hightop. On the new water-cooled VW the *Villa* will start from a remarkably low £8,979 (or £8,206 with fixed roof).

How does Richard Holdsworth keep the price so low? The answer is that many items of equipment which the motor caravanner will consider essential are on the 'options' list. Fridge, upper bed, sliding or louvre window, swivel cab seats with additional table, etc — the choice is for the customer but it brings the price of the Holdsworth VW nearer to that of its competitors.

NEW IDEAS

Newcomers to motor caravan construction are **Diamond RV**, an associate company of Travelworld of Wolverhampton. They showed their *Autocruiser* on the Transporter, a conversion which brings a fresh approach to the VW, with a new layout and a host of ideas.

Cab seats recline and swivel, while rear seating is set further forward than is normal in the VW, allowing access to the galley (which is over the forward edge of the engine deck) and to the tiny toilet cubicle on the offside.

The *Diamond Autocruiser* is purely a two-berth, and the sleekly swept fore and aft sections of its hightop make no concession to accommodating upper berths. Two single beds are formed by reclining and joining front and rear seats, while the seats can also provide places for four, each with proper back support, at table.



The kitchen unit is equipped with eye-catching vitreous enamel sink and 2-burner-and-grill cooker by Optimus. Small but practical, the toilet cubicle has a fibreglass liner with a niche extending backwards over the engine deck in which to store a Porta Potti.

The standard Electrolux 122 fridge is set high in the cabinetwork over the engine and to the rear of the toilet compartment, and behind that I found yet another surprise in this well equipped 'van — a Valliant, constant-flow gas water heater. Any loss of space in the body of the 'van due to the space taken by its 'extras as standard' is compensated for by a cavernous locker above the cab.



Prices for the *Diamond Autocruiser* start from £9,858 and, in addition to the base vehicle engine and gearbox options, caravan extras available include Eberspächer petrol-fired heater, auxiliary battery and double glazing. The *Autocruiser* won high marks for innovation and I liked the very thorough standard of trim, but overall finish was not quite as good as that of the 'approved' conversions.

Cavalier Coachman of Felixstowe are renowned for their individualistic motor caravans, a blend of practicality and the eye-appeal of the 'custom van'. On show were their *Classic* on the Transporter, introduced a year ago, and the longer-running LT-based model, the *Altus*.

The *Classic* is surely the most thoroughly trimmed VW around, the original metalwork and much of Cavalier's interior work being covered with rich pile fabrics or with toning, heavy woven material.

There is U-plan rear seating, twin wardrobes on either side of the rear well, and a compact kitchen unit with small, square sink, 2-burner-and-grill cooker, fridge, and cupboard behind the

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driving seat. The *Classic* is another hightop, making space for gigantic lockers front and rear plus a row of handy eye-level lockers along the offside. Sliding windows in the side door and opposite are standard, as is an extractor fan and a Riviera underfloor heater.

Cavalier are very flexible on specifications, so two 'vans are seldom alike. That on show at the SMMT day carried a price tag of £11,630 with a number of optional extras. You could save £500 or more, or write a much bigger cheque!

The *Altus* on the LT adopts a somewhat similar floorplan to that of its smaller brother. The decor is similar, and additional equipment includes an oven, shower/toilet compartment, and Carver *Cascade* storage hot water system. A superb vehicle for those who can find well over £14,000.

Although the Volkswagens made a big impact at the Press Test Day they had plenty of rivals. Last year's darling of the convertors, the Renault *Trafic*, is now well established and a very direct competitor of the VW with its suitability as an everyday vehicle. This year's popular newcomer is the Talbot Express. At 15'7½" long, 6'5½" wide and 6'10½" high, it's only 4 to 6 inches bigger than the German van in its various dimensions, but that's just enough to make it look too big for day-to-day service for many would-be owners.

Nevertheless on its internal proportions for conversion, its performance and its price the Talbot is set for success as a motor caravan, and is a serious threat to an upswing in the Transporter's fortunes. In chassis-cab form the Express also makes a fine base for coachbuilt 'vans, and will take its place firmly in that price range where LT-based models also come into consideration.

ADVENTUROUS

Auto-Sleepers and Holdsworth are official Renault convertors and both showed their relevant models. Auto-Sleepers, so far, have stuck to the short-wheelbase *Trafic* and a conventional floorplan, with seating forward providing a dinette and joining with cab seats to make beds, and the kitchen unit, wardrobe and cupboards in the rear. There's the same high quality, and light oak furniture, as in other Auto-Sleepers and a considerable price advantage over the VWs at £8,483, although that is with the modestly-performing 1.4 litre engine.

The Holdsworth Renault, the *Romance*, is more adventurous in concept. It shares a similar forward seating and bed arrangement with its rival but has an all-round kitchen and storage layout at the rear which simulates in miniature a modern home kitchen. It is well equipped with the increasingly popular Optimum fittings.

The original Renault *Romance*, based on the swb *Trafic*, last year won its class as Motor

Caravan of the Year. Now it has been joined by hightop and hightop lwb versions.

The latter, shown at Beaconsfield, adds a useful toilet compartment and considerable space to the *Romance* and has a standard hot water system. For price it is close to the VW Transporter models, from £10,133, while on size and features it could compete with some LT-based 'vans.

The accolade of approval for Talbot Express based motor caravans has gone again to Auto-Sleepers for panel van conversions, and to Autohomes for coachbuilts. The Auto-Sleepers *Talbot Sportsman* is available in elevating roof or hightop versions. Both employ layouts similar to those in the company's Renault conversion, but the extra space available in the Express makes way for the addition of very small toilet cubicles and some additional cupboard space. Prices again are below those of most VW 'vans, from £8,747 for the elevating roof model and just £200 more for the hightop.

On the road I found the Talbots lively and refined vehicles to drive. They have front-wheel drive, yet particularly light and precise rack-and-pinion steering. Handling, like that of both the VW and the Renault, is in the saloon car class. Panel van conversions usually come on the '1000' model with 1796cc, 68 bhp engine and 4-speed box. The 1300 and 1500 models (the figures relate to nominal payload) come with a larger engine (1971 cc and 77 bhp) and a 5-speed box.

Autohomes, in their *Excalibur* coachbuilt on the Talbot, have exploited the capability of the 1300 model chassis to take a longer than usual body and have come up with a novel layout. Despite its 18-foot overall length the front-wheel drive *Excalibur* was by far the best coachbuilt motor caravan which it has been my pleasure to drive. It really handles like a well set-up panel van, goes precisely where you want it, gives a smooth ride in the cab or in the rear, and is no sluggard, with a 0-50 mph time through the gears of about 17½ seconds.

The 5-speed gearbox, notchy and imprecise, is the 'van's only weak point. Its quietness on the road, common to all the Express models I drove, is a plus point bettered only by the new VW.



Inside the *Excalibur* I found a cutaway cab roof for easy access and a fold-down bed (stowed flat against the aerodynamically sloped front) instead of the usual Luton arrangement. Seating behind the cab provides face-forward places for two or three, a dinette for four or five with the addition of the swivel cab passenger seat, or an all-round seating plan for a small party!

Kitchen accommodation, centrally on the nearside, is small but adequate and is enhanced by a pull-out worktop opposite. On the offside there's a reasonably sized toilet compartment. In this design the width is where it matters and extra space has been found for slim but useful cup-

boards. The stable-door type entrance to the 'van is opposite the toilet cubicle door, while the extreme rear of the body provides a further 2-seater dinette.

Standard fittings are 2 cu ft fridge, Saunier *Duval* water heater, Electrolux balanced-flue space heater, oven, extractor fan and waste tank. The rear of the 'van can be closed off by a sliding partition to make a 'private' bedroom or a dressing room adjacent to the shower.

SURPRISE

In standard form the *Excalibur* is equipped as a 3-berth, though most will add the overcab bed to the specification and the complement can then be stretched to six. Nice to drive and nice to live in, the *Excalibur* is bound to do well.

For the buyer, another pleasant surprise comes when he sees the figures on the windscreen — £11,195 on the test day (but there was a base vehicle price rise in the pipeline). If the specification is taken into account, this big coachbuilt really costs little more than a Transporter conversion from some companies, and it's way under the price of any LT-based models.

A new rival for VW LT motor caravans which was also on show was the Mercedes *Autobahn* panel van conversion from Diamond. A hightop, and primarily a luxury two-berth, the *Autobahn* makes much use of fibreglass for its furniture units.



Toilet cubicle and giant wardrobe, both with smart looking curved doors, take up the nearside rear quarter. The well equipped kitchen forms a shallow 'U', across the rear, along the side and then with a pier into the middle of the 'van. Seating, opposite the side door, is arranged in an 'L'. With a look of luxury, and equipment from the 'top drawer' to match, this is a 'van which will draw envious glances for its owners — but they'll need to find £3,000 more than the price of *Excalibur*.

Volkswagen and Talbot stole the limelight at this first SMMT motor caravan test day, to judge from the interest shown by journalists in the static displays and from their choice of vehicle when disappearing for a spin around the test circuit.

Very different in concept, the two vans nevertheless share common attributes. Sure handling and comfortable ride; low noise levels, thanks to well developed engines and mountings and also to high gearing (18 to 20 mph per 1000 rpm in top) and the option of 5-speed gearboxes to further improve overall quietness; and, more important, economy. Both these newcomers (if such a word can be applied to a vehicle with a pedigree as long as that of the Transporter!) should squeeze more miles from every costly gallon than their older rivals.

On numbers exhibited, the Volkswagen was a clear winner on this first SMMT motor caravanning occasion. On technical merit it was a finely balanced situation, but I wouldn't be writing for *Safer Motoring* if I weren't tempted to give the decision to VW by half a point!

On price, sadly, the VW still 'leads'. Will the price of VW-based motor caravans be the Achilles heel of the marque in its attempt to regain lost ground? We will have to wait at least until the end of 1983 to learn the answer...