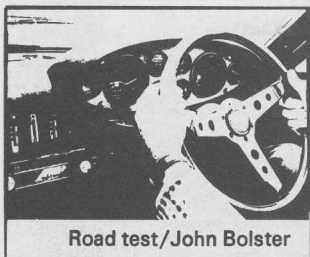




The big Volvo gives plenty of passenger space but is faster than it looks.



Road test/John Bolster

The tough 164E makes a lot of sense



The 164E understeers when pressed but is very stable.

Volvo cars are enjoying a tremendous success on the British market; there is no need to look up the import figures for you meet such a lot of them on any journey. Yet, they are generally more expensive than their competitors and their design is strictly conservative. Their popularity is due to their well-earned reputation for engineering excellence, their high standard of construction and finish, and their owners' habit of becoming acting/unpaid salesmen.

This is most heartening, for it means that our traditional love of craftsmanship is still with us, and many of our countrymen are willing to pay extra for less flashy but more durable cars. If our own manufacturers want a share of this market, they had better forget about planned obsolescence and yearly trade-ins. Many people prefer to buy a better car and keep it longer, having found that there is no substitute for quality, even if one has to go abroad for it.

The Volvo 164 is a big car in the 3-litre class, with an orthodox chassis and a really sturdy six-cylinder engine. An in-line six, with water between all the bores and a seven-bearing crankshaft, is a pretty substantial piece of engineering, especially when the cylinder block and head are cast in the best Swedish iron. The rest of the car is built on the same ample scale and the resulting vehicle weighs no less than 27 cwt.

The carburettor version is a car of adequate rather than outstanding performance but the 164E, with Bosch electronic fuel-injection, has as much speed and acceleration as most owners will be able to use. The compression ratio has been raised, and in spite of a much more sporting camshaft the torque has been

improved all the way up the range. Thus equipped, the big Volvo immediately becomes a very lively car which delights in maintaining high speeds on the motor roads of Europe.

The chassis design is conventional, and Volvo still remain faithful to a well-located live rear axle. Substantial construction is found throughout and the disc brakes are of ample size, with separate drums for the handbrake. All Volvo engines are highly developed in anti-pollution techniques and this is especially the case when the Bosch electronic injection system is fitted. Manual transmission with an optional overdrive may be specified, and I have driven a car so equipped. However, the Volvo which was submitted for the present test had the Borg Warner Type 35 automatic transmission, with which a higher-geared rear axle is employed. A short central lever moves in a quadrant to select the desired gear range and can instantly over-ride the automatic selection when required.

The 164E is a big, roomy car which is easy to enter and leave. The seats are comfortable, with the extra adjustment for the shape of the backrest, in addition to its angle, which has been a feature of this make for a long

time. There is a powerful and effective heating system but, most unexpectedly, there are no adjustable inlet points for cool breathing air. The interior is attractively furnished though one would prefer a round speedometer dial.

As is commonly found with the Bosch injection system, the engine starts immediately from cold and at once idles slowly and evenly, which avoids creeping when the automatic transmission is fitted. The flexibility of the engine is almost beyond belief, but this can only be enjoyed to the full by owners of the manual gearbox, for the automatic transmission changes down unnecessarily—I would suggest a modification of the setting to allow the low-speed flexibility in top gear to be appreciated. Yet the big six-cylinder power unit excels in speed and acceleration, as well as in flexibility, smoothness, and silence.

With the synchromesh gearbox, the big Volvo can go from a standstill to 60 mph in well under 9 sec. In automatic form, the more gentle getaway adds a second or so but the car is still very lively indeed. The intermediate gear of the Borg Warner box is good for more than 85 mph, which makes it extremely useful on winding roads. With the axle ratio used

in conjunction with this transmission, the engine is just about reaching peak revs at the maximum of 114 mph. There is no sign of mechanical stress if this speed is maintained for considerable distances.

Having a heavy engine in front, the car understeers normally, showing great steadiness at high speeds in side winds. The roadholding is greatly improved, compared with an earlier 164 which I tested, which may be largely due to the employment of wider tyres. Certainly, the rear wheels behave much better on bumpy roads and the ride is unusually good for a car with a live axle. There are occasions, if humps and depressions are taken at high speed, when the suspension seems to wallow a little, but in general a good compromise has been chosen. The level of road noise is low inside the body, only muffled thumps denoting the passage of holes in the surface; there is also a commendable absence of wind noise.

Full marks must be given to the steering, which has most discreet power assistance that can scarcely be noticed, yet takes all the effort out of parking the heavy vehicle. The curious transatlantic fashion for ultra-light steering has not been followed, thank heavens, for such a system must be dangerously insensitive on icy roads. Similarly, the overall width of the Volvo is just a little narrower than that of comparable luxury cars, which makes all the difference in heavy traffic or country lanes. Though built for comfort the car is sufficiently compact and controllable to be a doughty performer in the rigours of Sweden's interminable winters.

Much of the value of this machine comes from hidden features, like extra rust protection, unusually large brakes, built-in safety, and the use throughout of high quality materials. If you want to trade your car in after only one year of hard use, the Volvo is too good for you; you can get something with more flashy decoration for less money. On the other hand, you may wish to make a transportation investment which entails keeping the same car for a long time and it must be completely reliable over the whole period. If you begrudge every moment that your car is off the road and in the garage, the tough 164E may make a lot of sense to you.

SPECIFICATION AND PERFORMANCE DATA

Car tested: Volvo 164E 4-door saloon with automatic transmission, price £2979 including tax.

Engine: Six-cylinders 88.92 mm x 80 mm (2978 cc). Compression ratio 10 to 1. 160 bhp (net) at 5500 rpm. Pushrod-operated overhead valves. Bosch electronic fuel-injection.

Transmission: Hydraulic torque converter and 3-speed automatic gearbox, ratios 1.0, 1.45, and 2.39 to 1. Hypoid rear axle, ratio 3.31 to 1.

Chassis: Combined steel body and chassis. Independent front suspension by wishbones, coil springs, and anti-roll bar. Power-assisted recirculating ball steering gear. Live rear axle on twin pairs of trailing arms and Panhard rod. Telescopic dampers all round. Servo-assisted disc brakes with small drums for handbrake.

Equipment: 12voits lighting and starting. Speedometer. Fuel and temperature gauges. Heating, demisting and ventilation system with heated rear window. 2-speed windscreen wipers and washers. Flashing direction indicators. Reversing lights. Radio (extra).

Dimensions: Wheelbase 8 ft 10 1/2 in. Track 4ft 5 1/4 in. Overall length 13 ft 5 1/4 in. Width 5 ft 5 1/4 in. Weight 1 ton 7 cwt.

Performance: Maximum speed 114 mph. Standing quarter-mile 17.4 s. Acceleration: 0-30 mph 4 s, 0-50 mph 7.6 s, 0-60 mph 10.1 s, 0-80 mph 16.8 s, 0-100 mph 31 s. Fuel consumption: 17 to 21 mpg.



The angle of roll is by no means excessive during fast cornering (above). The interior is well equipped but there is an absence of face level ventilation (below).



The six-cylinder cast iron engine is a massive piece of engineering.

