

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

VOLKSWAGEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*



31 August 1951. Depicted as the first Beetle off the Uitenhage line, this was in fact one of the demo models from Germany.



Second Beetle off the line. Although incomplete, this was the first SA assembled car, the next car is a Studebaker.

In 1950 Mel Brooks, the managing director of South African Motor Assemblers and Distributors (SAMAD) in Uitenhage, had his hands full. His Contractual Plant had been set up three years before to assemble Studebakers, and volumes had increased substantially when the popular Austin A40 had been added to the production line. Always on the lookout for business, towards the end of the year he welcomed an approach by Baron Klaus von Oertzen, the MD of Volkswagen Export Division in Germany, for the assembly of the Volkswagen sedan (the name 'Beetle' was not yet official). Von Oertzen was no stranger to South Africa, before the war he had been the highly successful representative for D.K.W. vehicles in the country. In 1937 he had promoted the marque by bringing out from Germany the incredible V16 Auto Union racing cars that had stormed to victory at the Pollsmoor Circuit, driven by Ernst von Delius and Bernd Rosemeyer.

Soon after Hitler had come into power in 1933, he had challenged the German motor industry to build a small family car that could cruise at 100 km/h on the autobahns he was planning, and would cost only 1000 Reichsmarks, about £86.

None of the major players believed this would be possible (the cheapest small Ford cost £125), until Dr Ferdinand Porsche designed a rear-engined, air-cooled car that was launched in 1938. A year later a military version of the Volkswagen, the 2WD Kubelwagen, was produced. After the war the Wolfsburg factory, in the zone occupied by British troops, was in ruins. It was taken over as a vehicle repair workshop by Major Ivan Hirst, who found that the workers had recovered enough of the machinery to assemble two cars. The Allies had come to respect the performance of the Kubelwagens in Africa, and as the occupying forces desperately needed transport, Hirst secured an order for some 20 000 vehicles. In 1947 a Dutchman, Ben Pon, bought five cars to resell in Holland, these were the first civilian sales of VWs. The USA, Britain and France were offered the design as part payment for war reparations, but engineers from all three countries turned it down, and the Volkswagenwerk factory was handed back to the Germans in October 1949.

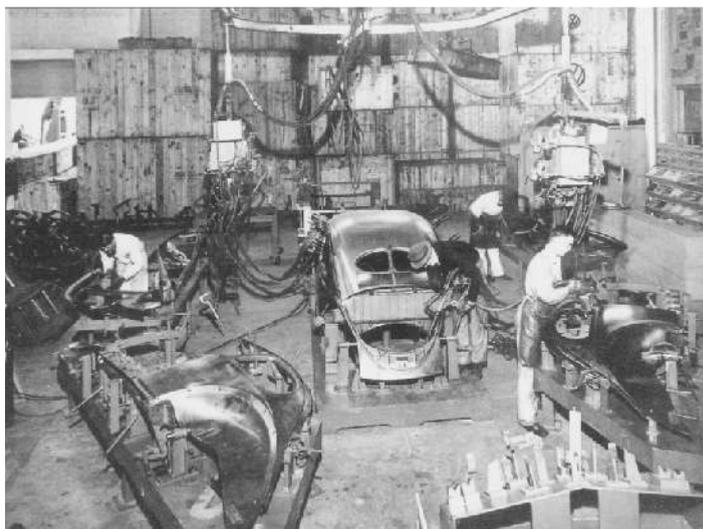
During the previous year management had been entrusted to a talented ex-Opel engineer, Dr Heinz Nordhoff, who had completely reorganized production,

servicing and sales. He had introduced quality control of all components on a level that had never been achieved on a mass-produced vehicle, and had ensured that the cost of parts and services was kept as low as possible.

Export markets were pursued aggressively. A mere eighteen months later, in March 1951, a fully built-up Volkswagen was dispatched to SAMAD in Uitenhage, and a second model was sent in July to coincide with the signing by Brooks and von Oertzen of the assembly contract. Events moved quickly and on 31 August 1951 the first Volkswagen came off the

production line. Photographs were taken of the event, but the vehicle depicted as the first locally assembled Volkswagen was not in fact that car, it was the model sent out from Germany in March, as not all the parts for the first locally-assembled Beetle had arrived.

Volkswagen adhered to strict guidelines when it set up its South African operation, and the company insisted that dealers met high standards in terms of spares availability and service, workshop and showroom areas. Agencies in the Cape were granted to Kulu Garage in Claremont, and to Motors Western Province in



Early Beetle production in Uitenhage, August/September 1951



Mel Brooks.



Baron Klaus von Oertzen.



Ben Pon.

Bellville, each received two cars a week, and in the last four months of 1951 some 290 cars were sold in South Africa. Their purchasers were brave as the car, virtually unknown in South Africa, was unconventional, with an air-cooled 1131 cc engine in the rear. There were no luxuries, not even a fuel gauge or a synchromesh gearbox, although it had hydraulic brakes and an efficient heater.

However very soon the little German car started to build a reputation for reliability as, with its 25 bhp over-square engine (bore larger than stroke), it was the first small car designed for freeway driving. Whereas for its contemporaries, the Ford Popular, 100km/h was equivalent to 4400rpm, and for the Austin A30, it was 4900rpm, the VW could cruise all day at this speed while the revs stayed in the vicinity of 3300. In mid-1953 the rear split window of the VW was changed to a larger oval window, and a year later the engine was developed to 1192 cc and 30 bhp.

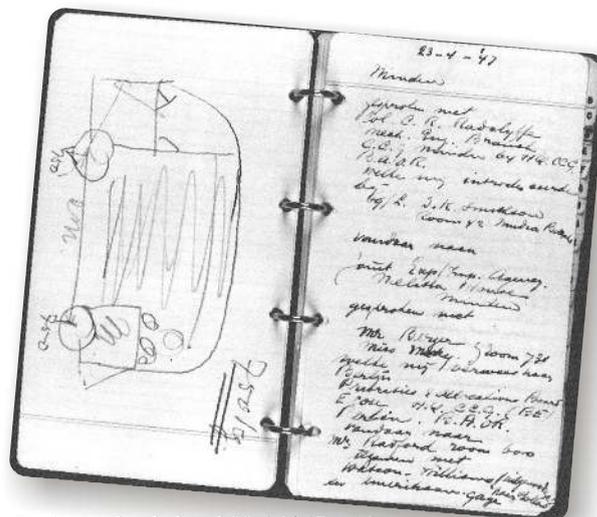
The car soon became famous for its rally performances. Leicester and Marion Symons won the 1954 Pretoria-Lourenco-Marques Rally (forerunner of the Total International Rally) in a second-hand model, and victories in the tortuous East African Safaris and the Round Australia Rally all helped to bolster the car's reputation for toughness and reliability. In June 1956 a VW became the first two-wheel-drive vehicle to conquer the notorious Sani Pass in the Drakensberg between Natal and Lesotho, this time with Leister Symons and Ewold van Bergen at the wheel.

Although, for three years, import restrictions limited sales to 520-780 units per year, they then started to increase dramatically. By 1956 Austin assembly had been moved to a new factory at Blackheath, and for

the first time the Beetle dominated SAMAD production, almost 3000 VWs were assembled versus 1800 Studebakers. Baron von Oertzen, having settled in Johannesburg, became chairman of SAMAD when Volkswagenwerk acquired a controlling interest. In late 1957 the Beetle was given a larger windscreen and rear window, and in the aftermath of the oil embargo induced by the Suez crisis, the VW became the best seller in the country, retaining its title as the top seller for eleven years.

Assembly of VW Kombi vans had commenced in Uitenhage in 1955. These iconic vehicles had been developed from a rough sketch by the energetic Dutch dealer, Ben Pon, who had come up with the idea of a forward cab with the engine retained at the rear. The first Kombi arrived in Cape Town in December 1952 as a gift to a German malaria researcher who needed to traverse the backroads of southern and central Africa. Soon afterwards a second Kombi, fitted out as a hunting/camper vehicle for Baron von Oertzen, arrived in Port Elizabeth. Ben Pon visited South Africa as a guest of von Oertzen, and being keen hunters, the men conducted several expeditions in

Ben Pon's notebook dated 23.4.1947, with his sketch of the concept for the Kombi.



the Jagdwagen Kombi and tested it in the most inhospitable terrain. This vehicle has survived, and can be seen in the VWSA museum at the Auto Pavilion at Uitenhage.

For some years the coach-building firm Karmann had built four-seater convertible versions of the VW Beetle, and the company was commissioned to produce a car that was to become known as a 'Volkswagen in an Italian sports jacket'. A shapely coupe body was designed by Ghia of Turin, and the car was launched as the Karmann-Ghia. These cars were first imported into South Africa in 1958 when a relaxation of import tariffs on special models saw an influx of many cars previously unobtainable in the country, but for the first two years they were available only in left-hand-drive form.

In February 1972 Volkswagen plants worldwide celebrated the production of the 15 007 034th Beetle, breaking the Model T Ford's record as the most produced single model in history. But VW started to experience financial

difficulties as Beetle sales began to decline; other rear-engined models had been launched over the years but these had not had the desired impact. Eventually the last Beetle left the production line in Uitenhage in 1979, an impressive 288 353 of these cars had been assembled at the plant over 28 years.

Fortunately for VW, the company had acquired Auto Union from Daimler-Benz, and a number of successful water-cooled, front-wheel-drive Audis had been produced. This concept was adopted for the new generation of VWs, and in 1974 the Golf, a small hatchback sculpted by Giorgetto Giugiaro, was announced.

This was the car that the world had been waiting for - a new Volkswagen legend had been launched.

Acknowledgements to Small Wonder, the Amazing Story of the Volkswagen by Walter Henry Nelson, The Spirit of Progress by Felix Stark, Classic Car Africa, July 2001, Crankhandle Chronicle, Sept 2017, Barrie Gasson, Andre du Toit, Hans Matter and John Lemon. 🚗



A VWSA dealer showroom in 1959 demonstrating Karmann-Ghia, Beetle and Kombi models.