

Press Release

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History of the Volvo P1800

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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 United States, the Volvo P1800 is Volvo's most internationally renowned model.

In 2011, this remarkable people's favorite turned 50. It was in 1961 the P1800 entered production and it reached showrooms after four years of careful planning and development; remained in production until 1973. From a sales perspective, the P1800 played a modest role for the company, but from an image viewpoint, it played a far bigger role than any previous Volvo model. Few, if any, subsequent models have matched it image-wise.

Design coupe

The Volvo P1800 was created to attract the attention of passersby to Volvo's display windows and to increase what today is known as "floor traffic" so showroom visitors left in a new Volvo.

Volvo produced 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 recognize 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 - helped his son Pelle secure a job at Pietro Frua thanks to Pelle's 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 snuck in his son Pelle's fifth design - and that was the one that everyone picked. Engellau, in particular, liked it since he had definitive views about wanting an Italian-designed car. That is precisely what he got, 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, the truth behind the winning design proposal emerged. The choleric Engellau 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 Pelle Petterson received due credit for designing one of the world's most attractive sports coupes. The new sports car 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. These cars were used for a variety of purposes, including templates for the production of press tools, in a range of tests, at shows, for press work, advertising photo-shoots and much more. All three have survived and are still on the road today.

Production overseas

At this time, Volvo found itself in an expansion phase, and the company realized 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 manufacturing partner got under way, and was led by Helmer Petterson. After much deliberation, Volvo decided 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 arrangement had its challenges. Constant problems with personnel, working methods, quality, suppliers and logistics - along with an unwillingness to deal with these issues - meant that Volvo transferred production home to Sweden as soon as it was possible.

In the spring of 1963 - after 6,000 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 name change 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.

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

Cult car for The Saint

In 1971, however, a new body variant was presented - the 1800 ES - a sporting hatchback with an extended roofline and a rear estate car 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. Nonetheless, it has achieved cult status along with its sister coupe and many have survived to this day.

Volvo's 1800 models are highly sought-after by enthusiasts, and there are several clubs dedicated to the model. For many years, the models were 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 take 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 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' "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, they approached Volvo to request 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.

Timeless 52-year-old

The Volvo P1800, this alert 52-year-old, was never intended to be a mass-produced car. It was and still is a niche product - the top of the range model. At the same time, the P1800 was priced 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. The P1800 appealed to people even before it arrived in showrooms in 1961, and its design has stood the test of time: 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 12 years, and to all those people who today own and value an 1800 - a truly living piece of Volvo history.

Volvo Cars Heritage

www.volvocars.com/heritage

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