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'52 Karmann Cabriolet

xcellence

Look that up in a dictionary and it'll say 'thing at which someone excels'. And there's no doubt Claus Missing has done just that

Words: Mike Pye
Photos: Stefan Bau

If you're going to pick a VW to restore, you can either make life difficult for yourself or easy. Choose a late model saloon and pretty much everything is available off the shelf to do the job. You might even find some NOS panels and parts at swapmeets still, as the demand for these cars hasn't yet outstripped the supply of parts. Choose a '50s saloon and things get a bit more difficult but, if you really want a challenge, choose an early '50s Cabriolet – and why not make it a Split Window model while you're about it. But be warned, you had better have deep pockets because you're looking at a serious financial commitment to get the job done right.

To give you some idea of how rare these cars are, to the best of my memory, in the last decade we've only featured two British concours Split-dash Cabriolets in *Volkswagen*, and both were out of this world. Sadly, very few people will ever have the opportunity to own one of these cars, and to take



51 Karmann Cabriolet
xcellence



We'd never seen one of these before – a Split Beetle trip speedometer. Can you say rare?



One for the cigar smokers among you – a Schenck gearstick-mounted ashtray



Believe it or not, glovebox doors were accessories. This one has a lock and a Köhler 8-day clock



If you want period sounds in a Split, they don't come any better than a Telefunken IA50

Finding the correct parts is more than half the battle



In a time when Beetles were austere and functional, the Karmann Cabriolet was, quite literally, a breath of fresh air

xcellence

32 Karmann Cabriolet

Less than 1% of production is accounted for today

on the restoration of one you have to have – how can we put it? – a somewhat obsessive personality. You also have to be prepared to travel the world – literally and metaphorically – in search of parts and be ready to stump up the cash when they do turn up. It's not uncommon to hear stories of people buying complete Split Window Beetles just to source body parts.

Common, man

Personally speaking, a Hebmüller has always been at the very pinnacle of my VW wish list, but speak to owners of Split-dash Cabriolets and they'll laugh and tell you a Heb is common in comparison. To put that word 'common' into perspective, records show that the Wülfrath-based Hebmüller factory produced 696 two-seater roadsters in total between the years 1948 and 1953 and, of those, the whereabouts of roughly 100 are said to be known today. Over a similar period, the official VW Cabriolet manufacturer, Karmann GmbH in Osnabrück, built more than 15,000 cars, of which just 124 Split-dash Cabs are known to the Karmann registry today, along with 15 1953 Oval-dash 'Zwitter' models.

That's less than one per cent of production accounted for! So your chances of finding one of these cars is slim at best, which makes the fact that Germany's Claus Missing has had three of them all the more remarkable. But it gets better than that – having bought his first Split Cab in 1993 in, as he put it, "untouched but wrecked" condition, he couldn't believe his luck when his friend Carsten Reeder offered him a second similar car just a few months later. This second car appeared to be a much better proposition for a restoration, but when Claus looked more closely he discovered two things: one, that it had been restored previously in the 70s and not very proficiently, and two, that it had a very similar body number to his first car. Rubbing his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming, he checked again and, sure enough, there was just a one digit difference. With body numbers 7715 and 7716, the two cars could both be dated to 29 February 1952. As Claus puts it, "It is easier to crack a lottery jackpot than find two Split Convertibles with consecutive body numbers!"

Despite his initial excitement about finding what he thought was

a better car, he decided to restore the unrestored car instead, rather than try to undo previous poor work. But boy, did he have his work cut out for him. You really need to check out the link to Claus' website to fully appreciate the work that has gone into this car, and the attention to detail with which it has been done, as we simply cannot explain it in words here. Suffice it to say, this car has had the works. With any car of this vintage, finding the correct parts is more than half the battle and the prices that are asked for some of those bits are enough to make a grown man cry. Luckily though, Claus had a second car to raid some parts from, but he still had to locate a correct original rear view mirror and numerous small detail parts to finish the job. And to understand how he did it, you have to look at the extensive thanks list on his website, which reads like a who's who of the European vintage VW scene. It's a small world, but it becomes a really small one when you get into VWs of this vintage.

Mint source

Having first had the body blasted, Claus then entrusted the metalwork to a friend with his own bodyshop and helped out wherever he could, both in sourcing parts and in actual hours in the garage. As you cannot buy new parts for these cars, the restoration used a combination of bits from modern repro panels and second-hand original VW

panels of a similar vintage, where possible, to keep all the metal to a similar thickness. Though this car started life in L70 and L71 Medium Brown and Beige, Claus opted to refinish it in L41 Black and L60 Ivory instead – correct colours for the year and, in fact, the exact same colours as the 'other' '52 Cab he owned. The correct 16-inch wheels are the same colours and the period perfect interior is a gorgeous combination of beige cloths and wools, all supplied by VW interior specialists such as Ingrid Oppenheimer in Germany.

Over the 12 years he spent meticulously restoring the car, Claus has become well known in vintage VW circles and so, when in the spring of 2004 another Split-dash Cabriolet surfaced, he was one of the lucky few who got the call even most hard-core buffers can only dream of. This time it was an even rarer '51 model, but not just any old '51. It was a one-owner car that still had its original roof, a superb original interior, all its original body panels and just 65,000 kilometres on the clock. Aside from an exterior repaint in the Seventies and the fitment of later flashing indicators (unfortunately mandatory in Germany) it was the holy grail of Split-dash Cabs and Claus knew this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, so sold the '52 to a friend in France and moved the '51 in. We could say some guys have all the luck, but then we could also say you make your own luck



Factory tool rolls are a nice touch



Correct year Hazet spare wheel toolkit - without Phillips screwdriver



With no b-pillars to mount them in, the semaphore indicators live in special boxes in the quarter panels



No one builds hoods like Karmann, which explains why they make Mercedes Benz CLK hoods today



Karmann Cabs were always expensive compared to saloons and were often upgraded with snazzy steering wheels, such as this lovely Petri Pealit

A Hebmüller is common in comparison

in this world and that as Claus has certainly put the effort in. Perhaps he has been justly rewarded.

To understand a little more of what goes into a restoration like this, have a look at the following link – it'll blow your mind: http://www.karmann1952gb.karmann1952.de/html/1952_karmann1.html



If you buy an early Cab' you best hope it has these latches!



It was a sad day when VW said goodbye to the dome interior light



25-horse motor has coffee can air filter and correct k-manifold

The knowledge

Want to amaze your mates down the pub? Get a few of these facts memorised and bore, er, we mean impress everyone within earshot

1 The earliest Beetle Cabriolets weren't built by Karmann at all, but were assembled by the Georg Autenrieth company in Darmstadt on a KdF-Wagen chassis that came from Porsche. A single 1938 example is on display in the VW museum in Wolfsburg.

2 The first prototype Karmann Cabriolet was built in November 1946 on Beetle chassis no. 10,000. In total, between 1946 and 1949, Karmann built 28 pre-production versions for testing by Volkswagen.

3 Production of Karmann Cabriolets began officially in September 1949 and continued until January 10 1980. In that time, just 10,851 Split-dash Cabriolets were produced out of a total of 331,847 Karmann-built Cabriolet Beetles.

4 1952 was the most prolific year for Split-dash Cabriolet production, accounting for 4,253 of the total of 10,851 units manufactured. For comparison, VW built 114,348 Beetle saloons in 1952.