

CHAMPION

and CHALLENGER



Volkswagen v. Talbot at Motor Caravan Fair Report/Pictures: Chris Burlace



General view of the Fair.

More motor caravans than ever packed the lakeside exhibition area at Billing Aquadrome in Northamptonshire, where the National Motor Caravan Fair took place, on the weekend after the Spring Holiday.

Bedford's CF, long a favourite with motor caravanners, seems, despite refinements, to be slipping into obscurity. The sleek, new Transit waits in the wings to make its debut in the motor caravan world. Renault's Trafic - the 1980s model which the Ford follows with

its wedge-shaped styling - holds an honourable third place. But battling it out for the top spot are the VW Transporter, for so long 'King', and the four-year-old newcomer, the Talbot Express.

Visitors to the Fair could take their pick from around twenty different VW models, all but a couple based on the Transporter. Of the Transporter-based motor caravans, all but two were panel-van conversions. The exceptions were coachbuilt models on the Transporter pick-up; imported outfits, good but pricey, and drawing plenty of attention.

The Talbots offered far less choice in the panel-van stakes. The Italian-built vehicle, however, is also available as a chassis-cab, and has become the number-one choice for coach-builders. If the Talbot's 'badge brother', the ident-

ical Fiat Ducato, is included in the tally, then the number of coachbuilt models on offer is wide indeed.

On the total variety of models, the Talbot/Fiat must lead by a neck. Rumour has it, too, that the Italian-built base vehicle is now also the winner, here perhaps by just a short head, on the actual numbers transformed into motor caravans.

The two largest British motor caravan manufacturers, Auto-homes and Auto-Sleepers, each now with a three-model VW range, had no changes to announce to the VW-based 'vans shown at last year's Earls Court show. An under-the-skin alteration to the Autohomes' Kamper, Kameo and Karisma, however, is the replacement of chipboard by plywood in furniture construction - more strength and less weight.

Holdsworths, also prominent on a great many stands at the Fair, had their long-running Villa, with conventional side-kitchen layout, and available in elavating roof or hightop form, and the innovative Vision hightop. This model drew much attention, with its central folding partition making it now the only Transporter model to offer a closed-off toilet/washing area.

It was good to see Devon Conversions back in action, following their near demise at the end of last year. The long-running Moonraker was still to be found, but the models exciting interest were the Eurovette, a stylish high-top 2-berth with fridge, oven, blown-air heater and mains electrics all as standard, and the Caravette.

The latter, available with elavating roof or hightop, makes a return to the multi-purpose style of camper vehicle. With a centre seat, as well as the rear bench, it's a 6/7-seater, but it is less well-equipped for living in than its



The 'Motor Caravan of the Year' award-winning Talbots. Left, the Autohomes Merlin; right, the hightop CXL by Auto-Sleepers.



stablemate, with just the basics of sink, 2-burner-plus-grill cooker, and fridge.

Another firm rising strongly after an earlier fall are Danbury. The VW is still first choice as a base vehicle

and, as with Devon, there are models aimed at different needs. The Family Estate caters for those needing a people-carrier as much as a caravan. There are two rows of seats behind the cab again,

well-planned storage units built either side at the rear and just to window level, so as not to obscure passengers' view, and the basic needs of sink and cooker.

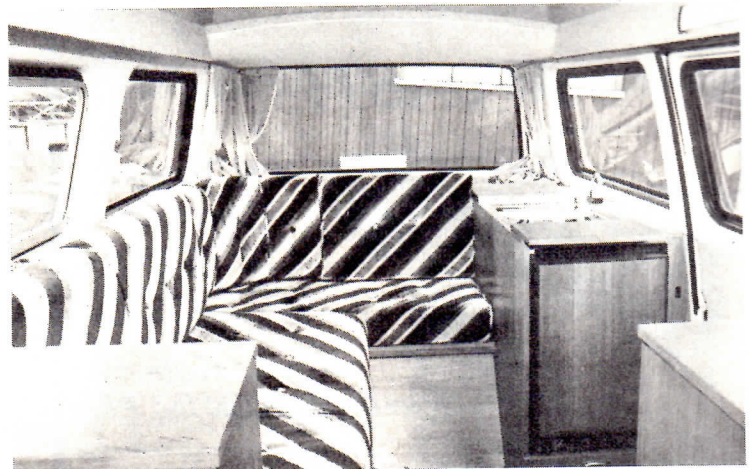
The Luxury Lounger, on the other hand, is a new model aimed at those just wanting comfort for

two. The hightop fitted to the Transporter is the eye-catching 'Huntsman' from RGA of Norwich. The main feature of the interior is a large and comfortable L-shaped settee, along the offside and across the rear, which converts to a big

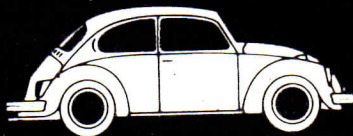
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New from Danbury is the 'Lounger' VW conversion, with sleek RGA hightop. Elite spoiler is an extra.



Home-style comfort for the motor caravanner in the Danbury Lounger, with its big, L-shaped couch.



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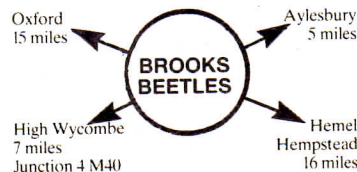
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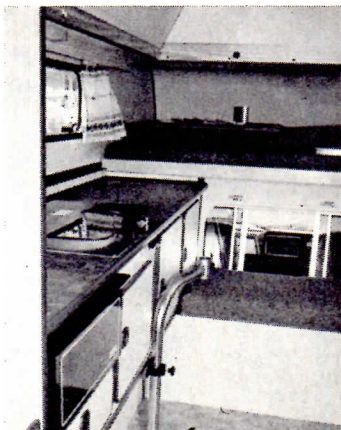
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double bed. Units behind the cab seats have cupboard space, a cooker and a drinks cupboard. Beside the sliding side door is a fridge and, set into the same unit, a sink/drain.

Motorhomes International's 'Galaxy' completed the UK-converted Transporter line-up at Billing. This is another 'van designed primarily as a 2-berth, and with some original features. The rear seat is set over, rather than forward of the engine deck, leaving good floorspace. The off-side rear has a well-arranged wardrobe/cupboard module and, probably the most clever feature, the kitchen unit behind the driver's seat has a slide-out, section to provide workspace, the usual 2-burner-and-grill cooking facility and handy-arranged storage.

There was interest enough from the home-produced VWs at the Motor Caravan Fair, but the really exciting offerings came from the importers. Tischer (UK) are distributors of fixed and demountable outfits by the German Tischer factory, whose top choice vehicle is, of course, the VW. The biggest queues on the Tischer stand were to get into the XN65 coachbuilt on the Transporter. Most entered only to dream, however, for the price was £16,500 – £4,000 to £5,000 more than the sort of price one now has to pay for a VW van conversion.

The XN65 has a GRP and sandwich-construction body, neatly embracing the Transporter cab, and with a smooth rounding



Tischer Caddy Camp demountable. Kitchen and wardrobe ranged along nearside, seat opposite. Main bed pulls out from over cab.

which sets it apart from the squarish lines of most coachbuilt motor caravans. The black mouldings at the joins of the body panels were, however, rather too prominent, and some exterior graphics were needed, I thought, to divert the eye.

Inside, the layout features a toilet compartment opposite the side door (offside in UK, for the 'van is left-hand drive), kitchen unit to the right of the door, and dinette/bed area over the engine deck at the rear. The interior was light and attractive in a pine finish, and the specification was to the high standard which the German buyer expects – big fridge, double glazing, water heater and blown-air space heater. Cooking facilities, by contrast, were very basic with just two burners. That's common in German home-market models, but the importers will fit an eye-level grill.

Tischer also showed their demountable models, on the Golf Caddy and on a Peugeot pick-up. These were the outfits which started their move into the British



Holdsworth's VW Vision has folding centre partition, enabling rear to be enclosed as toilet area.

market last year. Essential features in the slightly smaller, Caddy-mounted model, are pull-out double bed in the overcab section, side couch forming a single berth, side kitchen with good workspace and integral stainless sink/2-burner hob (and an eye-level grill added by Tischer UK), and rear corners filled by fridge, wardrobe and cupboard space. Standing height is provided by a solid-sided elevating roof, and double glazing, space heater and caravan battery and electrics were included in the price at the Fair, £10,999 on a diesel Caddy.



Kitchen module in the Karmann Gipsy demonstrates the superb cabinetwork which marks out this model.

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A good idea, if not strictly a motor caravan, was this folding unit shown on a Golf Caddy. All-in price just £6999, from Tischer UK. They also sell the Bull-Bar.



Tischer Caddy Camp demounted from a Golf diesel pick-up.



Tischer's 'XN65' on the Transporter, a semi-integrated coachbuilt, which blends the cab into a sandwich-construction body of exceptional strength.



Nene Valley Motor Caravans and customers celebrate at the handover of three VW Karmann Gipsies.

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For those who need the use of a Golf pick-up, but can't run to a five-figure price, Tischer UK had a budget price offering with their 'Freizeit Express', essentially a folding tent or caravan-style unit to fit onto the load platform and to extend sideways. Not a motor caravan but ingenious; it will suit some needs and pockets at £6,999.

The undoubted star of the show, and not just from the VW point of view, would set one back over £10,000 more than Tischer's cheapy. It was the Karmann Gipsy, coachbuilt on the Transporter, imported by the Motor Caravan Services Group and shown at Billing by their Nene Valley Motor Caravans company.

The Gipsy has all the style and quality which one would expect from the famous name which has so long been associated with VW. Externally it has traditional coachbuilt lines, but is blended to give a well-balanced look on the Transporter. Inside the layout is the same as that used by Tischer, except that the Gipsy comes in left- or right-hand-drive form in both cab and caravan.

It is the internal good looks which mark the Gipsy out, however, not just from British competitors, but from anything built in Europe or the USA. Rich wood throughout, finely detailed and finished cabinetwork, and trim and upholstery which look the last word in luxury. The spec. has again everything the German buyer de-

mands, lacking only in its 2-burner cooking facility. But if you can afford £17,395 then undoubtedly a few visits to a restaurant won't break the bank!

Nene Valley handed over three previously ordered Gipsies at the Fair, and took a firm order for at least one more. The high price for a smallish coachbuilt doesn't look like preventing Karmann from making a significant impact over here.

Volkswagens were in the final judging groups for both the coachbuilt and the conversion classes in the Motor Caravan of the Year contest. But the success of last year, when the VHT hightop from Auto-Sleepers took a top award, was not to be repeated. The Karmann couldn't be bettered for quality, but it had to concede on value-for-money to the Talbot Express-based Merlin from Auto-homes, which is well-equipped, versatile and attractively styled at £14,522 on-the-road.

In the panel van class, the VHT was in the running again, and the new-since-last-year Holdsworth

Vision too was a strong competitor, but both had to give way on price-for-specification to another Talbot-based model, the CXL by Auto-Sleepers. At £12,297 it provides the extras of shower/toilet cubicle, and water- and space-heaters, for a similar price to its VW rivals.

Of course, it is only the minority of visitors who go to a show with the intention of buying a new 'van. Most go to dream, to plan ahead, and to try to improve their current vehicle with some add-on goodies. There was a good selection of accessories and gadgets on offer. Most interesting for the VW owner were the Elite and Volkscraft stands.

Diamond RV, builders of the VW Autocruiser and Autostrada who folded last year, used to supply 'Elite' kits of spoilers,

headlamp/grille kits, side-skirts and rack-mounted luggage boxes for the post-'79 Transporter. Type 2 owners of later models will be glad to learn that these goodies can still be obtained from Elite, a subsidiary of Travelworld of Wolverhampton.

Volkscraft of Starcross, Exeter, cover a wider range, from the old split-screen Type 2 to the latest models, with their spoilers. Owners of post-'79 models will also welcome the addition to their range of a dash tray. Volkswagen have persisted with their shortsighted design of facia on the new Transporter - nothing can usefully rest on its sloping surface, and maps, books, sunglasses put down for a moment are quickly on the floor. Now Volkscraft have the answer with a smart moulding, incorporating map and oddments trays and drinks holders. □



Volkscraft had some nicely made spoilers for the Type 2, from 'Splits' to the current model.



Spacious 'President' coachbuilt by the now-defunct Pioneer company. Seen on Travelworld stand, who also market Elite front spoiler fitted to the LT base vehicle.