

VOLVO EVOLVES

How an unknown Swedish sports sedan became a symbol of urban respectability — then went on to mix the best of both. John Wright reports



THERE WAS a time when "conservative" would have been one of the last words anyone would have used to describe Volvos. In the very year that the company produced its 100,000th PV 444 model — the two-door fastback that looked like a shrunken '48 Ford — it also announced an all-new model, the 121/122S, that, some years later, gradually introduced the Volvo name into the Aussie motoring consciousness. Was that Volvo conservative? Not on your nelly.

Everyone who sampled a 122S in the early '60s recognised it as a triumph of toughness over tinsel, a robust and practical car with verve. No matter that when the first examples appeared in Australia, the design was already half a decade old: it was still a more advanced motor car than practically anything else you could buy in 1961. Back in 1956 when it was announced there was probably only one other four-door family sedan, (Citroen aside) that was as modern as the Volvo — the redoubtable and unforgettable Peugeot 403.

From its first appearance here, the 122S was judged to be an enthusiast's car. Despite the weight of its so solid body and the use of a 1.6 litre four-cylinder engine rather than a six, the Volvo could accelerate almost as rapidly as an EK Holden sedan. Certainly it lacked the sheer slogging capacity of the Holden — 15 mph in top gear, that kind of thing — but I shouldn't think there was any other single aspect of the Volvo's road demeanour that wasn't markedly superior. Cars such as the 122S and the aforementioned Peugeot 403 served to demonstrate how limited was the American/Australian sedan of the era.

Of course the 122S was a pricey car. But it was beautifully built and finished. So integrated was its overall design, so distinctive was its nature that it quickly carved out a strong reputation. It was often regarded as a sports sedan — a kind of Swedish Mercedes 220S.

The first 122S sedans to be sold locally featured a 1586 cm³ engine that developed 85 bhp SAE (63 kW) and provided a top speed of 90 mph (144 km/h). Even then it was regarded as a noisy unit. "The engine," said WHEELS, "emitted the hard note of many European engines about the same capacity and had the indefinable feeling usually associated with the noise." Within a couple of years the 122S had acquired a larger version of this engine — codenamed B18 instead of B16. The capacity was now 1780 cm³ the output 90 bhp (67 kW) and top



speed an impressive 93 mph (150 km/h).

Then in 1967 the first of the 144S sedans arrived here. While still recognisably a Volvo, it seemed to lack the distinctiveness of the 122S. It was also bigger, heavier and somewhat softer in its road behaviour.

With the 140 series, Volvo seemed to be hinting at a change of emphasis. It was as safe a sedan as money could buy in 1967, with its integral roll bar in the roof, its collapsible jointed steering column and its "triangle" split-circuit brakes. Disc brakes were fitted to the front wheels. Safety was the theme of Volvo's advertising and there was less emphasis on sportiness.

In 1968 Volvo began fitting a 2.0-litre version of its robust four. That

was also the year for the European launch of the six-cylinder 164 sedan, essentially a more powerful and lavish version of the same car and aimed squarely at the executive market. Its engine was simply a six-cylinder version of the B20 unit and provided impressive, if noisy, performance. From the beginning, Volvo wisely chose to equip the 164 with power steering; it was undoubtedly one of the best such systems around at the time.

Broaching the '70s, Volvo had a strong reputation in Australia but many prospective customers expressed their admiration from something of a distance. Volvo was, for example, comfortably outsold by Triumph in 1970. But between 1971 and 1974, the company achieved a great increase in its market share, becoming the top seller in the luxury class, ahead of Mercedes-Benz.

Why the dramatic improvement? The cars themselves did not change greatly during these years: there was still the 144 in several versions, and the 164, which acquired fuel injection and an "E" designation in 1972.

The explanation lies in one of the most skilful marketing programs ever seen in Australia. A Volvo, everybody learned, was a safe car in which to have an accident.

This essentially negative approach worked wonders. While other manufacturers trumpeted the desirability, performance, luxury and elegance of their wares, Volvo just kept on talking about safety. The secondary theme was prestige: if you recognised the intrinsic engineering excellence of the Volvo (was the implication), then you were a person of style and discernment. Volvo sales leapt from around 2000 in 1971 to 6000 by 1974.

In 1975 we saw revised versions to replace the Volvos that had been around for seven years. Instead of the 144/164, we got the 244/264. By this stage, Volvo's nomenclature was firmly defined — the first numeral indicated the model series, the second the number of cylinders and the third the number of doors. While the cars continued to look a lot like their predecessors, the 2-series models did contain significant changes. The four-cylinder engine was now a SOHC unit with only three components in common with its predecessor — crankshaft, conrods and pistons. The robust in-line six developed from the B20 four was superseded by a smoother but less powerful V6 unit, shared with Renault and Peugeot.

There were heavy-handed changes to the styling, particularly around the nose. Perhaps this was merely to

accentuate the safety theme, because these cars, with their shovel snouts and massive black bumpers, looked as if they could quite literally shove obstacles out of their path. You certainly couldn't call them subtle.

But the interiors were pleasant and practical. As a running change on the 144/164 models, Volvo had phased out the dated dashboard with its strip speedo and seemingly arbitrary placement of the controls. If the new treatment looked chunky and

orange stripes declared that here was a different, more sporting kind of Volvo. In fact it performed and handled well, so well that it seemed that Volvo might have further surprises in store. Meanwhile most people were convinced that a new body style couldn't be too far into the future.

It was a logical step to offer the more powerful engine in the cooking models and this was done in 1981, although the carbureted base model DL continued to use the 2.1-litre B21A engine. The

upmarket of any previous Volvo sedan. Cars such as the Fiat 130 and the Peugeot 604 had already demonstrated how hard it is for any carmaker to enter the upper echelon of the market.

Volvo, however, knew exactly what it was about. Now was the time to alter the image again. Advertising stressed that here was a new kind of Volvo,

1967 VOLVO 122S



The Volvos that started it all: 122 series sedans were distinctive, well-finished and well-built. They were cars with a lot of "character"

purposeful — well, OK, that was the new Volvo image. . .

It is easy to see that many customers would have been wooed into Volvos by the combination of that safety pitch and a nicely furnished interior. Look across the heavy dashboard and along the snoutlike bonnet and you could easily feel king/queen of the road.

WHEELS was less enthusiastic. In the July 1975 issue, Steve Cropley vented an opinion that was to become increasingly common among the motoring press as the decade wore on: "Volvo drivers these days are generally not interested in cars." Faint praise for the cars told most of the story. Solid? Sure. Safe? Indubitably. Comfortable? Yes. An enthusiast's car? No more.

Volvo itself, however, clearly didn't need to worry too much about any of this. The cars sold so well and established such a name for themselves that, by the mid to late '70s, the term "prestige car" came to mean for most Australians a Benz or a Volvo or a Ford Fairlane, in descending order of desirability.

In 1979 Volvo rather surprised its critics by introducing the 242GT, with an enlarged version of the SOHC engine, known as the B23E. Black and

DL's purpose in life was to provide Volvo motoring for those who might otherwise have bought a Ford Falcon or Holden Commodore; it was a kind of bargain basement model.

With the injected B23E engine installed, the four-cylinder Ovlovs proved surprisingly rapid, virtually the equal of the V6 models. Subtly, Volvo edged even further upmarket. In 1979 a premium version of the 244 was offered — the GLE. Similar treatment was performed with the 264. With air, power steering, alloy wheels, power windows and stereo as standard, the GLE versions demonstrated that Volvo wasn't going to demand asceticism of its buyers. The company was also tacitly acknowledging the appeal of the upmarket versions of the Commodore and the Falcon, while hoping to ward off more advanced European machinery such as the Peugeot 505 and Rover 3500 SD1. Sales held up well but speculation about a forthcoming all-new model intensified.

In 1982 the first 700-series Volvo was launched on the European market. Towards the middle of the following year it went on sale here. The 760GLE was a fairly high risk car for Volvo because it was designed to compete



retaining all the traditional virtues but adding sportiness and flair. The "German car, ja?" theme invited favourable comparison of the 760 with BMWs and Mercedes, territory previously untrodden by Volvo.

With the introduction of the 760, Volvo decided to standardise its nomenclature. The 244 became the 240 and Volvo hoped we'd all be able to

count the number of doors for ourselves. The 264 range was silently eased off the market with the notable exception of the GLE wagon. But the demise of the 264 sedans left a big gap — nearly \$10,000 — between the 240GLE and the 760GLE.

But neither of the two new Volvo models next to appear in Australia slotted into this gap. The 360GLT (already old in Europe) provided a new entrant for Volvo in the sub-\$20,000 bracket, while the 760 Turbo carried

\$20,000 and climb to well over \$40,000. That represents one hell of a long marketing haul from the old 122S, which was Volvo's initial Australian entrant.

1967 Volvo 122S

Phillip Merrick's Volvo 122S boasts a set of aftermarket alloy wheels and a sports steering wheel. Phillip is strongly attached to his machine, which he bought four years ago. He has always had the intention of entering it

You quickly become accustomed to the body roll and, really, the 122S turns in fairly well, displaying far less understeer than your typical 1960s sedan, an HR Holden say.

I keep coming back to that carry-all word "character" to encapsulate the qualities of the 122S. There is that almost absurdly long, chromed

1971 VOLVO 144 GL



Volvo's 144 looks bigger than the 122 — and it is, with cavernous boot and general emphasis on comfort. Still very Volvo, but not so sporty

the same pricetag and level of equipment as the GLE, but was powered by a turboed, intercooled version of the B23E engine. Both cars were promoted as most unVolvo in their sportiness and Volvo actually broke a string of endurance records at Surfers Paradise Raceway in an attempt to endow the 360 with a performance image.

Imminent arrival of the 740GLE led to more namechanging at Volvo. It made more sense to call the 760 Turbo the 760 GLE Turbo and to move it further upmarket. The 740GLE went on sale in June of this year at \$31,300, putting it into the same territory as the Rover 3500SE, BMW 520i, Peugeot 505 GTI Executive and Ford's LTD. It doesn't need to call itself sporting, merely luxurious.

What we may observe here is a particularly shrewd marketing approach. As recently as early 1983, the company had only two (closely related) model ranges — the 240 and the 260. The cheapest Volvo cost \$17,600 and the dearest \$30,100 (260GLE wagon). But in June 1985 there are three distinct body shapes and quite a variety of models from which to choose. Prices start at around

in rallies, "but so far," he says, "I haven't had the nerve."

Rather surprisingly (to anyone familiar with typical family sedans of the '60s) the car's standard equipment complements, instead of contrasts with, these sporting accoutrements. The front bucket seats have a distinctly rallyable look. And the engine note under acceleration is lusty; when you have a pair of SUs sucking through sports type air filters (albeit with proper paper elements), you must expect some induction roar. OK, so the tacho is an aftermarket item, but it takes a conscious effort to realise this. For the 122S is a zestful kind of car.

The steering lacks the pin sharpness of a good rack and pinion system, so the 122S doesn't steer as well as, say, a Pug 404. But at least there are only 3.7 turns from lock to lock and a pretty respectable 9.75 metre turning circle — 32 feet.

You couldn't call the ride supple, but the worst bumps are cushioned out effectively and the Volvo always feels as rock solid as you would expect so solid-looking a conveyance to feel. Eighteen years haven't softened it.

As for handling, it's hardly state of 1985 art but the car remains chuckable.



gearlever with its long yet precise movements. The seats are impressively comfortable — were they to be retrimmed in fabric they would match or better those of most 1985 cars and, remember, few manufacturers thought about seat design in the 60s — the Big Three still favoured unshaped benches. Everything fits well and works as it was intended to. The car says solidity,

quality, durability, while still managing to say fun as well.

You could extract this one from the garage early on a chill Sunday morning, tune in the elaborate aftermarket (they didn't put such things in cars back then) Alpine stereo, put on your driving gloves and head for the hills. Every time the persistent induction roar interrupted the music, you would laugh inwardly. And you would never want to exchange the quaint gearlever for a T-bar!

it will gather a fair head of steam when urged. Except at parking speeds, the steering is light to the point of being waffly, with very little feel. The surprise comes when you make a U-turn in a street that would embarrass a typical front-drive small car of 1985. The circle is just 8.8 metres (29 feet)! This goes a long way to justifying the necessary 4.25 turns between locks.

Like so many cars of the '60s that put on weight entering the 70s, the evolution of 122S into 144GL meant

couldn't readily lay our hands on one. And then I decided that we might as well try the current version. Volvo evolution is continuous, but much of the car is still as it was half a decade ago. Outwardly, much of the car is still as it was one and a half, nearly two decades ago. Park the nice clean beige '85 alongside the somewhat faded 71

1985 VOLVO 240 GL



The evolution from 144 to 244 (above) is obvious. Improvements in dynamics over the intervening 15 years, however, are not so easily found

1971 Volvo 144GL

Don and Judy Priest's car doesn't have alloy wheels or a fancy steering wheel. Apart from some fading of the paintwork and its retrimmed seats, it's just the way Volvo made it one and a half decades ago.

The GL bit stands for Grand Luxe. In this form, the 144 came with fuel injection, leather upholstery and various other items that distinguished it from the humbler Deluxe model. Like most Volvos of the early '70s that pitted leather upholstery against Aussie UV rays, the Priests' Volvo lost the battle and now has vinyl trim. The seats themselves are comfortable, but the contours of the front buckets do not declare any sporting intentions like those of the 122S. You cannot avoid the impression that this car has been shaped more for comfort than speed.

A manual version was available, but this example features a column automatic, with a slightly perverse shift mechanism. But you get used to it quickly enough. Indeed, you get used to the entire car quickly.

It makes few demands on the driver. Press the accelerator and it accelerates — at a fairly leisurely rate initially, but

less direct steering (to keep the effort down). The later model doesn't turn into corners with such alacrity and always displays more understeer. By 1985 standards, the body roll is unacceptable.

With older Peugeots and Citroens there was always a trade-off for the understeer and body roll. You got a lovely, supple ride. Frankly, the 144GL has a pretty undistinguished ride; it does the job.

What else? Naturally, it feels rock solid. It's comfortable and reasonably space-efficient — the boot is cavernous. Nor can you question its practicality or durability; (at 117,000 miles the engine performs pretty much as new and might go the same distance again). But, yes, those testers were right. Most of the fun has gone.

1985 Volvo 240GL

Does it seem like a huge leap in time from 1971 and 1985? Certainly it's bigger than usual for a WHEELS Time Test. Equally, it's seldom indeed that we would even entertain the idea of featuring two brand new models.

It started out as a logistical problem. We had wanted a late '70s/early '80s 240 series Volvo, but



and you instantly appreciate Volvo's idea of evolution, as well as grasping why the all-new 760 was regarded by its creators as revolutionary.

In the driving, thank goodness, there are obvious advances. But not 14 years worth. Step from an HQ Kingswood into a VK (or even a VB) Commodore and you will know how much the world has changed in the

interim. But the 240GL feels like a refined 144GL with more of the creature comforts expected today.

The first thing you would notice is the much more modern instrument panel (but most of that change actually occurred in 1973). Then there is the longer, more sloping bonnet. The seats are more comfortable, the engine is quieter and there is power steering.

All of this means — and it would have to — that the 1985 car is more competent and enjoyable on the road.

1985 VOLVO 740 GLE



Deliberately different, 740GLE still uses four-cylinder engine, but combines luxury interior with performance that has a sporting touch.

Not only does the 240GL have power steering, but it's a good rack and pinion system that is nicely weighted and requires just 3.5 turns from lock to lock on the same old tight circle. This goes a long way towards masking whatever understeer remains in the handling. It's not inspiring or exciting, but it does feel fail-safe, and you don't have to put up with excessive body roll or loading-up steering.

The ride is better, too, but remains far from current state of the art. A Mitsubishi Magna rides far better and the 240 can't quite match the standard of an XF Falcon.

This particular example is a manual with that rather odd pushbutton "fifth" gear. Work it through the box and the performance is spritely. It's particularly good for a 2.3-litre four propelling a 1300 kg vehicle.

After a full decade of evolution the Volvo 240 has shaken off most of its irritating faults. You can still pick it as a linear descendant of the old 144, but it now performs well, steers nicely and is much more comfortable. More to the point, it still feels as safe as a house, without handling like one.

But Volvo *seems* to pay little attention to the outside world. It's not

true, of course, but if you judged by the cars, you would think Volvo was an insular company. Pleasant as the current 240 is in its own way, it cannot justify its hefty pricetag in a world of Peugeot 505s and (even) Toyota Cressidas. Moreover, the GLE version is into Alfa 90 territory!

Sad it may be, but progress catches up with even the most classic of designs. And there are many who would say that the 240 series Volvo doesn't qualify for classic status.

1985 Volvo 740GLE

After its cheaper stablemate, the 740 cannot feel anything else but advanced. In many ways, of course, it is. There is no longer that railway-carriage feeling imparted by a narrow interior in a tall body. The whole interior treatment is more modern and, indeed, welcoming. The first class seats even hark back in their appearance — though, thankfully, not their trim — to those of the 122S. There is something of a sporting flavour here, even if luxury is the dominant theme.

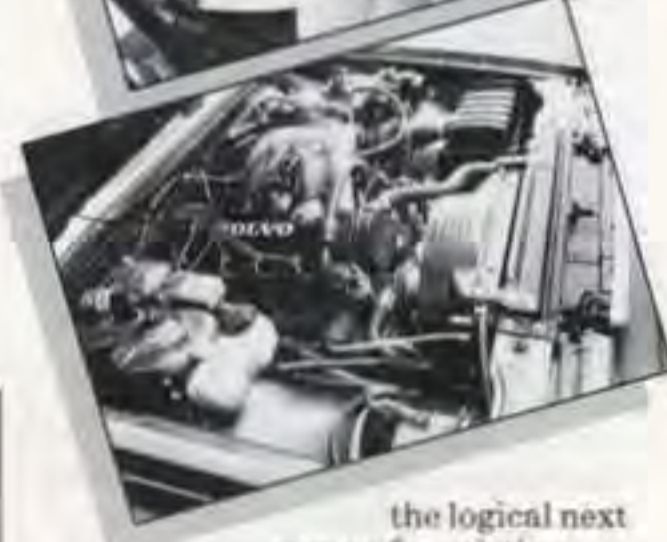
It is a bigger feeling car. Before you even ease it out of the golf club carpark, you know that this 1985-style gentleman's carriage is going to be making heavy demands of the 2.3 litre four-cylinder engine.

The performance is not as sluggish as I had expected. It doesn't compare with the 760's, of course, but you could learn to live with it. Push the 740 hard, as sometimes you will have to, and that familiar throbby, lusty note is there, but rather more muted than on the 240.

Compared with the 240, the 740 feels both more sporting and more supple. It handles *and* rides better. It steers slightly more sharply than the 240, but

not as sharply as its 760 brothers. That is because it is shod with 70-series tyres rather than 60s.

The worry with the 740 is that it always feels like a shortchanged 760. If you've never driven the six, you'll probably find the four just fine. And you could step from a 240 into a 740 and be happy forever. Volvo sees the car as



the logical next step up for existing happy 740 owners and counts on the well established Volvo marque loyalty.

Viewed thus, the Volvo 740GLE makes sense. Certainly it feels at least a decade more advanced in design than even the current 240. But it really is a very substantial motor car to be dependent upon a naturally aspirated 2.3-litre four-cylinder engine.

Conclusion

Shortly after leaving the golf club where Peter Bateman shot these photographs, I saw a somewhat battered yellow Volvo 244GL being driven in the manner that, sadly, far too many Volvos seem to experience. The driver was hitting about 95 in a 60 zone and hustling his steed through corners as fast as he was game to. He made a left turn through a red light. When I caught up with him (at the second red light, where traffic was queued), I confirmed that he was in fact not wearing his seatbelt and that one of his hands was given over to the task of smoking a cigarette.

The point of this story? Volvo has always promoted its cars as safe, and so they are. But they often attract buyers who are not interested either in cars or driving and, for some

unimaginable reason, think that a Volvo will always save them.

Try a spot check on the Volvo sedans and wagons around upmarket Sydney suburbs. Count the unrestrained children in the back. I've done it. I rate 240 series Volvos as the most typically misused cars on the road. They are, in fact, strong cars, but the windscreen of a Volvo is like the windscreen of any other car should an unrestrained passenger hit it.

Volvo, of course, goes to great lengths not only to build safe cars, but to promote safety consciousness. All that safety, however, is predicated upon the occupants being restrained.

During the '80s, Volvo has switched its marketing emphasis somewhat and now argues that its cars are pleasurable to drive. There is every chance that the 700 series cars — being so much more satisfying in their

overall dynamics — will attract people looking for more than just a safe, prestigious, durable mode of transport. Let's hope enthusiasts begin buying Volvos in quantity, as they did in the era of the 122S. □

YEAR/SALES

1960	1	1968	495	1976	6631
1961	17	1969	726	1977	5892
1962	80	1970	1031	1978	5502
1963	85	1971	2007	1979	6138
1964	107	1972	3073	1980	6136
1965	90	1973	4754	1981	6876
1966	187	1974	6400	1982	6078
1967	264	1975	7401	1983	5152
				1984	5485

Since the early '70s, wagons have accounted for an increasing proportion of total Volvo sales, in some years ('78, '79, '80) as much as around 30 per cent.

SPECIFICATION	122S	144GL	240GL	740GLE
Cylinders	four	four	four	four
Engine capacity (cm ³)	1780	1986	2316	2316
Power (kW/rpm)	67/5000	82/5600	96/5400	96/5400
Length (mm)	4445	4642	4790	4785
Wheelbase (mm)	2590	2605	2640	2770
Weight (kg)	1070	1140	1300	1360
Height (mm)	1504	1441	1430	1410
Tyres	165/15	165/15	185/14	185/14
Km/h per 1000 rpm in top	28.8	28.3	46.5	41.7
Price when new	\$3480	\$5395	\$20,990	\$31,300

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