

# The LAST of the BEETLE CABRIOS



**Chris Barber's report from the Karmann Works at Osnabruck**

(original Article dated 1980)

*As has become known throughout the world, at the end of 1979 the last Beetle Convertible left the production line at Wilhelm Karmann GmbH, at Osnabruck in West Germany. It is indeed an historic event; the production of this model had been continuous since its introduction in 1949 – one model produced for almost 31 years! What better time then, to visit the factory, the 'Mecca' of all Cabrio fans, than to see one of the last days' production in November 1979?*

As soon as the party, some 35 people, assembled in the reception hall, Wolfgang Kornmesser, a member of the press department of the company gave a brief run-down of the firm. Started in 1874, Wilhelm Karmann Sen took over the firm in 1901. In those days just 8 employees built carriages. One year later, however the first automobile body was constructed, using, of course, the same technology as before, namely wooden bodies, built up on chassis, allowing individual customers quite a wide choice of styles. Gradually, however, as the name Karmann became known, the car manufacturers ordered direct from the firm, which tended to produce standard models. In the 1920's, a visit to the US by Wilhelm Karmann persuaded him that newer ideas were needed to compete with foreign products, and so the 'semi-steel body' was introduced, allowing an increase in production, a reduction in costs, the start of true series production. The wooden frames were covered with steel sheet, giving rise to the name 'semi-steel'. The then new technology of cellulose spraying was also introduced.

After the German financial problems at the end of the 20's, which meant financial collapse of many manufacturers, Karmann worked closely with the Adler factory in Frankfurt, producing bodies for the Primus and the Trumpf models in particular. In the early 30's, in order to go over to bodies of pure steel, the moving conveyor belt was introduced at the factory and production climbed to 65 units per day by 1939. The war soon brought everything to a halt from the commercial side however.

After the war the restart was difficult, with small orders from Hanomag, Bussing and

Ford. It was in 1949, however, that the VW side of the story becomes interesting, because the Karmann firm presented the beetle Convertible for the first time, and promptly received an order for 1000 cars from Herr Nordorf the VW boss. This marked the beginning of a long fruitful relationship which continues until today, and will continue into the future, thanks to the Golf, Cabrio and Scirocco.

Apart from continuing to produce bodies for other manufacturers (in particular Ford delivery vans and Auto Union Convertibles) the Wilhelm Karmann company were busy with VW products. In 1955 they introduced the famous Karmann Ghia Coupe, followed two years later by the Karmann Ghia Convertible. Both models were slightly updated in 1959, but until the end of the production run (1974) these cars represented a classic beauty which has seldom been equalled.

In 1961, with the introduction of the Type 3 VW the VW 1500, in those days) Karmann showed a new model, the 'large' Karmann Ghia, the so called razor-edge model, which was produced with various power units until 1969. Also in '61 Karmann made their first bodies for the Porsche concern. Other bodies followed during the 1960's including the MW 2000 CS and the AMC Javelin assembly.

At the end of the decade, the VW Porsche 914 bodies were also produced at Osnabruck.

In the seventies, the replacement for the Karmann Ghia model was to be the Scirocco, and it seemed a good idea at the time that Karmann should produce this model. However the production figures since the introduction of that model have been so large (presently 360 per day) that the capacity of the relatively small plant is stretched!

Due to many factors (costs, passive safety, exhaust cleanliness etc) it became inevitable that the Beetle Cabrio would have to be stopped. In fact, Karmann themselves would be prepared to continue production, but Volkswagen say no; it would be too expensive and too complicated to bring it up to a saleable product throughout the 80's. But, thankfully VW and ~Karmann have got together, and are offering the Golf/Cabrio. Production of the Golf version started about April 1979, and of the Rabbit (only for the US market) in October.



*Much of the preparation is done with hand tools by skilled craftsmen. Here is a rear quarter panel.*



*The front ends await their screen pillars.*



*Meanwhile, the rear ends are built up on jigs.*



*The two ends are joined and await the wings before painting begins.*



*In a workshop a few hundred yards away, skilled craftsmen are constructing the folding roof on a jig.*



*The painted bodies receive their roofs.*



*Frames, complete with running gear, approach the bodies.*



*The great Coming Together! Skilled hands are needed to make a perfect match.*



*The final assembly line. These U.S. Spec. models have different headlamps, bumpers, front flashers and a slotted apron for air conditioning.*

At the date of our visit, the production by the 7000 employees per day was:

Scirocco 3	60
Beetle Cabrio	80
Golf/Rabbit Cabrio	50

Plus the BMW 600 series. After the new year, the Golf/Rabbit should replace the lost Beetle production.

One interesting aspect is that one half of the Karmann turnover is achieved as a manufacturer of presses and machine tools. Indeed, every European automobile manufacturer uses such machines from Karmann. While we were there, we saw huge copying machines, which can trace out a mock up (in 3 dimensions!), and produce a huge metal press. Some of the press shapes look suspiciously like parts for new Sciroccos!

For those present, though, there was one clear climax to the visit: it was the production line of the Cabrio Beetle itself! Nearly all the parts had been in storage. Indeed, it looked as if Volkswagenwerk, on stopping the production of the 1303 'Super Beetle' in July 1975, manufactured enough VW parts (McPherson suspension, dash boards, front lids etc) to keep Karmann busy until the end of 1979!

The engines for the new Cabrios come still from the Hannover VW plant, as they have for the past 20 odd years. Interesting for us the carburettor engines all got onto non US chassis, the later taking only injection engines. In fact, the chassis building is just about the same as that in Wolfsburg, until they stopped the Beetle production there. The main difference is, of course, in the body. Now we know just why the Cabrio has been so expensive: there is a great deal of hand work in it. There also seem to be checks at each stage of production, welding the rear section together, then the front, then joining the two together, mounting the wings, the doors, front and rear lids etc. The amount of effort put into making it perfect is considerable!

Before the parts are all screwed together the paint process takes place, also with great care, dunking the complete bodies into protection baths, charging it electrostatically, primer, and then the final top coat, applied by hand. (That could not, unfortunately, be looked at, as the risk of fire, dust etc are too great.)

The final production, lowering the body onto the chassis is followed by fitting of seats, trim, glass and the all-important folding roof, is all hand work. Incidentally, we were allowed a look into the department where the roofs are made, the upholstery shop. Here teams of craftsmen, (many in the firm since the beginning of the beetle Cabrio!) construct the 5 layers of roofing material painstakingly over the metal frames. There is no rear window in the roof at this stage, this is cut in at a later stage.

At the end of the production, each car has to undergo two inspection processes. Firstly the Karmann inspectors have to give their final stamp of approval, after which comes, possibly, an even stricter test: a team of VW inspectors has to pass the car as A1. Such are the high standards at Osnabruck, that there is an extra final production belt, just for cars which have failed one of the inspections!

By the time that we got to the final process, at the end of the assembly, the visitors were fairly drooling at the sight of these lovely cars. The two most popular colours black and white, where interspersed with silver, blue, yellow etc. Although the German models had been stopped in July, there were Cabrios for other European markets mixed up with those for America, these still have front flashers on top on the wings and the telescopic bumpers. It was a sight that the Cabrio fans will not see again: 31st December was the final date for the production stop. But memory will surely remain forever.

