

Communiqués

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A true cosmopolitan turns 50 – the Volvo P1800 1961 – 2011

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Planned in Sweden, designed in Italy, unveiled at the car show in Brussels, built in Britain and a huge success in the USA. The Volvo P1800 is perhaps Volvo's most internationally renowned model ever and the one that arouses most emotions. In 2011 this remarkable people's favourite turns 50. It was in 1961 that it entered production and reached showrooms after four years of careful planning and development, remaining in production for the next twelve years. From the sales perspective it played perhaps a marginal role for the company, but from the image viewpoint it played a far bigger role than any previous Volvo model – and few if any subsequent models have matched it image-wise.

Design coup

The Volvo P1800 was born for that very reason – to attract the attention of passersby to Volvo's display windows and to increase what today is known as 'floor traffic' so that people who entered the showroom left it in a new Volvo.

Volvo had tried its hand at a sports car back in the early 1950s – the open two-seater plastic-bodied Volvo Sport which was built from 1955 to 1957 with a total production run of just 67 cars.

"Not a bad car, but a bad Volvo" was the way Volvo President Gunnar Engellau put it when he retired the model. However, he did recognise the importance of having a prestigious and exciting model to boost overall sales, and Volvo dealers were desperate for just such a car.

Design proposals were ordered from Italy, where Volvo consultant Helmer Petterson – who was deeply involved in the planning of the new car – had got his son Pelle a job at Pietro Frua thanks to Pelle's fresh degree in industrial design from the Pratt Institute in New York. When the time came to unveil the four proposals to Volvo's board in 1957, Helmer sneaked in his son Pelle's fifth design – and that was the one that everyone picked. Engellau in particular liked it since he had very definite views about wanting an Italian-designed car. That of course is precisely what he did get, but it was penned by a 25 year old native of Göteborg who would later make his mark as a boat designer and win Olympic medals in yacht racing. Eventually, however, the truth behind the winning design proposal emerged. The choleric Engellau blew his top, felt he had been hoodwinked and promised that Pelle would never be acknowledged as the car's designer. And indeed many years went by before the truth was made known and Pelle Petterson received the credit he was due for penning one of the world's most attractive sports coupes.

The new sports car – which is how Volvo presented the model – had a fixed roof, a steel body, a lot of the mechanical components lifted straight from the Amazon and the newly developed B18 engine in its 100 hp sports version when it eventually arrived in the showrooms.

Three prototypes were built by Frua in Turin in 1957-1958 on Amazon underpinnings and these cars were used for a variety of purposes, for instances as templates for the production of press tools, in a range of tests, at shows, for press work and advertising photo-shoots and much else. All three have survived and are still on the road.

Production overseas

At this time, Volvo found itself in a hugely expansive phase and the company realised from the outset that it did not have sufficient in-house capacity to manufacture the new model – not for

pressing of body panels, nor for painting or assembly, not even on a small scale. The hunt for a suitable partner got under way, led by Helmer Petterson, and after much deliberation a decision was taken to use two British companies to build the car: Pressed Steel would build the bodies and Jensen Motors would paint and assemble the cars. Production got under way but this was a far from friction-free method. Constant problems with personnel, working methods, quality, suppliers and logistics along with an unwillingness to deal with these issues meant that as soon as it was possible, Volvo transferred production home to Sweden.

As of spring 1963 – after 6000 Jensen-built cars – production of the 1800 started up in Volvo's Lundby factory but it was not until 1969 that body pressings were transferred from Pressed Steel in Scotland to Volvo's press shop in Olofström. The move home also coincided with a change of name for the P1800. First it was badged the P1800 S, later in 1963 it was known simply as the 1800 S, S standing for Sweden.

During the coupe's long life, no radical changes were made to the successful exterior lines. Only details such as the grille, trim mouldings, wheels and colours differentiate the various model years. From the technical viewpoint the 1800 shadowed the development of Volvo's other models and was continuously upgraded. Disc brakes all round, more powerful engines and electronic fuel injection were the most noticeable changes.

Cult car for The Saint and a world record-holder

In 1971, however, a new body variant was presented, the 1800 ES. A sporting hatchback with an extended roofline and an estate car rear featuring a large glass tailgate. A GT and estate car combined. The ES was designed in Göteborg and attracted considerable attention, but it also divided opinion into two camps. It has nonetheless achieved cult status along with its coupe sister and many have survived to this day. Volvo's 1800 models are very sought-after by enthusiasts – there are several clubs serving the model – and they were for many years relatively inexpensive to buy, although in recent years their prices have started to rise on the classic-car market. Renovating an 1800 is neither easy nor cheap. Many parts are no longer available, particularly for the Jensen-built cars, but owners who have taken the trouble can expect many miles behind the wheel of an exceptionally pleasant, agile and robust car whose value to Volvo in terms of image can never really be fully quantified.

Just ask Roger Moore, who was fortunate enough to drive a P1800 in his role as debonair crime-fighter Simon Templar, a sort of modern-day Robin Hood, in the British TV drama series based on Leslie Charteris's "The Saint". The TV production company was looking for an attractive sports car that would suit a gentleman of independent means, and after being turned down by Jaguar approached Volvo to ask for the P1800. Volvo was quick to oblige. It was a brilliant PR move for the new Volvo model and the car became etched firmly in the minds of everyone at the time. To this day the P1800 is still often referred to as The Saint's car.

Another person who can testify to the car's excellence is New Yorker Irv Gordon, who has covered more than 4,500,000 kilometres in the 1800 S he purchased in 1966, making him the holder of a Guinness world record that will probably never be able to be beaten. Irv Gordon has spent a total of almost 12 years behind the wheel of his car and he is now aiming for 3,000,000 miles, that is to say about 4,800,000 kilometres. On the same engine!

Timeless 50 year old

The Volvo P1800, this alert 50 year old, was never intended to be a mass-produced car. It was and still is a niche product, the top of the model range, yet at the same time viable enough to be within the reach of ordinary people who wanted a car that looked like a Ferrari but cost and functioned like a Volvo: pleasant, reliable and economical. It appealed to people even before it arrived in the showrooms in 1961 and its design has been shown to stand the test of time: it is timeless, classic and sporty in a well-balanced way. Congratulations to Gunnar Engellau and Helmer Petterson who pushed for Volvo to build the car, to Pelle Petterson who designed it, to Volvo who kept the model going in good times and bad over a period of twelve years, and to all those people who today own and value an 1800 – a truly living piece of Volvo history.

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