

# When Volvo boxed clever

How to make a splash on your entry to the BTCC...

Volvo chose to enter an estate 20 years ago, but

whose idea was it? **GARY WATKINS** investigates



52

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**S**urely it was some kind of joke... The idea that anyone would choose to run an estate in the highly competitive world of the British Touring Car Championship seemed preposterous in the extreme. The fact that the late Tom Walkinshaw was behind Volvo's entry with the unconventional body shape 20 years ago only fuelled speculation that it was a wind-up.

The possibility that TWR would run an 850 estate was talked about the moment the stories of Volvo's return to top-flight touring car racing broke in October 1993. The programme was launched with an estate show car – though there was also a saloon present around the back – at the Stockholm motor show in February 1994, and it was definitively stated at the Geneva show in March that the Swedish manufacturer would be racing the 'shooting brake'. Yet the most cynical of doubters still didn't believe that TWR wouldn't be racing a saloon when the first car rolled off the truck at the BTCC opener at Thruxton in April.

Their suspicions were heightened when they looked through the grill of the first car that appeared and couldn't see an engine! Only when

the bonnet came up and they saw that there was an engine in there – mounted right up against the front bulkhead – did they believe that an estate car would be taking on the massed saloons from Vauxhall, Ford, BMW, Alfa Romeo *et al*.

The ever-mischievous Walkinshaw and Volvo were happy to play up to this attitude. AUTOSPORT ran a story after Stockholm headlined "We'll run most competitive car", but the reality is that the programme had been conceived with the estate as the vehicle of choice.

Martin Rybeck, the board member in charge of motorsport at Volvo, reckons there was a deliberate ploy to "keep people guessing". The estate idea was about maximising publicity during a season when, in all likelihood, the Volvos wouldn't be making headlines with their results, so the 'will-they-won't-they?' stories were the perfect lead-in.

Yet who came up with the idea to go racing with an estate isn't entirely clear. Andy Morrison, one of Walkinshaw's able and trusted subalterns, reckons the idea was part of his pitch to Rybeck.

"It was a cold call: I didn't know him and he didn't know me," explains Morrison. "We said we could help them with their image and wouldn't it be a wonderful idea if... I think

that caught their imagination."

Rybeck reckons it was the other way around and in fact he contacted TWR through Walkinshaw, and that an estate in year one was already in his plans. This version of events is lent credibility by the existence of a test car, commissioned by Volvo, that was already up and running during the early phase of the negotiations between TWR and Volvo. This car, produced by Steffanson Automotive, was built up around an estate shell.

"We wanted to produce our own car to see if the idea could work," says Rybeck, who dismisses the rumour that the Steffanson car was an estate because that was the only bodyshell available at the time. "We'd already done windtunnel testing with an estate before we built it."

The existence of this car was sprung on TWR during one of the early meetings between the prospective partners in July, a couple of months after contact was made. "They said you must come to our test track, which was in the middle of a forest somewhere," recalls Morrison. "This red estate car appeared that we knew nothing about."

That was the first surprise. The next was the suggestion that Walkinshaw drive it. "Tom was looking at me and I was looking at him, and I could



Volvo test car  
came as a surprise  
to Walkinshaw

tell that he did not want to get in the car," says Morrison. "I told him to get in and keep smiling."

Richard Owen, who would subsequently design the Volvo estate Super Tourer, remembers what turned out to be a very short run. "I was standing there with Ross Brawn [brought along as a heavy-hitter]," recalls Owen. "Off Tom went and he seemed to be gone a long time. Just as I'd said to Ross, 'This must be a long lap,' the car reappeared and looked a funny shape. As it got closer, we could see the driver's door was open and the bonnet was folded over the roof."

The bonnet had pulled out of its pins approaching 125mph, showering its driver — sans helmet and wearing an Armani suit — with glass!

A contract between Volvo and TWR didn't follow for another couple of months. Part of the reason was opposition Rybeck faced from other Volvo board members to working with a company that it had faced in the old European series in the 1980s. The battles — both on and off the racetrack — between Volvo's Belgian RAS Sport team and TWR's Jaguar and Rover squads were still fresh in the minds of some of the old guard.

"Do you remember the sticker on the bumper of the Jaguar XJSs?" asks Rybeck. "It said, 'Real men ▶



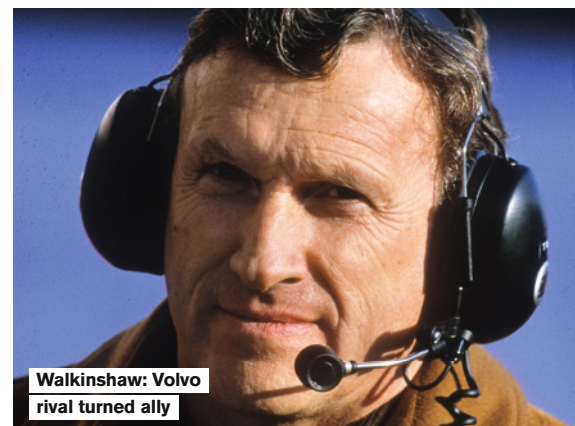
Lammers found the estate odd to drive



Rydell says direction change was one of the car's weaknesses



The 850 SE/GLT rarely ran with the BTCC big boys



Walkinshaw: Volvo rival turned ally

# “I said to Tom, ‘Why not the estate?’ I thought he was going to throw me out of the plane!”

TWR'S ANDY KING

► don't drive Volvos'. There were lots of people at Volvo who weren't supportive of the idea.”

The contract was finally signed on September 7, though the idea of running an estate wasn't entirely popular among the engineers charged with designing the car. Rybeck even suggests that Walkinshaw was against the idea initially.

That's backed up by a story told by TWR marketing man Andy King. “On the trip back from Sweden that time, I remember saying to Tom, ‘Why not the estate? It would make sense from a marketing perspective.’ It was one of those things you said after taking a deep breath. I thought he was going to throw me out of the plane!”

Yet the idea of running an estate wasn't as silly as it sounded in an era when aerodynamics had yet to become – not for a few months anyway – a significant factor. “What manufacturers don't advertise is that road cars produce lift,” explains Owen. “The estate produced marginally less than the saloon. I've always been big on centre of gravity, but running a bit more steelwork higher up and further aft was a disadvantage offset by the better aero figures of the estate.”

The estate – the Volvo 850 SE/GLT to give it its correct name – didn't prove to be a success on

the racetrack in the hands of Rickard Rydell and Jan Lammers in 1994. The design period was short and the car was late. It didn't run until a week before the Thruxton opener, its shakedown taking place on Walkinshaw's drive at Broadstone Manor.

“We drove it from his house down to the front gate and back,” recalls Rydell. “Jan drove it up and down and was not sure about it. He said, ‘This is a bit strange, maybe you should try it.’”

The car tested for the first time at Snetterton on the Monday and Tuesday ahead of the first race, but its weird characteristics were all too apparent around the fast sweeps of Thruxton. “You couldn't stay at the edge of the track; you had to be one metre inside because the car would suddenly jump to the left or to the right either on the bumps or when you were accelerating,” continues Rydell.

The car did improve, but was never truly competitive, notching up a best result of fifth – one each for Rydell and Lammers.

“The car was quite slow in terms of change of direction,” explains Rydell. “It was OK if you only turned once, but in a chicane where you had to change one way and then another it wasn't good. The rear didn't really want to follow the front.”

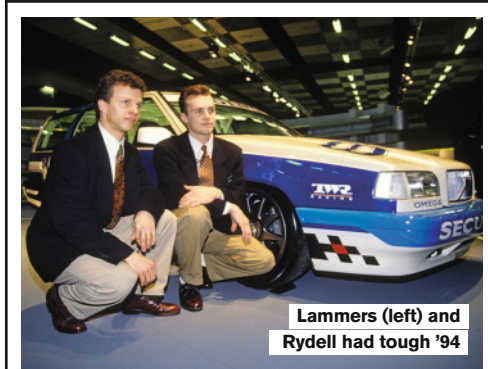
That characteristic explains why the Volvo

estate was at its most competitive at Snetterton in May. Rydell qualified third at a circuit largely made up of fast, flowing corners that didn't penalise the cumbersome estate. A problem starting the car ahead of the green-flag lap meant Rydell wasn't able to capitalise on his qualifying performance.

Everyone insists the estate was also going to be a one-year wonder, though any chance of the quirky body shape being carried over into year two disappeared courtesy of a change in regulations that followed the introduction of Alfa's bewinged 155TS Silverstone. The FIA freed up the aerodynamics for the following season, allowing everyone a rear wing within certain constraints.

“The rules said that the rear wing had to be within the profile of the car and not visible from the front,” recalls John Gentry, who took technical charge of the project on Owen's departure early in the season. “It had to be below the roofline, ahead of the rear bumper, so it left us nowhere to put the wing. If ever there was a thought of sticking with the estate, that effectively took it out of our hands.”

An estate did run with aerodynamic appendages after the end of the 1994 season, though you wouldn't have known it looking at the car. To get a head start developing its 1995 contender, TWR



**VOLVO'S 1994 BTCC RESULTS**

TRACK	RYDELL	LAMMERS
Thruxton	15	R
Brands Hatch	22	12
Brands Hatch	15	16
Snetterton	R	11
Silverstone	19	R
Silverstone	13	16
Oulton Park	5	13
Donington Park	11	14
Donington Park	R	15
Brands Hatch	10	7
Brands Hatch	8	16
Silverstone	8	12
Knockhill	6	R
Knockhill	10	12
Oulton Park	R	7
Brands Hatch	15	9
Brands Hatch	8	5
Silverstone	10	16
Silverstone	12	17
Donington Park	10	13
Donington Park	12	16
<b>POINTS</b>	<b>27 (14TH)</b>	<b>18 (15TH)</b>

commissioned XJ Engineering, which built the early Volvo shells, to convert one of the estates.

"We got them to modify an estate by chopping the back off it," recalls Gentry. "And you couldn't tell that the shell started life as an estate."

The saloon was, says Rydell, "a much more together car". The Swede took no fewer than 13 poles over the course of 1995, but ultimately fell short in the championship race and ended up third. Rydell reckons that the Volvo's use of Dunlop tyres, which didn't have the consistency of their rivals' Michelins, was the major factor.

Volvo did go on to win the BTCC in 1998 with Rydell and the second iteration of the car that would replace the 850, the smaller and more nimble S40, but the success of TWR's link-up with Volvo shouldn't only be measured on the racetrack. TWR formed a joint-venture company with the Swedish firm to develop and manufacture an entirely new sporting model. AutoNova, in which TWR had a 51 per cent stake, produced the C70 coupe and cabriolets at a new factory.

Other motorsport projects were considered too. Morrison reveals that a programme in the growing sport of truck racing was considered, and there was a proposal for an extreme 850 estate to take on the challenge of the Pikes Peak hillclimb.

"That one got quite a long way down the road, although metal was never cut," he recalls. "It was going to be an estate car shape with a mid-engined, turbocharged six-cylinder with four-wheel drive."

That car might have done in the USA what the original 850 BTCC racer did in the UK. For all the dispute over whose idea it was, the estate did what it set out to do. Joke or no joke, it garnered column inches far and wide. ❧

# STARTING AN ENGINE REVOLUTION

Volvo's 850 might not have been a success on the racetrack, but it broke new ground in one area – engine location. It was the kind of exploitation of the rules that sowed the seeds of the Super Touring category's demise, according to long-time BTCC technical boss Peter Riches.

The 850 engine bay was so voluminous – "you could have held a dinner and dance in there", reckons John Gentry – that it allowed TWR to position the engine for optimised weight distribution in a way never seen before in the category. The engine could be moved just far enough back, with its head more or less resting on the front bulkhead, to allow the driveshafts to run in front of the block.

"We did it because we could," says Richard Owen. "We were helped because the bulkhead, which we weren't allowed to modify, sloped away at something like 45 degrees and allowed us to get the

exhaust system in."

TWR opted for a five-cylinder engine with encouragement from Volvo, which had used the same configuration in its infamous test car.

"I was convinced that the five was the way to go, partly because there was talk that the rev limit for the series was going to be raised from 8500 to 9000rpm," says long-time TWR engine guru Allan Scott.

Scott was given eight weeks to produce an engine exceeding

the 260bhp achieved by Volvo's test unit. This involved some shortcuts, including borrowing pistons from Cosworth that had already seen service in the Andy Rouse Engineering Ford Mondeos the previous season.

That dictated the bore and stroke of the Volvo engine in year one, but it never changed over the six-year life of the programme. The five-cylinder lived on in the S40 of 1997-99, even though none was available in the road car.

