

SCANDINAVIAN COOL



LIKE SO MANY CLASSIC CAR RESTORATIONS,
THIS PROJECT BEGAN AS AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART

Words: Terry Cobham Photos: Adam Croy



Sweden in the closing years of the 1950s was probably quite a boring place — so cold for most of the year that much of the population sat inside creating what would later become mid-century design classics: knives and forks, glass lamps, dining suites, and the like. Meanwhile, in Gothenburg, however, one person was thinking, ‘if only we had a sports car to go with all those knives and forks’.

At this stage, the As and Bs of Abba were still only teenagers who hadn’t yet given a thought to Waterloo. Ikea was a few years away from opening its first store outside of Sweden, and the Scandinavian idea of design hadn’t yet made the worldwide impression that it would when all those simple, clean, fine lines and curves were introduced to a worldwide market.

All the world knew of Sweden was

along the lines of Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman. At that time, Britt Ekland was still only a teenager — becoming a Bond girl and romance with Rod Stewart were well into her future.

All this is to say that we are talking about quite an elderly car here. The secret to classic design is often that it defies its age.

Building a reputation

Volvo has been producing cars since 1927, but the company had grown out of the ball-bearing manufacturer SKF, founded in 1911. For decades, the international market hadn’t paid any attention to Volvo cars, but, after World War II, this had started to change.

When the model our 1970 feature car represents, the P1800E, was launched, Volvo was still producing its PV 544 sedan, a very solid, staid-looking vehicle that often featured in films of the era requiring a

Northern European setting. It looked a bit like a smaller version of a 1940s American car that had had a completely unique front end grafted onto it. Usually, it was depicted speeding through snowy low-light landscapes and gave the impression that it was fully capable of doing just that.

Volvo was building its reputation on well-made, solid, good-handling and dependable cars, and the world had also noticed its trucks. Indeed, today, Volvo trucks — formed as a separate company from Volvo cars in 1928 — sits at number two in the worldwide truck sales charts. That’s probably a position the Volvo Cars company doesn’t even aspire to under current ownership (it was sold to Ford in 1999, and Chinese brand Geely in 2010), but it didn’t stop its executives realizing that they needed a car that would raise the brand’s market profile.



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The P1800 wasn't Volvo's first sports car; that place goes to an unsuccessful two-seater convertible built in the mid '50s — not surprisingly, there wasn't much demand for such a car in the Sweden of that era. Production of the fibreglass-bodied Volvo Sport P lasted less than a year (1956–'57), and only 67, or possibly 68, were produced.

Not to be put off, Volvo realized that it needed a European-style grand tourer to impress in its European and US markets. So it approached an Italian design company to create a vehicle for that sector.

For the next 50 years, Volvo insisted the result of this project, the P1800, was an Italian design. However, the truth was that the son of the Volvo engineering consultant for the project designed the car, and it was as Swedish as vodka and pickled herrings. Well, almost, because, after various coachbuilders in Italy and Germany had been unsuccessfully approached to build the car, construction was initially contracted out to Jensen in England. German coachbuilder Karman turned down the contract when its main client, VW, saw it as a conflict of interest.

A beautiful little car

Jensen was more or less between projects when, in 1960, it signed a contract to produce the first 10,000 examples of the new Volvo P1800. To quote Wikipedia: "The engine and gearbox were from Sweden, the back axle from the USA and the electrical system from Germany, otherwise the cars were all British." Probably that is something Volvo would still contest today, even though it is now a Chinese

No matter where you look, the P1800E looks great from any angle

rather than Swedish-controlled company.

The first of these cars was introduced to the motoring public at the Brussels Motor Show in 1960, and, the same year, Jensen began production. The first model year was 1961.

Immediately, it was recognized as a very beautiful little car — a true two-seater, though it did have a back seat, but it was not big enough for passengers, being more a place for a stylish overnight bag — so long as it only contained a toothbrush and wallet.

The first car was remarkably similar to the last produced only 11 years later, with a four-cylinder 1800cc motor equipped with twin SU carburetors. Volvo used a motor that it more or less had on the shelf — as it was also being used in one of its tractors — which fed its 100bhp (75kW) through a four-speed manual gearbox to the rear wheels. This was still only the beginning of the '60s, remember. An electronic overdrive was standard, and this gave better fuel economy. Surprisingly, the non-overdrive-equipped model had a higher top speed, and would run out to almost 193kph, while the overdrive model could reach 177kph.

Disc brakes at the front and drums at the rear were the original equipment. Across the production years, those were eventually upgraded to four-wheel discs (as on our feature car), and engine capacity was increased to 2.0 litres. Power, although it never went sky high, was gradually increased as well, finally reaching 130bhp (97kW), while the electronic fuel injection gave a slight power increase, without affecting fuel economy.

An immediate search online turned up a very tired and worn-out 1970 P1800E. The 'E' stands for 'fuel injection' — this was the year Volvo changed to an injection system



TV star

Before long, the world's television viewing public was watching Simon Templar drive his white Volvo P1800 around London in the very popular TV series *The Saint*. This was an early example of product placement, and no doubt the Jaguar executives who had earlier said no to the series producers' request for an E-Type Jaguar must have sorely regretted their decision.

UK production didn't last long, and the Jensen contract was cancelled early after 6000 cars had been produced. Build quality was the problem, so, maybe by 1963, that UK industrial disease was already beginning to take hold. Production moved back to Sweden, and the 'S' designation was added to the model name — perhaps the only time 'S' has stood for 'Sweden' and not 'Sport' on a vehicle badge.

The body style remained almost unchanged, although an estate version was introduced in 1972. This was the year the coupé finished production, and, sadly, US vehicle-design requirements resulted in the end of production of the new estate version the following year.

Volvo had a limited sporting history, although it did win various rally championships later that decade with another car. Of course, down in this end of the world, another decade after that, it was winning plenty of races with its turbo-enhanced touring car racers.

Volvo's reputation is certainly built more on its dependability and quality than its sporting prowess. One P1800 owner in the US has owned and driven his P1800 almost 5,000,000km — apparently a world record for an individual owner. It is ironic that a Volvo sporting effort should hold such an unsporting world record.

Affair of the heart

Our feature car was a project for Brett Taylor of *Taylormadecars* (search 'taylormadecars' on Instagram). Like so many restorations, this began as an affair of the heart. Brett spotted a P1800 when he was out for a walk and decided that one of these would make a good project.

An immediate search online turned up a very tired and worn-out 1970 P1800E. The 'E' stands for 'fuel injection' — this was the year Volvo changed to an injection system.

A complete strip down and rebuild followed over the next 2.5 years.





1970 VOLVO P1800E

ENGINE	B20 — straight-four
CAPACITY	2.0-litre
BORE/STROKE	88.9mm/80mm
VALVES	Two per cylinder
COMP. RATIO	10.5:1
MAX POWER	118bhp (88kW) at 6000rpm
MAX TORQUE	167Nm at 3500rpm
FUEL SYSTEM	Electronic injection
TRANSMISSION	Three-speed manual
SUSPENSION, F/R	Wishbone, coil; anti-roll bar / Coil; support arms, torque rods, telescopic shock absorbers
STEERING	Cam-and-roller
BRAKES, F/R	Hydraulic drum
DIMENSIONS	
OVERALL LENGTH	4325mm
WIDTH	1690mm
WHEELBASE	2450mm
TRACK, F/R	1315mm/1315mm
HEIGHT	1280mm
WEIGHT	1130kg
PERFORMANCE:	
0-100KPH	9.6 seconds
STANDING QUARTER-MILE	17.4 seconds
MAXIMUM SPEED	112mph (180kph)

The car was stripped back to a totally disassembled shell, before being sent to Autoblast in Auckland. The frame was all in good order, and that was retained, although virtually all the exterior panels were replaced. The roof and right front guard are the only original panels — all the others were sourced new from Sweden. All brackets and bolts were replaced, when possible, or replaced with new. Virtually all the required new pieces were available ex Sweden, either as new-old-stock parts or aftermarket replicas.

The motor was rebuilt by Gleye and Parlane Engine Reconditioners in Auckland, and the under-bonnet area looks at least as pretty as it did the day the car was brand new. Other areas look even better. The dashboard, for example, still boasts its original gauges, restored by Dashboard Restorations of Auckland, and the original dark wood surrounds have been replaced with white carbon fibre. Purists don't need to worry, as all the original trims and bits and pieces have been retained. The car has now been fitted with power steering, a bolt-on affair that can easily be removed should a new owner wish to have heavy steering as well as an original-spec car.

Some other cosmetic changes have also been made — wire wheels, which were an option, have been fitted, although these are

not the original Volvo-spec wheels that had a reputation for catastrophic failure. The front bumpers are from an earlier-spec car, because Brett likes the look of them better — it's those simple flowing lines.

The car, which was originally white, is now painted in one of the Volvo blues, and the inside is trimmed in black. The end result is a rather stunning and exceptionally pretty little car.

These P1800s have moved from the very

low prices of a few years ago, and are now selling for respectable sums. Even though fully restored examples like Brett's (already sold) are now worth serious money, they are still among the top picks of cars that are becoming collectors' classics.

Brett was so enthused by this car as a project that he is on the lookout for another. This time, he wants a P1800, or, as those in the know refer to them, a 'Jensen' — one of the early ones built in England. ■

