



Missing link

There are some cars that have completely disappeared in people's minds, none more so than Volkswagen's K 70. Danny O'Driscoll grabbed his archaeologist's pick and began digging for the truth



There are several pretty effective ways of getting into a verbal fight when you're talking cars. You could say that Ferrari Daytona or A60s are the best cars ever built, or that TRs are driven by nancy-boys. But if you want the ultimate way of provoking a reaction, say that the Volkswagen Golf was not the first water-cooled VW. And for good measure, throw in the fact that it wasn't the first front-wheel-drive VW either. First, you'll be met with scorn and derision, then hoots of laughter at your wayward idea. I mean, come on, everyone knows that the Golf followed the Beetle, not to mention the Passat and Scirocco.

Er, no, it didn't. There was another car that totally changed VW's direction as a car manufacturer and that was the K 70. Admittedly it wasn't a Volkswagen design but virtually all were badged as Wolfsburg products. When VW bought NSU in 1969, they inherited the K 70 design that attempted to correct the problems of the Ro 80, a car which had been extremely well received by the pundits but could not match its plaudits with engine reliability. So rather than persevere with the Wankel-engined car, NSU returned to traditional theory for their Ro 80 successor and opted for an in-line four with water-cooling - itself something of a break for the Neckarsulm company - pumping out either 75 or 90bhp.

If there was one defining point when VW's change from a manufacturer warming over an ageing design to one that would lead cars into the latter part of the 20th Century, it was the launch of the K 70 in 1970. And the surprising thing about the K 70 now is that it doesn't feel like a car a quarter of a century old. Of all the cars carrying the classic moniker, I've driven, the K 70 is unique. It just doesn't feel like an elderly motor car. It's more like an ordinary family saloon of the mid-1980s - much easier to live with than cars of a comparable vintage. But a mere 7,000 were imported into this country, and unlike the Cortina or Victor, a minute number survive. If it wasn't for people staring at the car, try-



Driving VOLKSWAGEN K 70

model, the K 70 would slot into the flow of traffic with hardly a discreet burp.

The K 70 captures a moment in car marking when the old world values, values resistant to change, were cast aside in preparation for a brave new age. Gone were rear-wheel drive and noisy air-cooled engines sited in the back. No, the K 70 was to be the harbinger of a new

age for VW. All this should make it a car that is fondly remembered, but it does not. Memories of this era are, however, brought back by that unremittingly black vinyl interior. It is only those upright seats that give the game away as the rest could be out of a 1980s Eurobox. With its high-up driving position, the K 70 also gives you ample opportunity to set the car up properly for a corner. Good

God, it even has a respectable 0-60 time, making it more than a match for modern traffic. It's all too easy to forget that this is an old car. Although the rear is softly sprung and the engine pushed forward over the front wheels, the tail does not feel the need to wag like an over-excited labrador, even though you know there are semi-trailing arms under the back. It is only the pronounced lean through a

tunnel which shows it's not up to today's standards. But while it leans, it also holds the line like, ahem, a modern car would. Even if you approach a bend too vigorously and need to stamp on the brakes, the in-board front discs, used to reduce unsprung weight, and rear drums rapidly bring the car down to a much more manageable speed. Smooth cornering is coupled to a wonderfully clean delivery of power from tick-over



Separate rocker covers were a typical NSU feature and were carried over for the K 70



There is plenty of room for three in the rear thanks to the lack of a transmission tunnel



Spartan and all-black interior was a rare nod to the early 1970s by Volkswagen



Although family-orientated, the K 70's recounter hinted at sporting pretensions

Owner's view

Stephen Chapman Volkswagen K 70

'It needed a complete renovation when I got it,' says Stephen of his yellow K 70. 'It was generally neglected.'



Since buying it, Stephen has hardly added to the 14,700 miles travelled by the car, but before it was returned to the road, Stephen and fiancée Hayley repainted the underside, fitted new rubber seals all round, overhauled the braking system and replaced the exhaust. 'They might be classed as ugly now but in their day they were good looking,' adds the 27-year-old engineer. 'It's a phenomenally important car because it was a major departure for Volkswagen.'

Stephen is currently setting up a club catering for these most forgotten of Volkswagens, though with only around 20 known K 70 survivors it is likely to be a rather exclusive group.





Driving **VOLKSWAGEN K 70**

all the way to its limit. There is no hint of hesitation as the 1600cc engine provides the necessities to keep the K 70 moving at a fair lick. And it is re-assuringly quit, just like the gearbox, which offers no hint of whine or crunch, although a fifth gear - the lack of which does give the age game away - would help with fuel consumption at speed.

That cleanness of delivery in power is echoed by the exterior. There is no unnecessary frippery here - only the early NSU-badged cars had obvious ornamentation like a chromed sill cover. Definitely angular, unlike the swoopier Ro80, the K 70 was a bold design for the early 1970s that looked forward, rather than mimicked the past.

Only the large glass area detracts from the car, giving it a topheavy look that the removal of an inch or so would have cured. That is a small niggle about a car which, in theory, would have been nothing special from any other manufacturer. But as this is a Volkswagen, the K 70 is a hugely important and influential car. Without this car, VW would not have gained expertise in front-wheel-drive or water cooling for their engines, expertise which flowered with the Golf. So what that the expertise was that of

NSU's engineers. VW had found a simple way

to ease themselves out of their air-cooled straight-jacket and into the free world of water. But this stepping stone has vanished beneath muddy waters, just like NSU's disappearance into the VW goliath.

It was impossible to think of this car as an oldie after driving it. There was little that pointed to the age of the K 70, no vices in the handling, no clunks or rattles, no chips in the paintwork, no pitting of the chrome or blowing exhaust. And even though the Volkswagen did not stand out on the busy Leeds roads, that didn't seem to matter. The buyer of a K 70 in the early 1970s got more than a taste of what was to come in car terms, he got a complete seven course dinner!

It might lack a certain sense of brio and dash, like an ordinary modern car, but while it could be accused of being anonymous today, that would be doing the K 70 a huge disservice. After all, we remember cars that were hailed as technological marvels only to turn out to be less so, like the Hydragas suspended Allegro and Wankel-engined Ro80, so why has the K 70 done a very successful impression of Lord Lucan?

But, at least, we do know that he's out there somewhere!



SPECIFICATION

| | VW K 70 |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Engine | 1605cc 4-cyl, ohv |
| Power | 90bhp @ 5200rpm |
| Torque | 99lbft @ 4000rpm |
| Springs f/r | Coil/coil |
| Brakes f/r | Disc/drum |
| Length | 14ft 6in |
| Width | 5ft 6in |
| Weight | 2360lb |
| 0-60 | 12,9secs |
| Fuel cons | 24.1 mpg |

Above, front-wheel-drive gives the K 70 much more verve though the bends compared to its VW predecessors

