VW motoring

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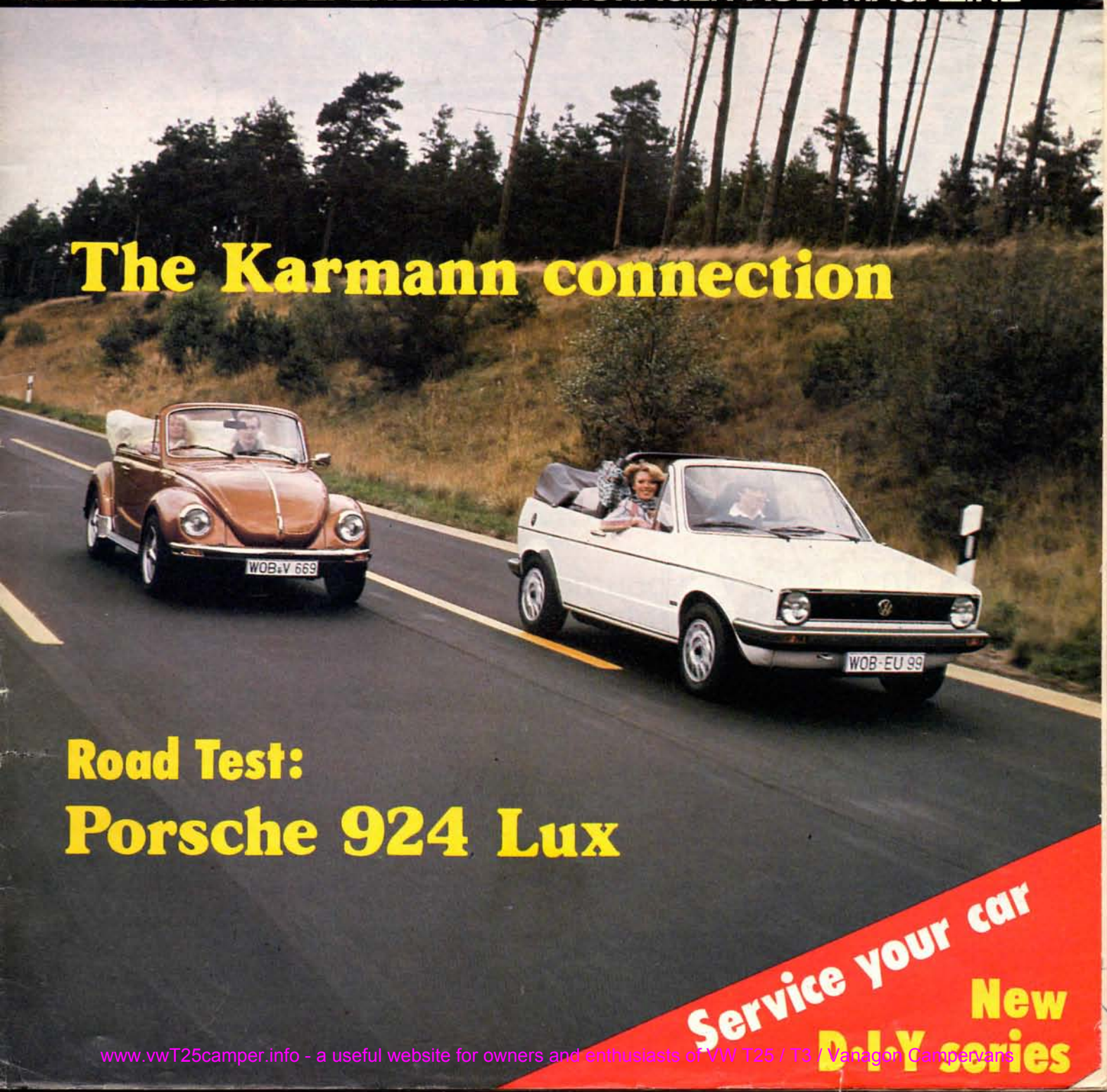

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CHRIS BURLACE takes a closer look at the VW-based Variety and Villa models

Two VW winners for Holdsworth

1984 brought double success to Reading motor caravan constructors Richard Holdsworth. In the spring their VW Variety conversion, based on the Transporter fitted with the standard VW hightop, was voted joint 'Motor Caravan of the Year', sharing its title with the Talbot Express-based Camelot by Autohomes. At the Earl's Court Caravan Show in November, Holdsworth's Villa Mk II, making its appearance for the first time fitted with a new, solid-sided, elevating roof, carried off the Caravan Industry prize in its class. These awards confirmed Richard Holdsworth's status as one of Britain's top motor caravan builders, a position which he has reached from small beginnings. Richard, helped by his wife Heather, produced his first motor caravan conversion working in the road outside his flat in Clapham in the 'sixties. The base vehicle, of course, was a VW and the Transporter has continued from those days to enjoy a prominent place in the Holdsworth model line-up.

Kitchen is fitted with smart, stove-enamelled hob, sink and separate drainer from the Optimus range, and there's still plenty of working space. The Electrolux 122 fridge is standard.

The VW factory hightop gives the Variety less flattering lines than its rivals from other stables with their specially styled, and more aerodynamic, roofs. Inside, however, it's another story with the Holdsworth model offering exceptional space. Built into the VW top are strengthening members, and the rigidity which these add allow not only the rear-of-cab and centre roof bows of the Transporter to be removed, but also the whole cab roof.

There's full standing height inside the conversion from the front of the rear engine deck right through to the front of the cab. The original layout adopted by Holdsworth for this model leaves the forward part of the interior very open and uncluttered, and the Variety feels almost as spacious as a small coachbuilt motor caravan.

Furniture units are grouped at the rear, the heart of the design being the U-shaped kitchen unit which bestrides the front edge of the engine deck, and whose wings extend forward to the line of the centre door pillar. The worktop is equipped with smart, stove-enamelled fittings from the Optimus range; on the offside is a hob with two burners, grill and separate drainer.

The centre portion provides a large working space, set at a comfortable height of 33 in, while below there is ample cupboard space at the rear and in the nearside wing and an Electrolux 122 (1 cu ft) fridge on the offside. A gas water heater is concealed in the nearside cupboard, and water comes from a 9 gallon tank under the 'van, supplied by a Shurflo pump through Quest polypropylene frost-proof plumbing – both top names for quality.

The Variety offers the most convenient and spacious kitchen layout yet devised for the small VW. To the rear, cupboard units rise on both sides above the engine deck and form a bridge across the hightop. The cupboard bases are angled to permit removal of the cover giving access to the engine, and the well above the cover, a cosy place to store bedding in a VW, is split horizontally by a lift-out shelf below the level of the cupboard doors.

On the offside the door opens to reveal wardrobe space, with a good hanging height of 40 in. On the nearside the cupboard is shelved, and in the base is vented storage for a couple of Gaz 907 (6 lb capacity) gas bottles.

Caravan seating in the Variety is provided by a pair of Holdsworth's cleverly designed 'Flexi-Seats' set immediatley forward of the kitchen unit. On the road they're well proportioned, forward facing seats. On the campsite they quickly fold down to form two inward facing settees for dining and lounging, and in that mode they also team up with the reclined cab seats to make a pair of single beds just on two feet wide and well over six feet long. The gap between the singles can also be bridged with tabletops and extra cushions to create a giant double bed. There's storage space in the base sections of the Flexi-Seats, proportioned so that there is room to carry a small Porta Potti toilet, and the seat units can also be quickly removed to leave a large load-carrying area.

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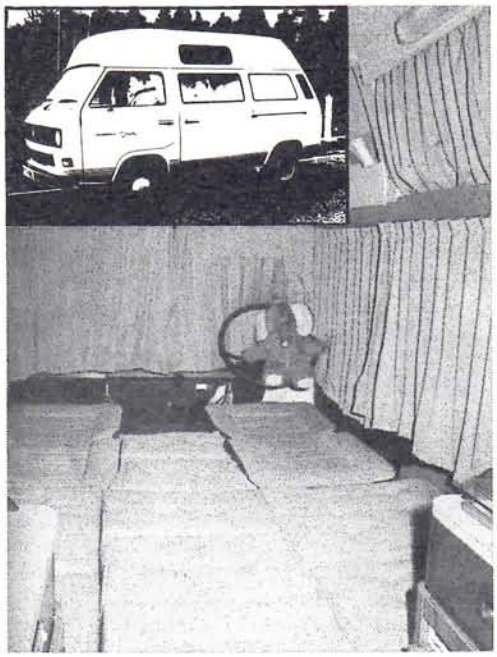

Cab seats swivel to form a second dinette. Fibreglass panels which line hightop form useful pockets over cab doors. LEFT: Table tops plus extra cushions can be used to create a giant double bed. Interior feels very spacious with hightop giving a full standing height into cab.

The Holdsworth hightop offers two options for dining. A 30 in by 16½ in tabletop fits on an island leg between the caravan seats, and provides just enough room for four at table. Alternatively, cab seats swivel inwards and a small tabletop mounts on another leg to provide a second dinette. The cab dinette is convenient with just two in the 'van, while for campsite entertaining the complement stretches to six.

The Variety layout is novel and practical but the model is equally nmoteworthy for its internal appearance. Cabinetwork is of plywood, strong and significantly lighter than chipboard, and of 'bentwood' construction giving the units smoothly rounded corners. Holdsworths are the first British manufacturers to adopt this technique of furniture construction and it achieves an elegance matched only by some of the top Continental motor caravans.

The finish is a warm teak – it looks like the real thing but, as usual now, is in fact a printed finish. Dark blue contrast bands, toning with the blues and greys of upholstery and trim, and horizontal grooving on the doors add interest to the cabinetwork, while piano-hinge and smart, recessed doorpulls add a finishing touch to furniture which is outstandingly attractive.

The no-expense-spared style of the furniture in the Variety is matched by the quality of trim and upholstery. Caravan and cab floors are covered by 'Jerba' carpet in grey, looking luxurious but easy to care for. A carpet-type fabric in mid-grey trims the interior to waist level, plus the cab seat plinths and the top of the hightop, while the hightop sides are finished with smart GRP mouldings which incorporate useful storage pockets in the cab area. An omission, too common in VW motor caravans, is trim around the caravan windows.

Upholstery is in a grey, warm wool mixture fabric with a buttoned finish on firm, 5 in thick upholstery foam. Cab seats in the test 'van were faced in the same material and edged with a dark blue vinyl, matching the contrast bands of the cabinetwork. Curtains, in a dense-weave quality fabric, were grey again, very generously cut, and ran smoothly on Silent Gliss track.

The VW Variety has good storage accommodation, still easily accesible when the forward area is arranged for dining or sleeping; exceptional kitchen facilities; and versatile seating and sleeping arrangements. Although conceived primarily as a luxury 2-berth, the Variety can sleep two more by adding a bed in the hightop, the sections of which stow over the cab.

Ventilation is well catered for by a double, louvre window unit forward on the offside and by small, sliding windows on each side of the hightop. For those who wish to extend their touring season into the colder months a blown-air heater is an option, £302 extra.

On the road the test 'van, with the 78 bhp version of the now water-cooled flat-four, was exceptionally quiet at all speeds, a tribute to VW engineering and the extensive insulation added by Holdsworths in the course of conversion. There were no rattles from the well fitting furniture. The extra frontal area added by the hightop only made itself felt at higher speeds or when running into a stiff wind, when a heavier right foot was called for. Nevertheless economy was reasonable, working out at around 26 mpg in cross-country runs not exceeding 60 mph and dropping to 21 mpg on a mainly-motorway journey at 70 mph punctuated by some creeping through traffic jams.

In crosswinds the hightop was not without effect, but in near-gale conditions the 'van, with concentration, could be held on course

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The Villa Mk II with the new, solid-sided, elevating roof. Pairs of gas struts at each end make lifting easy.

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where the older, pre-1980 Transporter with hightop could have been positively dangerous to drive.

The VW Variety, fitted with the lower-powered 60 bhp engine and the standard 4-speed gearbox, costs £11,241, but most buyers of this luxury model will want to add the higher-powered engine, 5-speed 'box and other extras, so the on-the-road price tag can easily top £12,000. More within reach of most family buyers, and perhaps more suited to family use, is the continuing Holdsworth VW Villa model, starting at £10,294 with elevating roof.

The Villa has long been a familiar name in the Holdsworth range. It appeared with iomprovements as the Mk II in the middle of last year, and was the first model to appear with the new Holdsworth solid-sided elevating roof, (although the Giant Riser roof with its insulated, concertina-like sides is still a no-cost-difference option).

In the Villa the popular side-kitchen VW layout is used, the unit continuing along the offside to provide a wardrobe and then two handy, open-fronted lockers under the slope of the tailgate. There's a bench seat, with part of the underseat space taken up by a water tank, which joins with the area over the engine deck to provide a double bed, the seat flattening on the familiar rock-and-roll hinge principle. Under the curve of the roof at the rear are a group of small open-fronted lockers.

In 2-berth form the bench seat provides places at an island leg table. To increase the complement of the Villa a Flexi-Seat can be added for £106, providing an extra face-forward seat for travel and one (or, by means of a fold-out flap, two) seats at table. A fridge, swivelling cab passenger seat and a mains electrics hook-up, with earth leakage circuit breaker for safety, are standard fitments, but if you want a louvre window on this model it's extra.

Villa has a conventional side kitchen layout. Single seat. left. has flap which can be folded out to give extra place at table.

Inside, the Villa by its decor is recognisably a relation of the Variety. The cabinetwork does not share the elegant, rounded corner detail of the more expensive 'van, but the same high standard. There's the grooving detail on doors and a contrasting facia panel on the kitchen unit in dark blue or brown, depending on whether the grey/blue or the browns interior colour theme is chosen.

Upholstery is in wool/rayon mixture fabric with attractive contrast panels, and curtains are every bit as good as in the variety, although the trim of the Villa is more basic, with fibreboard panels replacing the carpet trim below waist level.

The new Holdsworth roof is just about the easiest to erect. The top and sides go up in one simple action, assisted by a pair of gas struts at each end of the roof cap. Panels are plastic clad with aluminium on the outside for strength and durability, and foam insulation to keep heat in or out depending on the season. The end pieces are trianglulated, the pieces joined by the plastic cladding which serves as a hinge, and they push easily into place like the ends of a folding packing case. The concepts are simple and the end result practical. However, for those who want permanent headroom in their motor caravan, the Villa Mk II can also be supplied with the standard VW hightop, and including rear roof lockers similar to those in the Variety, for £200 extra. The Holdsworth VW range does its best to provide choice of specifications and permutations of its winning features.

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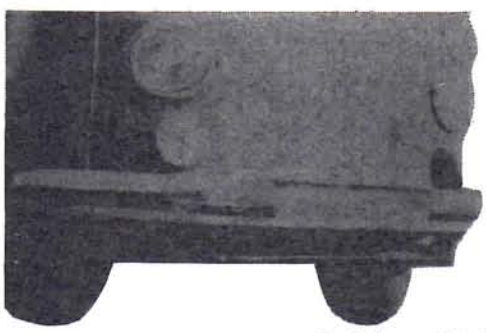

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