

the Holdsworth Journey

**Richard Holdsworth
Conversions Ltd
1969 - 1995**



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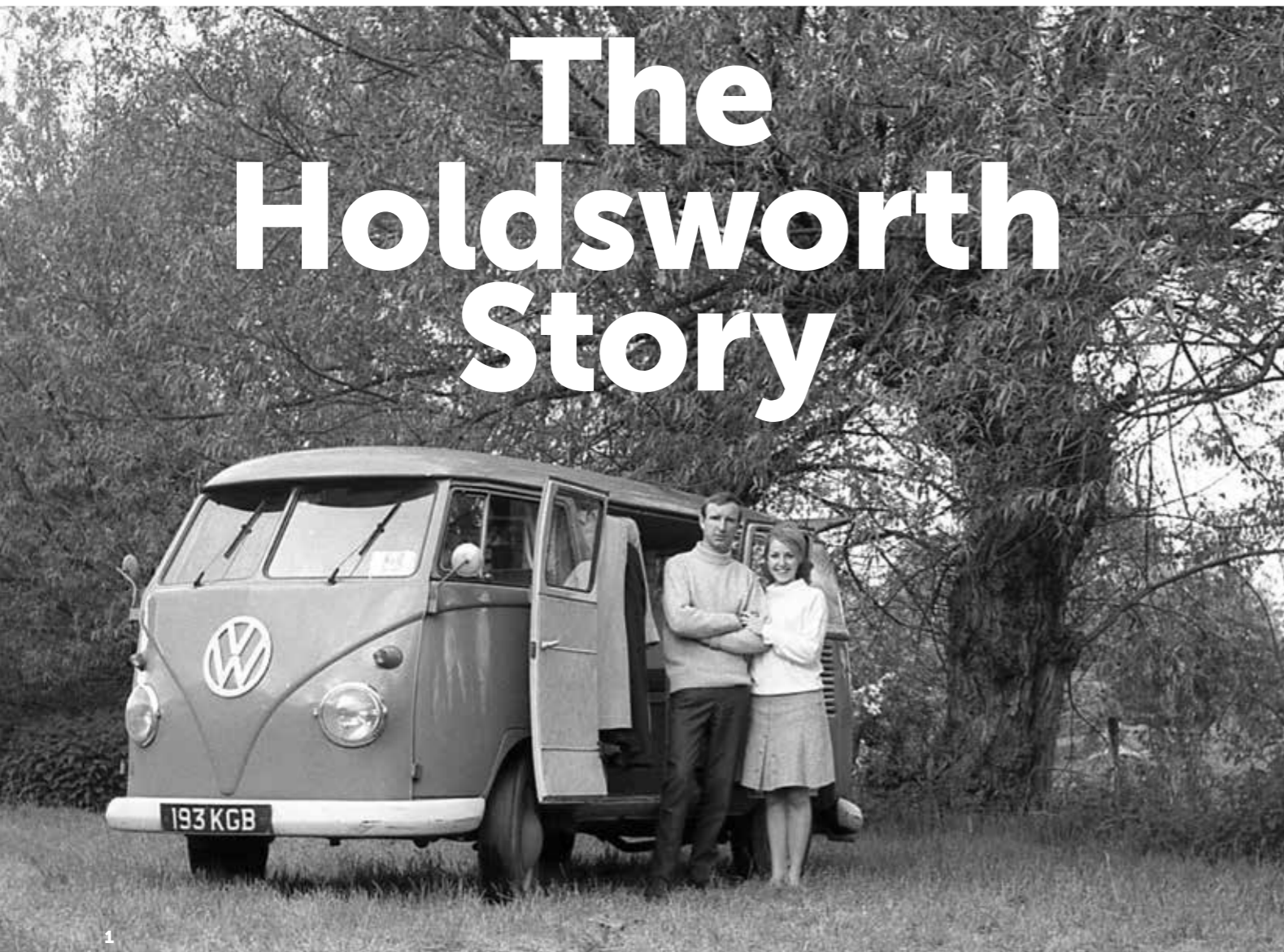
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The Holdsworth Story



Part 1: Boy meets Girl; Couple create Camper

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD HOLDSWORTH

It all started in a lift between floors two and three. In the Herald and Weekly Times newspaper building in Melbourne, Australia. In stepped the future Mrs Heather Holdsworth (little did I know it at the time) and I didn't miss a trick. "Good morning," I said, "nice day isn't it?"

Fact is, it was raining, not a pleasant Melbourne day, but that didn't put us off. We were married within the year and with the proceeds of the sale of my beloved Porsche Speedster, we sailed to the

UK for what should have been a year's honeymoon. Buy a Volksie motor caravan, tour around – Paris, Rome, Madrid, Munich – while I worked as freelance for magazines in Oz and Heather as a part-time temp when we were back in London. But Volksie campers cost a premium – certainly more than we could afford after paying the fares on the ship, the Fairstar, the only way to get from Australia to the UK in those days, and then a hefty deposit on a bed-sit in Clapham. But we came

1: Richard and Heather Holdsworth in the home-made Volksie motor caravan camping for the first time in a Gloucestershire farmer's field, May 1966. This is their honeymoon!

2: Converting the first van outside the bed-sit opposite Clapham Common in 1966 after arriving from Australia in January 1966.

across Colindale Motors on the Edgware Road and a split windscreen Kombi, 193 KGB. Parted with £495, shook hands with the salesman, and back to the forecourt outside the bed-sit. Armed with a saw, plane, screwdriver (anyone remember Green Shield Stamps?) and the first Holdsie camper started to take shape. Heather came back from her day-time job in London and in the evenings sewed the curtains and seat covers. Hey-presto – we were on the road, or more correctly the campsites. The attached picture is of our first night in a Gloucestershire field.

End of story? No fear!

Someone said, "That's a nice conversion you've got there – will you build one for me?" At this time



I was getting fed up with trying to write meaningful articles about the men in Australia House who were supposed to be promoting Australian produce, beef, lamb, fruit, honey etc. Some were good but some simply taking farmers' money and doing little; I knew these farmers and they deserved better. I couldn't turn things around on my own and as there seemed an opening in the Volksie camper business – I did some costings on the back of the proverbial fag-packet and said, "Richard Holdsworth Conversions is born!"

First mistake! I presumed converters such as Devon and Dormobile bought the vans from VW, added the conversion and with the profit from the two would have made a packet. I soon learnt that Volkswagen owned the base vehicles, received a hearty discount on the conversion and sold the finished

motor caravan to the VW dealer. Never mind the figures – I was fired up by the idea. I had not been an academic at Wallingford Grammar, but I did top my class at woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing and my English teacher said, "You could be a writer one day..." What better than putting these skills to good use in the motor caravan conversion business? Next to our little flat was a used-car yard. The wheeler-dealer was sympathetic to my cause; "Clear out the rubbish and you can have the lock-up – a quid a week, two if you want electric..."

KGB 193 progressed at a pace. My father had been a Midland Bank manager in a rural Berkshire village where we had been evacuated and I popped along to my local Clapham branch with my business plan and half an hour later left with an overdraft facility of just £150 – he was



3: The very first advert in the Volkswagen magazine, Safer Motoring, early 1967. The publisher and editor, Bob Wyse, was a good friend of Richard and Heather.

4: First sales material – single sheet and appealing to Aussie buyers.

5: We're in business! This is how it all started way back in 1966. Outside the lock-up garage in Clapham. For two quid, we got electricity thrown in!



6: It's 1968 and we've moved to Ashford, Middlesex and advertising conversions for £145 and kits of furniture £98. The Exchange & Mart, May 30, 1968

a cautious man! I had the bright idea of offering kits of furniture to the people who couldn't afford having their Kombi or Micro Bus fitted out – yes, they had to be windowed VWs as I had no facility for cutting and fitting windows at this stage. I advertised in the Exchange & Mart and in the VW magazine, Safer Motoring – complete interior fitted at £135 - £145 and kits of furniture at just £98 (See pictures) and we got 15 orders in that first summer of 1967. 🐾



Using my experience as a journalist, I had written Press Releases and attached pictures of our van with Heather in her prettiest and sent them off to everyone I could think of. It worked, one actually made into the prestigious Autocar magazine. Talk about punching above our weight, it did wonders for our profile and one sunny day a guy fronted up from a Volkswagen accessory company. He needed furniture kits to add to his catalogue.

The guy and his co-director had

a place in the north but a workshop in Ashford, Middlesex, and offered a corner to me – man, this was luxury compared with the lock-up at Clapham. If I put the van in the lock-up I had to get out – if I went in, the Volksie went out! Now I had space to swing a fret saw, and electricity and use of a phone!

I thanked the wheeler-dealer and moved out to Ashford. Unfortunately, the heaven-sent opening soon turned sour. The directors took two-hour lunch breaks and locked away the



I soon learnt that Volkswagen owned the base vehicles, received a hearty discount on the conversion and sold the finished motor caravan to the VW dealer.



7: Heather shows there's a real wardrobe in the first Holdsworth van. How lucky is Richard he has a wife AND model to help launch their vans!

8: How's this for style. No need to leave the ball-gown behind when you go motor caravanning in a Holdsie van!

9: Sitting pretty. Heather starts a new career in modelling Holdsworth vans. How could we not succeed?!

10: Taking a break. Richard poses with 193 KGB.



phone during that time, then raised the rent, and again! And didn't sell a single kit of furniture. Time to look for the third premises in just 12 months; around the corner was a great little workshop, separate office and a phone! This time I sorted the small print in the contract, beat the rent down and got more concessions from the landlord. It was still more than we could sensibly afford and

we had to sign a five-year lease, but we bit the bullet and moved in. Then recruited our first man, then another then another.

The one good thing the two directors had done was use their contacts at VW and ordered on our behalf one of the new model VWs, a Bay Window Kombi, and we got a good discount. The new VW carried the name Clipper but there was some



11: Kits of furniture helped get the company off the ground. Heather shows a leg and the delights of wielding a hammer.

12: Early morning shave out in the fresh air for Richard Holdsworth touring in the first van.

13: Exploring the English countryside. Richard and Heather lived in the split windscreen van in their first year of motor caravanning.

14: The bay window arrives and with it a colour brochure of the growing business of Richard Holdsworth Conversions. Picture taken just outside Rye in East Sussex.



palaver with Pan Am, the American airline; the rumour was that Pan Am owned the name – it was never used again by VW. Heather took a day off work and we caught the train down to Folkestone, the import centre, to collect our new pride and joy. It drove like a luxury saloon, the soft ride, the precise steering and the rattle of the engine in the old split-windscreen van was replaced by a purr although this was, of course, still air-cooled. But probably the greatest step forward was the sliding door – we had never seen anything like it and engineering friends couldn't leave it alone! The Holdsworth Bay was about to be born! 🍷

Next issue: Developing the Bay models, moving to a new factory and a phone call from VW!

The Holdsworth Story - Part 2

The Bay window models, new premises and a phone call from VW

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD HOLDSWORTH

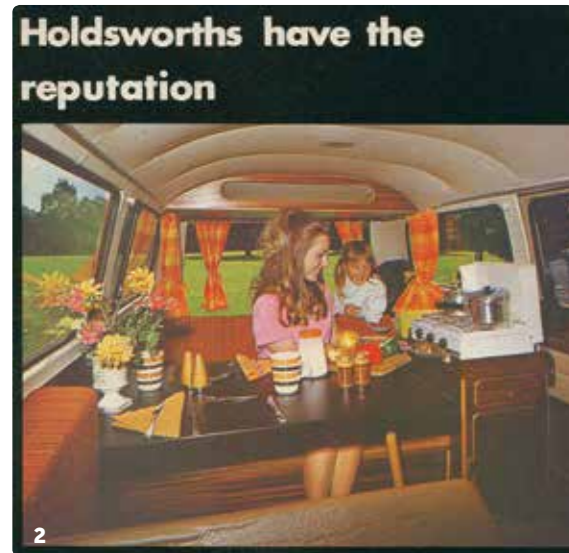
With the new Bay window model came a new design and layout for our furniture, with a two-burner & grill cooker to the left of the side door. We simply named it Layout Two (see pictures) and it was an immediate success. Volkswagen were moving ahead, Richard Holdsworth was too!

We needed an elevating roof, not any old roof and I eyed the concertina-sided elevators on Devons. They must buy hundreds if not thousands, I might be able to order a couple, cash flow meant six at the most. Bring out my persuasive powers and a call to the manufacturers in Birmingham, Weathershields by name. I got them to accept my tiny order, as long as their roofs didn't end up on Holdsworth Volkswagens, Devon had the exclusive rights. Goodness, once again it seemed the dice were stacked against us. We had no choice but design our own roof. A simple enough construction that did the job and expanded the appeal of



Richard Holdsworth Commer and VW. Well finished considering the comparatively low prices. VW from £1,125, Commer £1,067. Interior fittings are available as d-i-y kits.

In those days, there were just three specialist motor caravan dealers.



Holdsworths have the reputation

2

1: A giant step for Richard Holdsworth Conversions, the first public showing at the COLEX exhibition, 1969. Heather took a week off work and helped show our Volkswagens at £1125 and Commer at £1067.

2: Colour photography and brochures helped establish the company, people were starting to take notice.

3: Layout One looks good in colour. And Heather proves it works.

Holdsworth VW motor caravans. You could now stand up in them!

In those days, there were just three specialist motor caravan dealers. Others hadn't cottoned on to the burgeoning market for people wanting to get out and about on holiday! Cheap flights to Benidorm hadn't arrived yet, there was a future in motor caravans and our infant company was keen to capitalise.

The three big dealers were Wilsons of Brixton, Turners of Dulwich and a marvellous character called Charlie Simpson with a prime location on the corner of Edgware Road and the North Circular. I put on my best bib and tucker and went to see Wilsons



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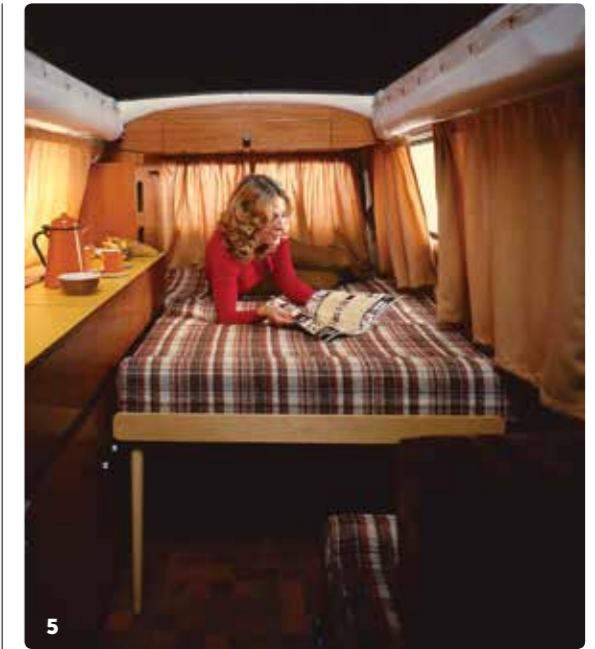
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first. Bill Murrell was the Sales Manager and I must have impressed, as Bill offered me a used Commer van to convert. We devised a layout and my men put it together. Then the finishing touch, the furnishings. In Heather's lunch break (it was another couple of years before we could afford to do without Heather's weekly pay cheque) she found an importer of Scandinavian fabrics and came home that evening with a roll under her arm and burnt the midnight oil making seat cushions and curtains. It looked marvellous.

I went back to Wilsons a week after the finished Holdsworth Commer had been delivered. I expected Bill to shake his head and say, "Can't sell it..." He didn't, the van had sold straight away. The die was cast and a string of used Commer vans started to fill our yard,

but not before Tony Wilson put the hard word on Heather and me over dinner and insisted that Wilsons had sole rights to Holdsworth vans! We declined, of course, but we still got the orders. And a three-course meal, the first since we'd left Australia.

What happened to VW's I hear you ask? Well, Volkswagen had this quaint policy that only VW dealers could sell VW motor caravans. They, VW, were missing out as the buying public wanted to see different vans side-by-side. No Volkswagen, no sale. As a small converter, Richard Holdsworth had no chance of becoming the third official UK Volkswagen converter. I got my foot through the door, just. But was given a firm "NO". It was not surprising, Danbury had it all going for them especially the man behind the name. George Dawson was a charismatic



5

Volkswagen had this quaint policy that only VW dealers could sell VW motor caravans.

4: Rich colours and quality furnishings attracted attention, but not from VW. Private customers brought their vans to Ashford in Middlesex for conversion.

5: Fitting the units down the off-side and a bed over the engine appealed and the Holdsworth Layout Three meant VW sales soared.

6: Layout One gets an elevating roof, you can now stand up!

salesman and Danbury joined Devon and Dormobile. We consoled ourselves by realising we would have over-stretched our tiny operation with a VW contract and just set our sights on being one of Volkswagen's blue-eyed boys some time in the future. Little did we realise just how long we would have to wait. In the meantime, we converted used VW vans for private customers and the occasional new VW "through the back door" when a dealer was brave enough to defy VW and do business with us. But it was mainly Commers that filled our order books and enabled us to forge ahead.

By this time, I had seen Charlie Simpson and we began a friendship that lasted for years. He must have taken sympathy on the young Holdsworth, bright-eyed and bushy tailed and slightly wet behind the ears. Charlie and I shook hands and the second of the "big three" was in the bag. "Send the invoice with each van" said Charlie. "You need the money more than I do". How right he was; starting with so little behind us, cash flow was critical. The first man to join us, a wonderful lad by the name of Dave Fuige had offered to defer his wages to help out and for a while in the early days Heather and I slept in one of our vans in the yard!

The COLEX show was the

important London show of the time. Run by Paddy Malony, the Camping and Outdoor Life Exhibition, held in the draughty old Olympia building had it all. Motor caravans, caravans, tents, trailer tents, camping gear and even bicycles. At one memorable show, my uncle's Holdsworth Cycles rubbed shoulders with our product carrying the Holdsworth name. The picture shows our stand, it was 1969 and we felt we were making real progress.

The Caravan Show, held in Earls Court was a much more prestigious event and Richard Holdsworth Conversions joined the Big Boys and presented a Holdsworth Volkswagen, Commer and our new Bedford CF conversion to an audience of over 100,000.

Nothing is easy in this world and trying to make an impact against the might of Autohomes, Autosleepers, Dormobile et al was not easy. I can remember being over the moon when we made two sales on our first Saturday but the opposition was talking in dozens. We made sales at



7 Earls Court was a much more prestigious event and Richard Holdsworth Conversions joined the Big Boys.

that first Earls Court show and with dealers who weren't already buying from us taking notice, it became clear that we had out-grown our Ashford factory. A stroke of luck came from an unlikely direction, my parents lived in beautiful Berkshire and visiting them one day and I picked up the local paper and there it was. On the old Woodley Aerodrome, a huge hanger and parking space that would surely accommodate a hundred vans. All I had to do was persuade a hard-nosed business consortium to rent

7: You can even cook the Sunday roast in Layout Three from Richard Holdsworth. Heather does!

8: Two-tone paint was popular in the 1980s and the new elevating roof helped. Holdsworth sales increased at a rapid rate.

9: Pretty as a picture! Heather Holdsworth models one of the company's best-selling vans beside the Thames near Henley.

it to two enthusiastic youngsters for their up and coming business.

We arrived at our new factory in November 1972 to a recession! There seemed to be one every few months. May 1973 saw Purchase Tax replaced by VAT and it was applied to motor caravans. And Car Tax hit us too. Inflation was out of control. Miners went on strike, coal supplies dwindled and electricity supply had to be rationed. Ted Heath, the Prime Minister brought in the Three Day Week on December 31st 1973.



9



10

We arrived at our new factory in November 1972 to a recession!

Funnily enough, this all helped Richard Holdsworth Conversions. People still wanted to get away and our kits of furniture allied to our "one day" fitting service for windows and elevating roof, was a winner. Customers came from everywhere. Then I had the bright idea of a Sale Day and this was a hit too. We offered redundant bits and pieces, plus furniture taken from customer's vans when they had their old interiors updated to one of our layouts. Local roads were choked with bargain hunters!

But you can't call yourself a fully-fledged motor caravan manufacturer until a customer chooses one of your new vans above all others and that's where I was determined to go. We developed Bedford, Ford and Leyland Sherpa conversions and in 1977 Ford was the first manufacturer to involve us on the complex matter of strengthening a van once we started to cut holes for windows and roof.

The next step would be getting a vehicle manufacturer to pay for the vehicles in our yard. That is what was offered to the biggest converters. From the beginning I discovered that Volkswagen owned the vehicles and supplied them to the converter,

at no time did they have to fork out for a yard-full of vans. The industry term is Bank Stocking. But while correspondence between Woodley and Milton Keynes, the new VW headquarters in the UK, was polite it never progressed further. They had their three converters and needed no more.

On other fronts, things were moving. Helped by our local Leyland dealer, Penta Motorhomes, we were awarded Bank Stocking on the Sherpa van and chassis cab in 1978. Then, as the UK Press began to get excited about the new Renault Traffic range arriving in the UK, I phoned Renault Head Office in Acton and was put through to John Ogden. "We are talking to leading converters" he said. "You're not talking to me," I replied

With the help of Jim Wilde, a man with an eye for style, who mocked up a card miniature of the L shaped layout, our presentation was successful and we became official converters along with Auto-sleepers and a Bank Stocking agreement was signed. Some time later we were offered the contract to build a range of Renault based mini buses on the Traffic van. 🐾

10: We've moved to the wide-open spaces of the old Woodley aerodrome and business has never been better, the year is 1973.

11: The letter that made all the difference! Volkswagen UK approval and backing at last. The date, 14th February 1984.



11

And then in 1984 came the call we wanted. "It's Volkswagen on the phone" said my secretary. It seemed that Dormobile was getting out of motor caravans and Danbury were in trouble. Anthony Trevelyan, representing Auto-sleepers, had been to see David Abbot at VW's UK head office in Milton Keynes. Trevelyan phoned me that evening. "It all went well for us and will for you, Richard," but warned, "Milton Keynes is like a maze, it's easy to get lost, don't be late." I replied that I had waited for VW for ten years, they could wait ten minutes for me. They did, and we were in - AT LAST!

Next month: Open Days, new safety regulations and the first crash testing

The Holdsworth Story - Part 3

It was 1978 before Lucy had joined our ranks, she was almost immediately put to work as a model in our brochures and was as pretty as a picture – just like her mum!

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD HOLDSWORTH



1

Another initiative was Open Weekend; we advertised it well and my Press Releases always earned excellent coverage. Journalists were kind to us. We invited representatives from our best dealers to the Open Weekend – a new wave of dealers had come into the market – we laid out the factory for inspection, mowed the grass and hoped it wouldn't rain. We displayed at least two models of each van for the general public to pore over and dealers were invited to bring second-hand Holdsworth vans. Balloons, flags and lollipops, said Steve Pike of West Country Motorhomes. A friend sizzled sausages on an open

1: Another bright idea – Open Weekends brought customers en-masse to the Holdsworth factory and dealers sold many vans.

It was 1978 before Lucy had joined our ranks and almost immediately put to work as a model in our brochures and as pretty as a picture – just like her mum!

fire while a couple of ponies gave kids a ride. Dare I say that Richard Holdsworth Open Weekends were the forerunners of all these motor caravan shows up and down the country of today?

But you can do none of this without good staff; when we arrived in Woodley it was a quaint country village and traditional crafts such as coachbuilding, motor trimming and

woodworking kept the community in work. We paid well and had no trouble in recruiting good men. We all worked like stink – even through the Three Day Week when I had risked being banged up for breaking the law! Heather had been with the company for some time by now and ran the accounts department keeping a tight rein on spending. We never had time to add



2

2: VW approval brings Kombi vans flooding into the Holdsworth factory. A sight for sore eyes... how long had we waited.

3: It can snow all day – Heather Holdsworth peeps out to see what VW approval looks like!



3

to the Holdsworth family – if we wanted pictures of children in our brochures, we borrowed them from friends or staff! And Heather was our model from the very beginning – can't beat that. It was 1978 before Lucy had joined our ranks and almost immediately put to work as a model in our brochures and as pretty as a picture – just like her mum! And another “baby” was our computer aimed at costing each van down to the last Farthing. We were the first in the industry to use such technology. Bills of Material became the new by-word in the Holdsworth factory, every assembly and sub-assembly had its own code, a BoM, and these brought a new dimension to costings and the knock-on effect of stock control.

All in the garden seemed roses!



4

4: A little bit of publicity goes a long way!

4: Lucy Holdsworth and friends show off cab dining in the Variety. It was a winner.



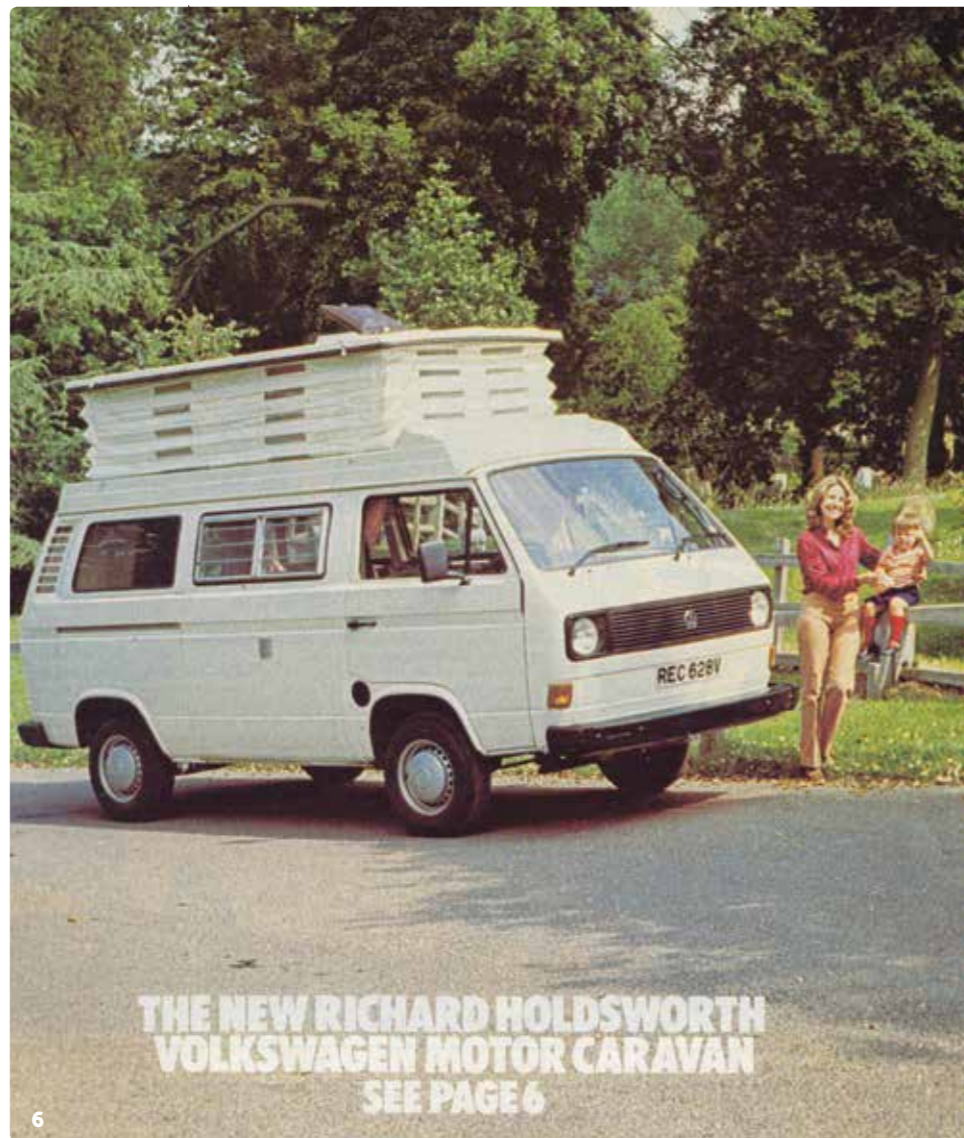
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The annual rent on our vast ex-aircraft hangar had started at just £6400 and although it went up yearly, the increases were manageable despite the fact that the Thames Valley Corridor was becoming ‘High Tec’ and specialist companies were moving in pushing up rents and wages at an alarming rate.

We had always put the customer first with quality as well as style; now well into the 1980's, new buzz words stated to have real meaning.

Product Liability, and manufacturers from coat hooks to complex motor cars were held responsible if anything went wrong and in a motor caravan lots of things could go wrong; law firms started to spring up with the claim, “No win – no fee”. I took this on board in an industry where a number of our competitors gave little heed to where we were all going. The wearing of seat belts in cars became mandatory - how long before motor caravans followed? We started down the road of finding out what would happen to our seats in the event of a front-end impact... Middlesex Polytechnic offered a test in which the seat was hurled down a track and stopped dead as if the vehicle had hit a brick wall. We loaded our seat, two “dummies” and strapped them in with lap belts and then sheltered behind inch thick reinforced glass as we watched in awe – looking back now, it was a pretty elementary test but you have to remember it was over 30 years ago. At least we learnt the steel frame and lap belts attached stood up to the test. A good start.

By now we were well and truly under the “wing” of VW and instruction was sacrosanct. We gathered our staff in our workshops one evening while we watched a VW presentation that brought home our responsibilities; we were to imagine the scenario of our van



“The bang” we were told, “is the force of a tin of beans bursting through a weak cupboard catch and hitting a passenger on the back of the head.”



6: Front cover treatment with a leading motor caravan magazine for the Holdsworth Villa Mk 1.

7: Holdsworth stole a march on the competition with crash tested seats and lap belts. This is the sledge test at Middlesex Polytechnic in 1991.

hitting an immovable object at 30 mph. At that moment a blank from a shotgun was fired – “the bang” we were told, “is the force of a tin of beans bursting through a weak cupboard catch and hitting a passenger on the back of the head.”

Me and my team chewed over the consequences. There was more to come. It would be one thing to use a quality catch (we did) – and similar attention to detail in the rest of the conversion – but we had to demonstrate it was not only one van built in that manner, but the next van and the next... “That’s where the Quality System BS5750 comes in,” our man from VW insisted. “All our approved converters are to work towards that goal...” If I remember rightly, it was a good man, Kevin Varey, at Volkswagen telling us. He was serious!

Next issue: new contracts, new owners and the end of Holdsworth Conversions. 🐾

The Holdsworth Story - Part 4

New standards, new models, new owners and the end of an era

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD HOLDSWORTH



We had scarcely heard of BS5750, it was used in the aircraft industry and hardly applied to us. But the more I researched it, the more I realised it was for us. It is said that BS5750 doesn't guarantee quality, what it does is make sure each product is exactly the same, peas in a pod. In our case, we reckoned we did things right, used quality materials and the BS system would ensure this was 'set in stone'. An enormous task to

1: The Volkswagen high top wasn't the prettiest on the market – but Holdsworth designers made the most of the increased interior space.

document the operation from start to finish and the man to do it was Alan Robins, he had retired from MD of Avon Tyres in Africa and was looking for a challenge. Boy, did we give him one. But, did he do the job! We allocated him an office and he set to work documenting every operation in the Holdsworth factory from the moment a vehicle arrived to the moment it left. As an example; a form numbered BS1 was created to record the arrival of a vehicle in our yard; tool kit, log books, spare wheel,

windscreen wipers, everything was logged along with condition of the vehicle and signed by the delivery driver and counter-signed by Noel Mills, our man designated to receive vehicles at the gate. As the vehicle moved through the various departments in the conversion process, similar forms accompanied the vehicle until it left our care when the last documentation was accepted and signed by the delivery driver. Arguments about missing tools, condition of the vehicle, were banished at a stroke.

When we got the MoD contract to build hundreds of 12-seater mini buses, each interior trim panel had a drawing and accompanying template showing the exact

He set to work documenting every operation in the Holdsworth factory from the moment a vehicle arrived.



2: The Richard Holdsworth High Top Variety had this amazing rear kitchen.
3: The Holdsworth Vision was another adventurous High Top conversion expanding the appeal of the Transporter. Weren't the Holdsworth designers clever lads?!

positioning of each screw so that if a Squaddie threw his kit in the back of a van damaging the panel, a replacement could be despatched knowing that the screw holes would line up. This was carried through every item in every van and of course, it applied to any materials and fittings we used. Plywood, for example, had to be of a certain grade. We used WBP ply, Water Boil Proof, the best for the purpose and that was specified to our buying department. Stores checked that the correct grade was delivered into the factory, nothing less. BS5750 defined the specification of a Holdsworth van and that never varied.

Needless to say, this system was invaluable when we did further crash testing; fittings, bolts, belting, steel, steel welds, all this had to withstand enormous pressures in controlled tests at MIRA, our system ensured that this was the standard from that moment onwards. I

enjoyed a good night's sleep to think that our vans ensured we had done all we could to protect the safety of our users.

It was calculated that bringing in BS5750 into the operation cost us around £100,000. But the pay-off could be enormous and one day it was! Stewart Wright, Fleet Sales Manager at Renault in Acton, was a real go-getter and he realised that the British Military purchased a whole stack of 12 seat mini buses for bases world-wide. The MoD had only bought wheeled vehicles from British suppliers but that didn't put Stewart off. We discussed the idea of tendering, Stewart argued that the Traffic with low floor and front wheel-drive would suit the Military and that our conversions would be an ideal partner; we studied the specification and built prototype vans, sharpened our pencils on price... Renault tendered and we got on with our lives. I'd almost

BS5750 defined the specification of a Holdsworth van and that never varied.



4: The unique Holdsworth solid-sided roof won customers and once again put the company ahead.

5: This is the serious stuff! A "pull" test at the Motor Industry Research Establishment with a Volkswagen "shell" proved that Holdsworth engineers had done their homework.

forgotten about it until Stewart walked into our showroom late one day. Huge smile, hand outstretched, 'We won... We won the contract...!' Heather nipped to the off license and brought back a couple of bottles of bubbly. Mike McCarthy and Alan Robbins, feet on the ground as always, got a rope around the implications. Page after page of the contract specified buses; the contract was for three years with options of two further 12-month periods. The requirement totalled more than 3,400 vehicles with delivery peaking at 100 a week starting in October, just three months away. Until then the best we'd achieved was ten a week! We formed a bus team within the

factory, the men on bonus, with a wonderful man by the name of Ern Wilkinson, Team Leader, and we never let the MoD down once. The MoD was delighted as was Renault. The contract went without a hitch, one year, two years, three and the MoD signalled the fourth in the usual rumbustious celebratory session in a pub with Stewart leading the singing!

And on the back of this I started to look at the German home market for motor caravans; the market was worth some 22,000 sales a year (UK was at the time 5,000) of which 6,000 were Volkswagens. That was attractive, I reckoned technical requirements for Germany would be far greater than for the UK but my interest heightened



Ready to take the strain — bolsters in position, standard seat belts replaced by heavy-duty versions, each chain connected to a hydraulic ram.

6

6: A two-ton pull is about to be applied to the Holdsworth seats and seat belts in this T4 'shell' — all came through with flying colours and the basis for getting into Germany. The year is 1993.



7

The requirement totalled more than 3,400 vehicles with delivery peaking at 100 a week.

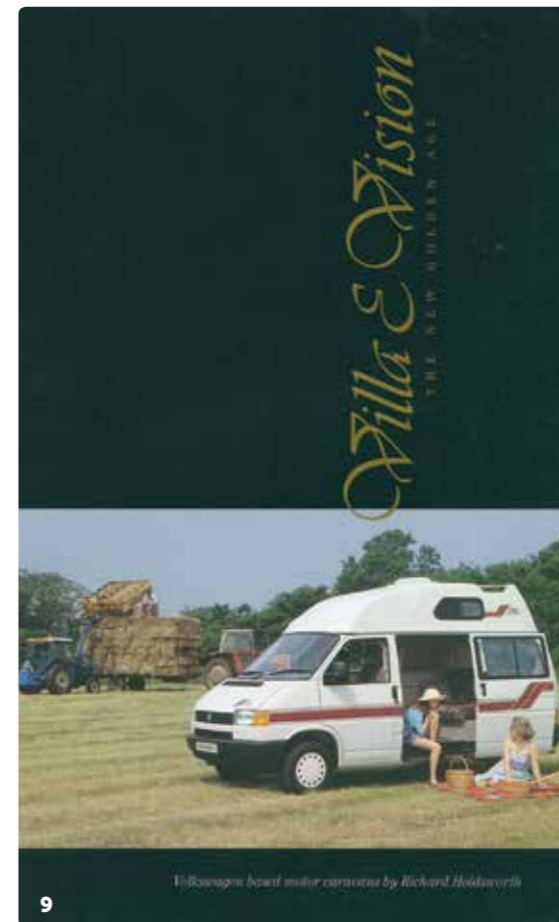
7: The T4 with front-engine arrives and, typically, Holdsworths created an equally forward-looking conversion.

8: The T4 was one-step ahead and called for something special in a motor caravan brochure.

when Volkswagen in Japan chose our range over all others for their market, a market just starting to take off. Our record stood us in good stead and we beat all six German converters and Auto-Sleepers & Autohomes in the UK. A real feather in our caps. And by now we had developed the Valentine coach-built on the T4 chassis. It had great appeal.

I wrote to the appropriate men at Hannover, the home of the Transporter... Nothing! That didn't surprise me, Renault had done the same and VW in the UK. I enlisted the help of Richard Ide, the MD of Volkswagen UK and things started to move forwards. We needed technical approval for Germany (just as I had expected), approval by the German regulatory body the TUV, and a base in Germany from which we could service the vans we sold. To say it was a mountain to climb is an understatement, but one we climbed and by the end of the year we had achieved all three.

In the meantime, tendering for MoD buses had changed, the faceless men in Brussels had a say in how contracts were awarded. Clearly, the fourth and fifth years of the contract were not forgone conclusions. But over the customary



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glass of ale, our man from the MoD assured us that Renault/Holdsworth were secure. 'Nothing's changed, it's business as usual'. It was only a verbal agreement and not worth the paper it's not written on, as my father would say. But Renault UK ordered the first 300 MoD specification vans and I instructed our buying department to fill our stores with 300 sets of seats, windows, floors, trims, head-linings, electrical wiring looms and all the other kit and caboodle that makes up a complex mini bus.

Then disaster! The French government started nuclear testing and the whole world was up in arms, including the British. The bus contract was taken from Renault and awarded to British Leyland. Our cash flow was in tatters, the German enterprise was costly and although we had more than 20 dealers, volume sales were yet to come and our annual rent in Woodley was now in excess of £125,000. Heather & I and our City accountants decided we needed cash and that meant a buyer, enter John Coburn and John

9: Stylish brochures for Richard Holdsworth were always regarded as the best in the industry. They helped get the nod of approval with buyers.

10: The compact Valentine coachbuilt arrived on the scene. It was a winner on both sides of the Channel.



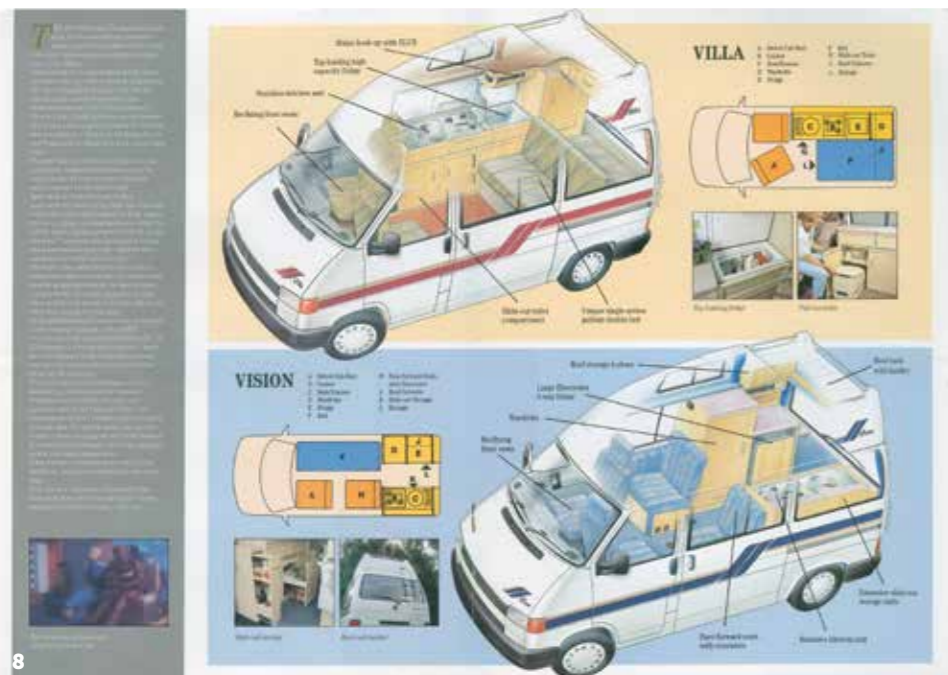
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Disaster! The French government started nuclear testing and the whole world was up in arms.

11: You'll have little clout in Germany if your brochures, sales material and adverts are not in their language.

Weller. We smiled, they smiled. But who was going to run Richard Holdsworth Conversions? 'You, of course', they said. Three months later, on Christmas Eve, they sacked Heather and I. 'We don't need you anymore'. And after just one more showing at the major German show at Dusseldorf, they pulled the plug on the German operation. Then stripped the Woodley factory and moved everything north to Autocruise which they had taken an interest in.

All our staff were dismissed. Richard Holdsworth Conversions was no more!



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Holdsworth vans are still very much alive and kicking as will be seen in the pages of Volkswagen Camper & Commercial magazine and there's a small but thriving Holdsworth Owners' Club. Anyone, who owns a Holdsworth van or has owned one, is welcome to join. Contact Penny Cox E-mail, pennycox61@btinternet.com

