

Communiqués

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Volvo with four world-firsts turns 20

After presenting its first front-wheel drive Volvo model - the 480 - in 1985, Volvo Car Corporation continued its comprehensive product and production-technology transition with its next project, launched on June 11, 1991: the Volvo 850 GLT. The car with four world-firsts - one at the front, one at the rear and two in the middle.

New car through and through

Like the 480, the larger 850 was also a result of the over-riding, long-term strategic Galaxy project within which future Volvo models were being developed. In brief, Galaxy resulted in the 400 and 850 Series since work on them took place both at the Volvo Car Corporation in Göteborg, resulting in the car that became the 850 as well as the 900 with its conventional technical layout, and in the Netherlands, where Volvo Car B.V. developed the 400 Series.

The Volvo 850 actually carried over nothing at all from previous Volvo models apart from its name. It represented a total departure from its predecessors and the other models in the range in virtually every respect. From the newly developed and modularly constructed all-aluminium engine range - whose first result was the 3-litre in-line six that was fitted to the Volvo 960 in late summer 1990 - a five-cylinder 170 hp variant was created. It was installed transversely in the new car, in a separate sub-frame, and drove the front wheels via an unusually compact gearbox fitted alongside the engine. This was world-first number one.

The rear suspension was attached to a new type of multilink axle called the Delta Link, which cleverly combined the comfort and pliant ride of independent suspension with the live rear axle's stability and constant track. World-first number two. Safety was naturally a high-priority area and the Volvo 850 took a giant step forward in this respect, not least thanks to the two world-firsts in the middle of the car: the integrated SIPS side-impact protection system and the ARH automatic height-adjustable safety belt mechanism.

What is more, Volvo had invested immense effort in designing a truly lively car that offered plenty of keen driving pleasure, even tuning the exhaust note to enhance the car's sporty credentials. Behind the wheel, the cockpit was now more driver-focused than in previous models. Generous support for the left foot made enthusiastic driving easier, as did the car's excellent dynamic properties.

The design of the 850 showed only relatively modest departures from classic Volvo lines. There was no doubt this was a Volvo, yet it looked entirely new in every respect. The new car's heritage could be clearly seen at the front and rear, while several interesting solutions contributed to a cohesive overall impression such as the unusual side window treatment and the new type of bonnet with integrated grille that became a standard feature of Volvo models for many years to come.

Production start in Belgium

For the first time in Volvo's history - with the exception of early P1800 production at Jensen in Britain - the new model was initially built in a non-Swedish factory - the Volvo 850 GLT first went into production in Ghent, Belgium. The company's Swedish factory in Torslanda took over part of the production output later on. From the production-technology viewpoint too a number of new features had been developed to improve and streamline the production process, such as increased use of robots and automation, the use of lasers for measurement, cutting and welding,

and larger one-piece body pressings than ever before. The car's technical layout also made assembly easier: the marriage-point was made fully automated and all "under-up" work (working above shoulder height) was eliminated.

The 850 was launched in the sporty GLT version, with a 20-valve naturally aspirated engine producing 170 hp. The introductory price on the Swedish market was 187,900 kronor "ready for the road" - it was keenly priced midway between the 940 and 960 - so its sales success was assured right from the outset, even on Volvo's most important export market, the USA. Car tests the world over delivered a unanimous verdict: the new Volvo appealed to everyone and the 850 reaped a formidable harvest of international awards - almost 50 all told.

Model range with many variants

In true Volvo fashion the model quickly underwent considerable development in terms of both breadth and depth in order to appeal to a wide customer base. By summer 1992, in time for model year 1993, a somewhat detuned model known as the GLE was introduced, featuring a 10-valve version of the five-cylinder engine producing 140 hp. Half a year later an estate car version of the GLT and GLE hit the showrooms, packed with innovative solutions to enhance both flexibility and safety. The estate model was the first to feature large vertical tail lamp stacks that covered the entire D-pillar from the lower edge of the tailgate window all the way up to the roof line, a solution that Volvo's five-door cars still use.

In time for the 1994 model year the company launched a high-performance model known as the 850 Turbo (or T-5 as it was known outside Sweden) together with somewhat gentler body lines with altered bumper contours for all versions. The Turbo model delivered 225 hp and 300 Nm of torque, and if that was not enough an even higher-performance version was unveiled at the Geneva motor show in 1994: the 850 T-5R in eye-catching yellow livery. The limited production run of 2500 cars with the 240 hp engine was swallowed up immediately and was succeeded by 2500 cars in black, which also disappeared from showrooms at a rapid pace, followed finally by the last run of 2500 dark green T-5R cars.

Later that year another world-first was introduced in the 850 Series: side airbags integrated in the front seats - a feature known as the SIPS bag that soon made its way into the rest of the Volvo range.

Increased demand for more horsepower and higher torque was met with the 1996 models: the 850 R with 250 hp and the 850 TDI which was powered by a five-cylinder diesel engine. Another very pleasant addition to the 850 Series was the 193 hp light-pressure turbo that was installed in another variant that broke new ground for forthcoming Volvo models: the four-wheel drive 850 AWD.

1996 was also the last year for production of cars with the "850" badge. In November the 1997 model range was launched as the S70 sedan and V70 estate car. This new updated generation was also the first to use Volvo Car Corporation's new model nomenclature. In terms of appearance they resembled their 850 predecessor but under the skin there were major changes. Between 1991 and 1997 no less than 716,903 cars bearing the 850 badge were sold, and the last Volvo models to be built on this "old" technical platform were the C70 coupe and convertible in 2005.

Investment for the long term

It has been said that the Volvo 850 with its 15 billion kronor investment bill was the largest Swedish industrial project ever at the time. That is correct, but also not entirely true. This was not the price tag for the car but for Volvo Car Corporation's future: the figure encompassed not only an entirely new technical platform but also, crucially, investments in production technology and plants, such as the all-new Skövde engine factory that today supplies Volvo Car Corporation with engines that are a further development of the modular units developed for the Galaxy project. The 850 thus completely reshaped Volvo's product strategy - and indirectly continues to do so to this day.

No single Volvo model has meant as much to the company from the viewpoint of technical innovation as the Volvo 850 did. It was a car that in many respects was far ahead of its time yet in other respects was exactly right for its time. It was launched 20 years ago - and with its launch Volvo Car Corporation entered a new era.

For more information about Volvo Car Corporation's classic models, please visit www.volvocars.com/heritage.

Mots clés:

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