



Production launch for an icon: The first VW Beetle rolled off the line at the Wolfsburg plant 70 years ago

- **The start of mass production of the Volkswagen Saloon shortly after Christmas 1945 marked a new era of civilian vehicle manufacturing**

Wolfsburg, 27th December 2015 - It was shortly after the first post-war Christmas 1945 that the first of the Volkswagen Type 1 – the model which, as the Beetle, would subsequently be sold more than 21 million times – rolled off the production line. By the end of 1945 only 55 vehicles had been produced in total however. The start of mass production was a highly improvised undertaking, and material shortages hampered operations over the subsequent months. Yet the early vehicles were visible symbols of hope; a new beginning for the car plant under British control.

By the end of the Second World War in 1945, just 630 of the People's Car known as the 'KdF-Wagen' had been built. The state-of-the-art factory in what was to become the present-day Wolfsburg, built specially to make the vehicle, was integrated into Germany's wartime armaments industry, producing mainly military goods. The site was occupied by US troops on 11th April 1945. In June 1945, the British Military Government took over trusteeship of the factory with its workforce of some 6,000 people.

On 22nd August 1945, the recently appointed 29-year-old Senior Resident Officer Major Ivan Hirst acquired an initial order for 20,000 Saloons, thereby providing the factory and its workforce with a future, and avoiding the threat of decommissioning and dismantling. The vehicles were intended mainly for use by the occupying Allies, but also to help provide health-care services in rural areas. Production mostly remained stuck at around 1,000 vehicles a month through 1946/47. It was only after the currency reform in June 1948 that significant numbers of private buyers emerged.

Volkswagen's British roots remain discernible still today. It was the British who converted the factory to civilian manufacturing, and who focused on the quality of the vehicles. They paid great attention to service and meeting customers' needs, and set up a dealer network which was already covering all three western zones of Germany by 1948. The launch of exports in October 1947 marked a first step onto the international stage. The first elections to the Works Council in November 1945 – barely six months after the end of the war – introduced the principles of democratic employee participation into the plant. When the Volkswagenwerk GmbH company was placed in German hands in October 1949, it was in pole position for the start of Germany's Economic Miracle.

Dr. Manfred Grieger, Head of the Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft Corporate History Department, sums up: "Volkswagen was very fortunate in that the robust Saloon helped the British Military Government to carry out its administrative functions, and that in Ivan Hirst it had the right man at the helm. The skilful pragmatist gave the factory and the workforce a vision, motivating British military personnel and German workers alike to turn the languishing works into a successful market-driven business. He knew the qualities of the Volkswagen Saloon, and was able to realise them on the road."

The Beetle was a key factor in the development of democracy and mobility in post-war Germany, and subsequently found a home in many other countries, acting as an important ambassador in promoting a positive image of Germany. Production at the Beetle's last manufacturing location in Puebla, Mexico, was discontinued at the end of July 2003. With over 21 million vehicles built, the Beetle had become an automotive icon, loved by many millions of people. Its characteristic shape is recognised everywhere.

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