

Mercedes 180D bakkie as built in South Africa. Note the extended cab and separate pick-up body



OUR 1960s MOTORING SCENE **THE BAKKIE MARKET** IN SOUTH AFRICA

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

DURING the early 1950s stringent quotas and tariffs in South Africa limited imports of fully-assembled cars, but these were not applied to commercial vehicles. This anomaly produced some interesting commercial hybrids that were unique to the country.



Mercedes half-car as imported from Germany



Binz version of the Mercedes with integrated pick-up body, shorter cab and access to the spare wheel under the load-bed

Mercedes-Benz (M-B) was the first to circumvent the rules successfully. Unable to import cars and keen to augment the sales of its heavy trucks, the company came up with an unusual solution. Believing that its sturdy 180D cars held the key, the company started to import 'half-car' 180 diesels. These were standard four-door models from which the roof over the rear seats, the back window and the boot lid had been omitted. The intention was to weld up the back doors and build a robust 'bak' (the Afrikaans word for a bowl) to replace the back seats and boot. Concerned about the manufacturing quality of these load-beds, M-B investigated intensively before contracting

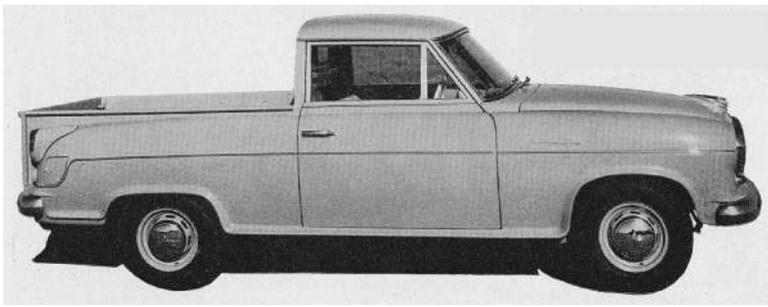
Morewear Industries in Germiston to fabricate them. The results were excellent and between 1955 and 1958 some 400 of these bakkies were built; they acquired the nickname 'Stanley Porters', named after the M-B agents in Cape Town. Construction came to an end in 1958 after M-B had signed up the CDA plant in East London to assemble its full range of 180, 190, 219 and 220S saloons. The bakkies were no longer needed to boost sales but they had certainly created an impact. The idea had been taken up in Germany where the coachbuilders Binz built some 450 versions of the pick-up. The designs of these vehicles differed slightly. The SA models had larger cabs to

house the spare wheel behind the seat and a separation between the front end and the load-bearing sections of the body. The German versions had smaller cabs with the spare wheel mounted under the rear floor panel and an integrated body side panel. Both versions are collector's items today as intense commercial use meant that few have survived.

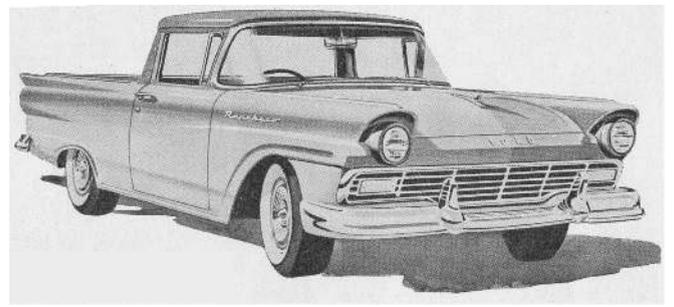
In 1957 another four-cylinder German pick-up, the Borgward, made its appearance in South Africa. This tough little vehicle soon made a name for itself, together with the Isabella sedan, the Combi station wagon and a svelte coupe. Buddy Fuller broke the 4-cylinder record from

Johannesburg to Cape Town and back in 23 hours 53 minutes in an Isabella TS. Unfortunately, as Borgwards were not assembled locally, when import tariffs were re-imposed, they became much less competitive.

Although both Ford and General Motors (GM), with their local assembly plants, had cornered the pick-up market in South Africa, their vehicles tended to be quite large, with relatively thirsty six and eight-cylinder engines. In 1957 Ford announced a pick-up version of its V8 Fairlane 500 range, the glamorous Ranchero. It was impressive, but not much less expensive than the Fairlane saloon or its station wagon derivative, the



Borgward pick-up



Ford Ranchero



Opel Olympia pick-up

Country Sedan.

GMSA responded differently. The fuel shortages arising out of the 1956 Suez crisis and M-B's success in the pick-up market alerted GM to the potential for a smaller commercial vehicle. In 1959 the company announced a bakkie based on the four-cylinder Opel Olympia. Based on the popular station wagon and delivery van, the spare wheel was carried in a recess behind the seat. To increase the torsional stiffness of the pick-up body, pressed-steel inner panels were added to the sides and welded to a heavy-gauge

corrugated floor panel, while steel boxes over the rear wheels imparted extra stiffness to the inner panels and floor. The rear number plate swung down automatically when the tail gate was opened to form a loading platform. The Opel Olympia pick-up was an exclusive South African design that had been tested intensively in local conditions. It soon generated international interest and within two years was being exported in C.K.D. (completely knocked-down) body packs to Denmark for assembly for the European market.

Although these smaller bakkies

had made an impact, as the decade came to an end the American light trucks like the Chevrolets, Fords, Dodges, Internationals and Studebakers still dominated the market.

All this was about to change in the early 1960s as South Africa entered a period of political turmoil. Protests against the pass laws at Sharpeville and Langa posed the reality of international sanctions coupled to a depreciating currency, and fuel and vehicle prices faced mounting pressures.

European designs became strong competitors. Ford of Germany came up with a counter to the Opel Olympia bakkie, a model based on the Taunus 17M, and GM retaliated with a new design based on the Opel Rekord. Meanwhile Volkswagen promoted sales with its 1500 rear-engine single and double cabs. France had a tough competitor, the Peugeot 403 Express on offer, while BMC developed a small pickup based on the Mini.

But within a few years the manufacturers from both the USA and Europe were having to contend with a comprehensive range of

pick-ups from an aggressive new competitor, Japan.

By 1964 sales of the .75-ton Datsun 1200 bakkie had comprehensively outstripped all competitors in the light commercial field. Based on the 1959 Datsun 1000 saloon, the initial pick-up had been cramped and underpowered, and with its 3-speed gearbox a very modest little vehicle. But the Japanese adapted quickly and within a year the roomier and more powerful 1200 Bluebird saloon and bakkie started to make an impact. 1962 saw another increase in interior space and upgrade in power coupled to a 4-speed box and sales took off. Even with a full load steering was light, braking was impressive and road-holding, engine-performance and fuel consumption were excellent. Playing off the Bluebird name, the advertisers came up with the slogan 'Mossie maar man', loosely translated as 'Tiny, but can take it'. This struck a chord and rural communities in particular adopted it with enthusiasm. To widen the product offering the Datsun 1900 (also sold as the Nissan Junior 1.75-tonner) was added to the range.

A second light-commercial contender from Japan was Toyota, with its .5-ton Tiara and its 1.75-ton Toyopet Stout. Toyota was the largest manufacturer of motor vehicles in the Far East and had taken note of the popularity in SA of the Datsun/Nissan range. By 1964 the Toyopet Stout was already the third best seller on the sales list, while the Toyota Tiara was in fifth place, just ahead of the Datsun 1900/Nissan Junior.

Another Japanese entry of the time was Mazda, with its 1-ton B1500 and B2000 pick-ups. Although these bakkies had been on the SA market for only one year, they had quickly secured eighth place on the sales list. Another Japanese marque that was to have a major impact locally was Isuzu, with its 1300cc Wasp and 1.5-ton Elfin.

PTO ➔



Peugeot 403 Express



BMC Mini



Toyota Tiara



Mazda B2000



Chevrolet C14/6 Fleetside

These four Japanese brands, all introduced within a few years of each other, were to leave a lasting footprint on the South African market. Two other makes had also arrived, but their impact had been limited. Prince Motors Ltd of Tokyo, named after Crown Prince Akihito, had introduced its 1.75-ton Prince Super-Miler, but within three years the company was to be taken over by Datsun/Nissan. A similar story related to Hino Motors Ltd of Tokyo, it had released the 1-ton Hino Briska on the SA market but the company was soon to be absorbed by Toyota. Meanwhile, the products of one of the largest organizations in the Land of the

Rising Sun, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, were yet to arrive.

The Americans were determined to defend their share of the market with their six-cylinder pick-ups. GM had a strong contender with its burly Chevrolet C14/6 Fleetside, which secured second place in the 1964 sales list. Ford had a similar vehicle, the F100/6, which occupied fourth position, while lower down were Chrysler with its Dodge D-100/6, International with its C-1120/6 and Jeep with its four-wheel-drive Gladiator J-200. Some of these models offered V8 engines (the only option with the Studebaker Champ), but sales in this market faced massive headwinds.



Jeep Gladiator J-200



Datsun Bluebird 1200

It had taken only five years for the bakkie market in South Africa to be turned on its head. Incredibly, sixty years later the Nissan 1200 bakkie, the direct descendant of the Datsun Bluebird, still dominates the local market.

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An outing of the CHC Helderberg Group.

Report by Nic Middleman

Imagine arriving at a splendid outdoor venue in the Helderberg and having 3 horses, a donkey, 3 pigs and a duck come over to meet you at your car! This was the welcome we got at Goedverwaching Estate. Fortunately they did not all arrive at the same time otherwise we might have been overwhelmed! We counted at least 5 more varieties of farmyard animals wandering freely on the property, all of them were people- and animal-friendly. Our dogs had a first-in-their-lifetime experience rubbing noses with all of these animals.

My attempt, as unofficial convener of CHC activities in the Helderberg, to initiate an outdoor gathering of our members had an encouraging beginning. I had two apologies and 4 members - who enjoyed this relatively new venue in the area. A lovely old homestead houses an art gallery, a coffee shop and a wine bar. Boerie rolls were available for the hungry folk. Lots of pleasant places to sit and just

chill - or you can take a shady walk around the property. On some Sundays there is a fleamarket with mellow live music. Activities such as line dancing are arranged for the more lively.

Thanks to our host, Anton, and to members Brian de Villiers, Brian and Bev Wallace and Mark McLoughlin for coming out to join us in this first attempt to winkle out the local members. 

Goedverwaching estate provided a natural setting for the Willys Overland

