

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

STANLEY PORTER,

MERCEDES-BENZ AND THE CDA ASSEMBLY PLANT

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

The Van Riebeeck Festival staged in April 1952 on the Cape Town foreshore had an immediate impact on the motor industry. During the 1930s some 140 Mercedes-Benz trucks and 46 cars had been imported into South Africa through local representatives, the last of which was South African Motors. After World War II the company had been dissolved, and in 1951 one of the German directors, G. Paulus, was sent out to investigate the establishment of a new South African dealer network for Mercedes cars and trucks. His task was relatively simple as these vehicles had built up an excellent reputation for sturdy design and durability and a surprising 35 of the pre-war cars were still on the road. He realized that the festival would be an ideal opportunity to relaunch the Mercedes-Benz brand, and booked a stand for a comprehensive display of vehicles, ranging from the newly-launched 4-wheel-drive Unimog, through four large trucks, a bus, a van, a pickup, and a station wagon, to two cars, one of them a diesel. Due to import controls they had been imported on a triptique basis for re-export after the exhibition.

An enthusiastic visitor to the



The Mercedes-Benz stand at the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival on the Foreshore

stand was a 43-year-old entrepreneur who had made a strong impression on the Cape motor industry. After qualifying as an engineer at UCT in 1930, Stanley Porter had built up experience in the engineering department at Shell. He had then joined Robb Motors as manager of the Used Car Department, and gained further experience when he was placed in charge of the workshops. In 1938 he branched out on his own and, with six employees, established Stanley

Porter (Pty) Ltd, a motor workshop at 78 Buitengracht Street. His appreciation for German automotive engineering was honed when he secured the agency for Adler cars, and took delivery of five units. He bought a site in Riebeeck Square to erect a two-storey, 5000 sq ft service station and garage, but unfortunately the supply of Adlers came to a halt when World War II was declared. After weathering the difficult war years he was able, by 1951, to expand the premises and increase the staff to 25.

Impressed by the potential of the Mercedes-Benz range on display at

the festival, Stanley Porter took the first available flight to Stuttgart and returned elated, having secured the Mercedes franchise for Cape Town and the whole of the Western Province. D.H. Saker & Co. was granted the franchise for the Transvaal, with the exception of the Northern area, which was granted to Haaks Garages (formerly Hupp Garages) of Pretoria, while Natal Motor Industries (NMI) Ltd received the franchise for Natal. A Mercedes-Benz importing company, Merben S.A. Ltd, was formed by these four companies, later Ronnies Motors



A section of the workshops, note the cantilevered windows above the work bays

Left: *The new Stanley Porter building on Riebeeck Square, c. 1959*



Stanley Porter



Allan Porter

aging Director, while Stanley retained overall control as Chairman.

The supply of Mercedes-Benz vehicles to the South African market had become crucial. In 1948 Haaks Garages and Westraads Motors had

formed Nash Distributors Assembly in East London, but a year later had changed the name to Car Distributors Assembly Ltd (CDA), to assemble Nashs and Packards. Sales of these American vehicles stagnated after the sterling devaluation and in 1950 CDA was contracted to assemble Renaults, Fiats, Standards and Land Rovers. A full range of vehicles had been secured, from the small Renault 750, the Fiat 500 Topolino and 1100, through the medium-sized Standard Vanguard, to the Land Rover, Nash and Packard. However production was volatile, the first to leave CDA was the Standard Vanguard, which moved to the Triumph assembly plant in Durban in 1952, Packard closed down in 1957, and Nash joined American Motors in 1958, this coincided with the apparent end of local Land Rover assembly.

Daimler-Benz AG had been investigating the local assembly of the Mercedes range, and had commenced negotiations with CDA which was soon to be left with only two clients, Fiat and Renault. In 1958 CDA was able to convince Mercedes-Benz that it could meet its extremely high standards;

initially both of the diesel cars, the 180D and 190D, were to be built, together with the petrol models, the 180, 190, 219, and the 220S. Mechanical parts were supplied from Stuttgart but batteries, upholstery and paint were sourced locally.

The range of vehicles assembled at CDA expanded again when production of Jaguars and D.K.W.s commenced in 1961, and Alfa Romeo in 1962. However this trend then reversed when Fiat left for Durban in 1963, D.K.W. went out of business in 1966, Jaguar left for Blackheath in 1967, and Renault and Alfa Romeo for Rosslyn in 1968 and 1969. These departures left CDA catering solely to Mercedes-Benz.

Meanwhile, Daimler Benz AG had cancelled all its franchise arrangements in South Africa, and had appointed the Pretoria firm United Car and Diesel Distributors (Pty) Ltd (UCDD) as its sole concessionaire. The company, which was responsible for the import, assembly and marketing of all local Mercedes-Benz products, took over the CDA assembly plant in East London, and set up a spares division, MB Spares, in Durban. By 1973 sales penetration of Mercedes cars, at 9000 units, had increased to 4.5% of the local market, but in money terms this represented almost twice this percentage. These cars included the full range of 230, 240, 280 and 350 models; remarkably, even the top-of-the-range S-Class cars were being

assembled. By then Mercedes commercial unit sales, at 4000 units, had soared, and its heavy trucks were the largest sellers in their category.

Although Stanley Porter had lost the D.K.W. contract when the company had closed, the boom in Mercedes-Benz sales had more than made up for the deficit. But Stanley Porter's health was deteriorating, and by 1973 he and Allan had sold the company to the Atkinson Oates Group. Their timing was impeccable, as the Arab-Israeli War that year led to a quadrupling in the cost of oil that wreaked havoc on the motor industry.

The Porter family's appreciation of German motor engineering continues to this day. One of our Crankhandle Club members, Stanley's son, Dennis Porter, enjoys driving his incredible collection of classic Mercedes-Benzs, including a '58 300 Adenauer, a '59 190SL, a '59 220S Coupe, a '61 220SE Cabrio, a '63 220S, and a '69 280SL. A cherry on the top is his '62 Porsche 356 Roadster!

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The CDA plant, c. 1958, the assembly lines for the Fiat 1100, Mercedes-Benz 180 and Renault Dauphine

of East London was appointed for the Border Area and John Williams Motors for the Orange Free State.

Initially, stringent controls limited imports to Mercedes-Benz trucks, and in 1953 only three were sold in South Africa. It took another three years for permits to be granted for Mercedes cars, in 1956 only 78 of these moved off showroom floors. Stanley Porter needed to widen his range of vehicles, and in 1955 secured the Western Province franchise for yet another German make, the two-stroke D.K.W.

In 1958 import restrictions were lifted, sales boomed and the premises started to burst at the seams. A new three-storey structure was designed and built, although foundations were laid for another four. A 5000 sq ft showroom faced Riebeeck Square on two levels, a basement and a mezzanine floor both visible from the pavement. On the Church Street/Buitengracht Street corner was a filling station with four dual pumps and a mixture pump for D.K.W. engines. The reception area was on Buitengracht Street with ramps leading up to 16000 sq ft of workshops on the first and second floors, and on the Buitengracht Street/Wale Street corner was the entrance to the truck workshops. A full range of equipment was installed and 70 employees worked on test benches, a cylinder reboring plant, brake drum lathes, wheel balancing and alignment tools, a spray-painting plant, lubrication bays and a Kienzle Tachograph speed recorder. An interesting space-saving feature in the first and second floor workshops were the mechanic's work bays, the workmen stood at the outer wall in front of benches, the windows of which were cantilevered. Stanley's son Allan joined the business, and established a subsidiary, Stanmar Motors in George. He returned to Cape Town, and over time gained enough experience to be appointed Man-