

Karmann – A Short

Karmann GMBH, of Osnabrück, West Germany, is much more than the Volkswagen "Special Vehicles Division". It is an independent company with a proud history stretching back nearly 120 years. Today, as in the past, they are makers of fine automobile bodies for a number of European manufacturers, and of the tools, dies and parts for many others.



Wilhelm Karmann



Wilhelm at the wheel

In 1901 Wilhelm Karmann purchased Klases, a coach – building firm established in 1874, and immediately renamed it, after himself. Car body building began the next year and soon production was converted entirely to motor bodies. By the outbreak of World War 1, Karmann were making bodies for Opel, Minerva and F.N. A great proportion of these were convertibles. Such cars are never in large demand in times of war, and so further growth was naturally slow until the postwar German economy stabilised in 1921. In this year a large order was received from the AGA motor company, which required an expansion of the plant. Throughout the twenties the firm became more successful as each year passed, as other car manufacturers engaged Karmann to build bodies for them.

Wilhelm Karmann, like many other German industrialists of the time, travelled to the United States to inspect and learn the latest methods of production. Until this time, Karmann bodies were built in the old fashioned way by covering a wooden framework with a sheet steel.

The great depression of 1929 sent most of Karmann's customers to the wall, but the company was saved by a business relationship with the Alder motor company. Alder convertibles of this period

were renowned for their beautifully made leak-proof roofs. In 1931, Karmann began to build Model A convertibles for Ford. (It is interesting to have recently read in the motoring press that Ford Aust. Approached "...a West German specialist..." when it had a problem with water leaks during design of it's Capri's top.)



Pre-war Karmann convertible

By World war 2 the plant employed over 600 people. Little is known about what the factory produced during the war, but as it was almost totally destroyed by Allied bombing, one can only assume that it was armaments. The newly completed KDF plant at Wolfsburg made everything from stoves to aircraft sections to V1 flying bombs, so things were probably a little different at Osnabrück.

After the war, events were again similar to those at Wolfsburg. The British occupied what was left of the plant for use as a repair unit. Rebuilding was slow as demand for special bodied motor vehicles was again non-existent. Tools, dies and body sections for utilitarian vehicles became the company forte until Volkswagen entered the story in 1948. This still represents a third of the company's turnover, with tooling having been supplied at one time or another to many European



Hebmuller production before the fire destroyed the factory

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manufacturers, including VW, Mercedes – Benz, Renault, Ford (Europe and US), BMW, Saab and British Leyland.



Hebmuller Beetle two seater Cabrio model

In 1948 the Hebmuller and Karmann companies were each engaged by Volkswagen to construct open top cars based on the Beetle, Hebmuller a two seater and Karmann a four seater. Volkswagen approved both prototypes and ordered 2000 Hebmullers and 1000 Karmann cabriolets. From these figures, Hebmuller was expected to be the bigger seller but, as is well known, a fire destroyed the Hebmuller factory only a month after production began in 1949. Only about 700 were completed with the factory struggling to rebuild on the payout from its inadequate insurance. At least a dozen Hebmullers were known to have been completed by Karmann after Hebmuller finally succumbed to bankruptcy in 1952!

The Karmann design fared much better. Production began in September 1949 on the brand new 'Export' Beetle chassis. The first order was filled by 1950, and VW ordered more. 10,000 were produced by August 1950 and the car's place in an expanding VW range was now secure. 1949 cabriolets are considered rarer than 1949 Hebmullers.

The Karmann Beetle cabriolet used the chassis, nose section, fenders and front and rear lids supplied by Wolfsburg with the rest being fabricated by Karmann. The reinforcement rails required due to the lack of a turret section were incorporated into the body below the heater channels. They were not part of the chassis. The cars were largely hand made and it has been said that no two were exactly the same, in that the body was built in two halves, a front and a rear, manoeuvring each on the floor pan to achieve the best floor gap before welding the two halves of the body together.



1956 model

As the beetle evolved, so did the convertible. It was considered dearer than the sedan and was always a 'de-luxe' model with the most powerful engine in the range. About 330,000 were made until the model was discontinued on the 10th January 1980, the last of the Beetle models to be produced in Germany. The production figure represents the most number of convertibles of any one type made by any company.



last model Karmann beetle to roll off the production line in 1980 was the 1303 version

Wilhelm Karmann died in 1952 at the age of 88 and was succeeded by his son Wilhelm Jnr. The younger Karmann, a highly qualified engineer, was good friends with an Italian by the name of Luigi Segre, who was the owner and chief stylist of Carrozzeria Ghia of Turin. Volkswagen had earlier asked Karmann to design a sports car on the Beetle chassis, but had rejected some of the prototypes put to them.

Wilhelm had casually mentioned this to Segre, who had some ideas of his own. Without the knowledge of either Karmann or Volkswagen, Segre procured a standard Beetle, removed its body and built on it a design study, it was shown to a surprised Wilhelm Karmann a year later in 1953.

Karmann arranged for Dr. Nordhoff and his vice president Dr. Feuereisen to inspect the car. Both were highly impressed and production prototypes were soon ordered and built. The chassis had to be widened at the front on the four or five test cars and this feature carried over into the production version. The car was launched in mid 1955 and was an instant world sensation! The Karmann Ghia was born.



Early Karmann Beetle production model – note one piece side windows and semaphore indicators



Karmann Ghia coupe and convertible

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continued

The Karmann Ghia, while certainly not the first small two door coupe, popularised the body style. Soon there were the inevitable imitators. One has only to look at such cars as the Renault Floride/ Garavelle coupe and convertible of the late 50's and early 60's to see evidence of this. This car was another rear engine, swing axle design. It had evolved from the original 4cv 750 Renault, a prototype of which Dr. Porsche was said to at least have 'advised' on when he was a prisoner of the French after the war.

During the initial period of Karmann Ghia production, Karmann GMBH surprisingly had no presses large enough to bend the sections for the Ghia body. The body was therefore hand welded from many smaller pieces. Anyone who has done a bare metal restoration, even on a late Ghia will tell you that there are welds in some very unlikely places.

The lower frontal area of the coupe enabled the heavier car to reach a higher top speed more economical than a 36hp Beetle, but acceleration was even slower! A Wolfsburg in chic clothing? The convertible version, which followed in 1956 was an in-house modification of the coupe design. These earlier coupes and convertibles are very beautiful cars, and very, very rare.

The Karmann Ghia range was face lifted in 1958. The 'nostrils' were re-shaped and the tail lights enlarged. The headlights were also raised slightly and right hand drive models were introduced. From now on, the range was slightly more 'mass produced'.

The Ghia received chassis and engine improvements in line with the Beetle until it was discontinued in 1975, looking hardly any different to the 1958 version. Its place on the production floor at Osnabrück was taken by the Scirocco after about 283,000 coupes and 81,000 cabriolets were built.

The Karmann Ghia version of the Type 3 – nicknamed the 'Razor Edge'

The Karmann Ghia version of the Type 3 was built from 1961. The styling is loved by some but hated by others. Let's just say that it does not have the universal appeal of the Type 1 cars. They were however, fine motor cars with very respectable performance for a car of this time. The model evolved alongside the other Type 3 models until 1969, when it achieved the dubious honour of becoming the first model to be dropped from the VW range.



Beetle Cabrio and Porsche 356 being assembled alongside each other at Karmann factory - Osnabruck during the early sixties.

Only 42,000 were ever made. The Porsche/VW 914 took the place of the Type 3 Ghia on the line at Karmann.



The mid-mounted engine layout offers an almost ideal weight distribution. This two-seater with the pop up headlights and the removable plastic roof was in special demand on the US market.



Beetle based Karmann built Brazilian market sports coupe named the 'SP2'

Throughout the 60's and 70's Karmann put many proposals to VW for a Ghia replacement, but none saw the light of day. Some of these cars were extremely good looking cars, such as the Ital – designed Cheetah of 1971. The Ghia company had become part of the Ford empire by the late 70's. The Golf and the Scirocco were styled by Ital Design, but the Golf convertible was an in-house Karmann modification of the Sedan.

Over its long history, Karmann has not only built sedans, coupés and convertibles, but has also made a name for itself as a supplier of ideas. A whole series of prototypes were brought out between 1961 and 1970.



1974, the Scirocco was a milestone in the history of Volkswagen. This was the first time that VW produced a car with front wheel drive and a side-mounted four-cylinder engine at the front.



In 1960, Karmann established a branch factory in Brazil, at Sao Bernardo do Campo. At first assembling the Type 1 Ghia coupe from CKD kits from Germany, this plant later produced models of their own design. These were known as the TC Karmann Ghia.



Karmann built Brazilian market Type 3 - named the 'Brazileira'



1979, the Golf convertible with the very noticeable roll bar appears on the market as the successor to the Beetle convertible. It was to become the most successful convertible in the world.

There is little doubt that the Golf cabriolet will become a classic. Every other VW with that little black badge on the side has! Although their products are rare in this country, Karmann built Volkswagens represent one of the few things life has to offer that is at once a great investment and loads of fun!

Other notable projects that Karmann have been involved with in more recent years are as follows:-



1961, the first examples of the Porsche 356 B were built with a removable roof that

was later replaced by a welded-in hardtop. The flat-four engine was mounted in the rear.



1968, in addition to the production and development of complete cars or components, the production of jigs

and fixtures and tools and dies becomes increasingly important. Thus Karmann supplies press tools for the Triumph 2000 sedan and the unforgettable TR6 roadster.



1966, Karmann produces Porsche bodies for the 911 and the 912

version, which at first glance is almost identical to the 911. But compared to the 911 with its mighty six-cylinder engine, the 912 had the more modest 90 HP 1600 cc four-cylinder engine of the Porsche 356 C mounted at the rear.



1983, the Ford Escort convertible was the result of joint styling and development

work by Karmann and Giorgio Giugiaro. On request there was a top that could be raised and lowered electrically.



1988, Karmann transformed the luxury Jaguar XJS coupé into a

high-class convertible and supplied tools for the pressed parts and a complete body in white production line after pilot production in Osnabrück.



1995, the new Mercedes SLK "Retractable Hardtop" – developed by

Karmann changed the Coupé into a convertible by the push of a button.



2001, the Mercedes convertible concept vehicle – introduced in March 2001 at the Geneva Car Show.



The basic vehicle is the C class sport coupé presented in Paris in the Autumn

of 2000, out of which a sporty convertible was created in Osnabrück.



In March 2003 Renault presented the convertible version of the Mégane at the

International Motor Show in Geneva. The open variant of the "Car of the Year 2003" was equipped with a retractable hard top developed and produced by Karmann.



At the Geneva Motor Show the new Mercedes-Benz CLK Convertible, developed and

built by Karmann, will celebrate its world debut. Resembling the lines of the coupé, it combines fascinated styling with high quality technology.

Developed by Karmann in Osnabrück, produced by Volkswagen in Mexico – the New Beetle Convertible. Karmann-Ghia de Mexico currently produces soft tops as well as the mechanism and delivers these components to Volkswagen de Mexico.



VW New Beetle Convertible