

# PRACTICAL CLASSICS **BUYING** FEATURE



*We three. Foglamps were not a standard fitting at first (hence the auxiliary grilles on the blue car) but soon became a standard fitting. The big USA specification bumpers did nothing for the car's looks.*



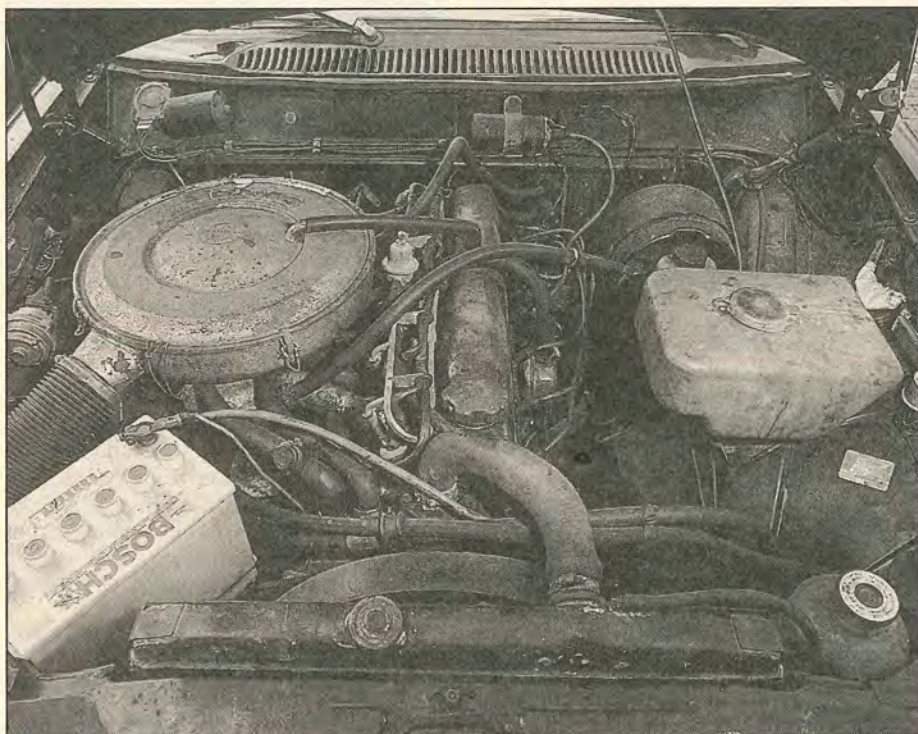
*Above: The 164's lines were clean and uncluttered, and the car's overall appearance very unpretentious indeed for a car costing about the same as a Jaguar XJ6.*

*Left: Straight six power! This 19,000 miles from new car is totally original under the bonnet. Notice the operating bar leading from the brake servo to the pedal side – only a tiny minority of total 164 production was RHD.*



# SIX-POTTED SWEDE

Volvo's big saloon of the early seventies is a lot of car for the money; but is it a good buy? Peter Simpson investigates.

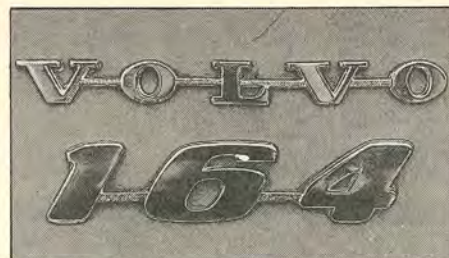


**M**any people think Volvos in general, and the 'three box' 140/160 series in particular, to be boring cars with little, if anything, to attract the enthusiast to them. Regular *Practical Classics* readers will already know that, as the owner of two Volvos, I do not share this view at all. Furthermore, having just driven a 164, the six-cylinder version of my 144 for the first time, I reckon that if they were treated to the same experience, a fair few Volvo critics would 'think again'.

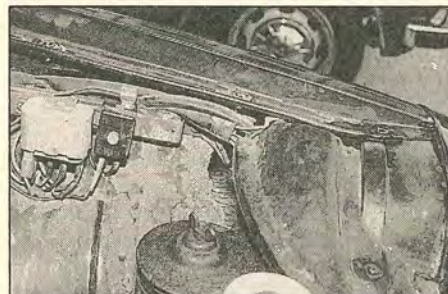
Let's look at the 'on paper' performance first. Even in carburettor form, the six-cylinder B30 engine (in effect one-and-a-half four-cylinder B20 units) delivers 145bhp, and either manual or automatic versions can easily top 120mph although, as you'd expect, it's the manual that gives the best acceleration. Add to that lot the car's comfort, spares availability and Volvo's legendary durability and you have, as they say, one very practical car that goes like blazes too!

The Volvo 164 range was introduced in 1969. Actually 'range' is putting it a bit strong, as there was basically just one model, available with manual or automatic transmission, and it was really an upward extension of the 140 range, being virtually identical to the 140 from the bulkhead back. The front was lengthened, however, to take a six-cylinder version of the 2-litre, four-cylinder B20 engine from the 140. This engine, the B30, was, as its name implies, in effect one-and-a-half B20s joined end to end. Bore, stroke, piston size etc. remained the same. Front-end styling was changed to incorporate an almost square radiator grille instead of the 144's full-width treatment and the 164 was intended as the flagship of the range.

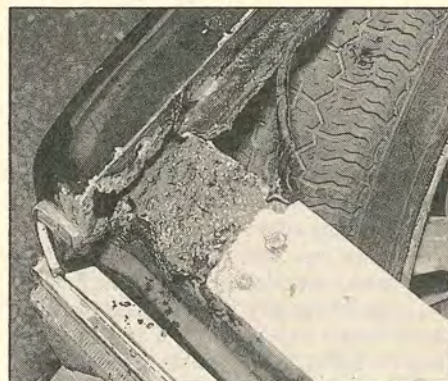
Power steering became standard by late 1969 and, as a result of customer complaints, many earlier cars were also fitted with PAS very soon after purchase. At about the same time a sliding steel sunroof became a standard fitting and Laycock overdrive was offered as an optional extra – Volvo were then very big customers of the UK components industry.



For the benefit of the uninitiated, the 164 was a six-cylinder four-door car, whereas the 144 was a four-cylinder four-door.



Inner wing corrosion is very common but can usually be cured by welding in new sections; the outer wings are bolt-on.



Above: Look out for rot where the rear wing and rear panel meet.

Left: The fuel-injected underbonnet was rather more cluttered, as Clara Fields' well-used car shows!

The Stromberg carburettors fitted until 1971 were also UK sourced. In that year Bosch fuel injection was offered as an optional extra. Not only did this improve performance but, in practice, fuel-injected cars were (and are) more economical; the petrol is burnt more efficiently. At the same time the front-end styling was changed – the bumper was straightened – and the following year the dashboard styling was changed completely at the same time as the 144's was.

In 1973 fuel injection became standard and a fuel-injected car with manual/overdrive transmission is probably the most desirable 164. In November, 1973, the car's external appearance changed dramatically – for the worse – when 240/260-type USA specification 5mph impact bumpers were fitted. At the same time the door design was changed; front door quarter lights were removed. Production then continued unchanged until late 1974 when the 164 range was discontinued – the last cars to be sold in Britain were registered in early 1975. In the final year, a limited-edition TE model was introduced. Just 500 were produced worldwide and five survivors in the UK are known to the Volvo Owners Club. All were



# SIX-POTTED SWEDE

metallic blue automatics with tan interiors and the specification also included rear headrests and seat belts, headlamp wash/wipe, air conditioning and an eight-track player. These, too, are desirable.

No estate car or '165' version of the 164 was ever available, although one was built by the factory for evaluation purposes. A two-door 162 was also made as a design test-bed for the 200-series based 262. Both these cars are still owned by Volvo. About 90 164s are on known to the Volvo Owners Club but it's thought that far more cars than this are around, either sitting out of use in people's garages or being used as hack transport. It's not unusual for a 164 to have had one owner for much of its life although this may not have been from new; many 164s started life as company transport for the 'top brass' and would therefore have been sold on after a year or two ... They are also not that uncommon in scrapyards, often with not that much wrong with them.

Because 164s aren't yet known to be collectable or particularly fashionable, asking prices can vary widely, depending on who is selling and how quickly they want a buyer. Informed opinion is that manuals are more desirable than automatics, but a non-enthusiast seller may well not be aware of this. Remember, too, that in a perceived fuel crisis, large thirsty cars, especially old ones, are much harder to sell. We reckon that at the moment it should be possible to strike a very favourable deal indeed.

## Buying Guide

I'd like to start this section by thanking Paul and Clara Field of Swedish Classics (Unit 13, Henley Business Park, Trident Close, Medway City Estate, Rochester ME2 4ER, Tel: 0634 290789) for their help in preparing this feature and providing most of the information contained herein. Paul and Clara are Volvo enthusiasts of the first order and, as well as running the business specialising in older Volvos, they are Joint 164 Series Registrars for the Volvo Owners Club.

Volvo structural durability is legendary, but even the very best doesn't last for ever and 164s do very definitely rust as some of our photographs show. You're unlikely to find a rusty floorpan, however, as this, along with the sill bottoms, was galvanised at the factory. Nevertheless, on top the tinworms can, and often do, strike. As you'd expect, most of what follows applies equally to the 140 series.

The usual troublespots include the sill tops, particularly around the doorpost joins (don't buy a 164 until you've opened all the doors to check for this), front screen scuttle (big-bumpered cars had bonded wind-screens, so replacing a cracked one is costly), rear wing lower corners, front wings, inner wings, door bottoms and so on.

Complete rear wings are no longer available but rear arch and spare wheel trough repair sections are and these, along with a few pieces of shaped sheet steel, will cure



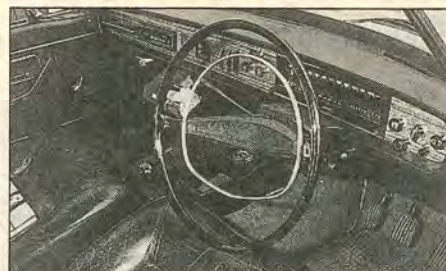
most rear wing problems. If not, and a complete wing is needed, beware. Although 244-type rear wings can be modified to suit 164s it's an involved business, as is fitting the modified wing, and the 244 panel costs over £200 to start with!

For a mercifully short period in the mid-1970s, Volvo paintwork quality sometimes left a little to be desired. Big-bumpered 164s may well have been 'caught' by this, and the tell-tale signs are faded metallic paint, lots of stone chips and possibly quite large scabs of rust where the paint has failed. Although it may look awful, such a vehicle need not stand totally condemned, as Volvo metal is thicker than on most other cars of the era, and rust-spots, if not too advanced, may well respond to rubbing down. Certainly outside-in rust of this kind is nothing like as serious as inside-out, where what you see is only the tip of the iceberg.

Volvos are also well-known for long-lasting mechanical components. The B30 engine is good for well, well over 100,000 miles given regular servicing, although it's not thought to be quite as good as the four-cylinder unit from which it's derived. This is probably because it produces so much more power from the same basic design. Carry out all the usual checks for smoke on overrun, noise when starting up, knocking under load etc., but bear in mind that a worn engine may well carry on for ages. The bottom end was uprated in 1973/4 and later-type engines can be fitted to early cars if the flywheel is also changed. The pre-1973 engine is perfectly satisfactory in normal service, however, and certainly shouldn't be regarded as a drawback. A worn camshaft is quite common and not an immediate problem; you can probably put off rectification (which can be done with the engine in place) until you can no longer stand the noise ...

Transmission and final drive units are also long-lived. Automatics had a Borg-Warner 35 gearbox, which is a superb little unit for which parts are readily available, and the manual transmission is virtually indestructible. Changing an automatic to manual is possible but a lot of other parts (flywheel, clutch and brake pedals, clutch assembly, propshaft etc. etc.) have to be changed as well. Manual and automatic rear axles were also different, but a converted car will accelerate better (but have a slower top speed and be less economical) if you retain the lower ratio automatic box.

Fuel-injection may frighten off some buyers but the Bosch system was far better



*Apart from some early cars (on which it was an option) leather trim was standard on all 164s. Otherwise the interior was the same as on the contemporary four-cylinder cars. This is the early-type dash with ribbon speedometer.*

than most of its contemporaries (particularly the Lucas set-up!). It is, however, still a 'non DIY' area of the car for all but the most skilled. Flat spots on acceleration are the most common problem – it's usually the pressure sensor that's at fault; rectification will probably cost between £75 and £100 depending who does it. Avoid running out of fuel, too, with fuel injection – the system does not take kindly to muck from the tank being sucked up.

The well-known weakness of the B18/20/30 engines is the fibre timing gear on the end of the camshaft which can strip its teeth. 1974 cars had steel timing gears which are more durable and can be fitted to earlier cars; they don't even cost any more than the fibre item. The only disadvantage is that steel gears are noisier, but we reckon this price is well worth paying.

All 164s had disc brakes all round, with many components shared with the late 120s and 1800 models. Post-1972 discs were ventilated, which improved performance, and later discs can be fitted to earlier cars. Either system should be adequate for the car, but maintenance is important, particularly on non-ventilated systems. Calipers can seize on a car that's used only occasionally. Check, too, that the servo is operating correctly.

The 164's suspension is a bit of a let-down. Even when new, 164s did not corner that well, and tired examples can be pretty nasty! The set-up is perfectly conventional, with wishbones at the front and trailing arms to the rear. Shock absorbers have a hard life, damping movement over two tons of car, and front inner wishbones also need changing quite regularly, even on a car that isn't used much. An awkward job. Coil springs can break, too, particularly the rear ones. This fault is quite hard to detect because it's usually the bottom coil that fails





Rear lights were changed in the 1972 facelift.



Volvo intended that hot air passing through the sills would drive out moisture and prevent corrosion. It often didn't work...

and this is hidden in the lower housing.

You'll never make a 164 feel like a sports car, but some improvement can be bought about by fitting an additional front anti-roll bar, or going for lower profile (195 maximum) tyres. You could also fit uprated shock absorbers. Volvos are, of course, very popular as tow cars and most 164s will have been fitted with a towbar by now. This is not a disadvantage but you should bear in mind that regular towing puts an extra strain on the rear suspension.

You're unlikely to be offered a 164 without power steering (Paul and Clara know of just one, which definitely isn't for sale!). The system is generally good but the normal precautions of checking fluid level regularly and ensuring no dirt enters the reservoir must be observed. The box itself lasts well but the column top-joint does wear (problems here are potentially lethal and an MoT failure) and the parts alone cost over £100.

All but the earliest 164s had sliding sun-roofs fitted as standard. Leaks are common, and can be quite tricky to rectify, although it is possible with new seals etc. Separate cables control the opening and closing functions, so if the 'closing' cable breaks you may have a job to shut the roof! Investigate any stiffness in operation sooner rather than later!

Finally, when assessing a 164, it's vital to check that the bonnet hinge mountings are secure and that the bonnet safety catch and lock are working correctly. The car is designed so that the front end will collapse in an accident, leaving the passenger compartment undamaged, but for this to happen the bonnet must stay attached to its hinges. If it doesn't, it will be pushed back into the passenger compartment, probably decapitating the driver and front seat passenger in the process. You have been warned.



The 1972 facelift resulted in probably the best-looking 164, with the small, straight bumper.

Living with a 164As our price table shows, there's no doubt that a Volvo 164 is a lot of car for the money. As you'd expect with an early seventies car, it's entirely practical transport, too, if you can accept fuel consumption which will vary between 12 and 30mpg, depending on how you drive...

Manual or automatic? As a driver's car, there's no doubt that the manual wins hands down. It's faster accelerating, slightly quicker at the top end, more flexible, more 'fun' and, given the same use, it's also slightly more economical if proper use is made of the overdrive. The big disadvantage of a manual car is the heavy clutch which makes town driving rather tiring. An automatic 164 is a much more relaxed vehicle, ideal for those who do a lot of town work, or want to cover long distances effortlessly and easily, for whom 0-60 in 10 or 12 seconds is more than enough. You pay your money and takes your choice....

164s have one drawback though; their insurance rating. Being big and foreign, all 164s are in group six at least, and the injected versions in particular can be group seven. This is costly, especially for under 25s, and probably impossible for anyone under 21. Agreed-value limited mileage cover may be an option for some but this, too, is unlikely to be available on a 164 if you're under 21. So youngsters may have to wait a while (and perhaps choose something from this month's 'A Grand Occasion' feature...) before putting a 164 on the road. Needless to say, this insurance rating is totally unjustified in terms of the car's performance; hopefully it will be changed in the future.

Back on the positive side, however, 164 parts availability is, as with all Volvos, superb. Virtually everything can be obtained, although Volvo prices for some items seem ludicrously high (a genuine three-part clutch kit will set you back about £400!). Many

## Price Guide

As explained in the main text, prices for 164s do fluctuate, and you may well be able to do quite a bit better than our guide prices. Manuals are more desirable than automatics and, consequently, should be priced nearer the top of each range than a comparable automatic. £50-£100 will buy a car for breaking or possibly a very brave (and totally uneconomic) restoration. For £200-£350 you'll get a runner, possibly with an MoT, but which will certainly need work. Once again, putting this car into tip-top condition is unlikely to be financially viable. Good cars, in need of titivation but little else, seem to change hands for between £900 and £1500. 164s are sometimes advertised for over £5,000 but we don't think they actually change hands for that much and, unless you're considering buying a genuine concours winner (in which case ask to see the certificates), £3,000-£3,500 should be sufficient for a very good, clean, low mileage example.

parts are more reasonable, though, particularly those that are British-sourced, and for older Volvos, the independent specialists are usually cheaper than Volvo main dealers. Front inner wings aren't available but it's usually easier to repair what's there than replace the complete wing. Front outer wings (which bolt on) are a reasonable enough £170 each.

A Volvo 164 does not have the acres of walnut trim and traditional luxury of a Jaguar XJ6 or P5B Rover. Despite the leather seats, a 164 interior looks quite austere by comparison. It's not until you sit in it that you realise how good it is. The car feels right. All the instruments and controls are where you expect to find them, the seats and driving position are superb and there are no awkward blind spots. The steering feels good and, although there is a slight question mark over the suspension which may not be ideal for the sporting motorist, it's fine in normal use which, after all, is what the car was intended for.

The Volvo quality comes out, not in mechanical innovation or making a car which looks good, but in doing simple things extremely well. An article of this kind has to highlight a particular model's faults but it must be stressed that, almost without exception, these will manifest themselves only long after they would on most other cars. The 164 engine may be a simple pushrod job, but it's built to such fine tolerances that it should last over 150,000 miles, and possibly a lot more. The Volvo interior is simple but will retain both its comfort and appearance long after the oppositions have fallen apart. And, of course, the 164 bodyshell will still be 100% solid long after the rest have been terminally weakened by corrosion.

Above all, the car will still be on the road, going strong, not looking its age, and more than capable of doing its job, long, long after most of its contemporaries have been reduced to cubes of crushed steel!