

Victoria!

by Les Hughes

As a horse-drawn carriage, the Victoria goes back to around 1840 - the first one imported to England was reputedly built for King George IV. They comprised a two-seater body with a folding roof and a raised box-seat for the driver and footman; the photo shows the design of one preserved in a Mexican museum.



In the early days of the motor-car, a similar style of body was commonly used, often with the crude engine tucked under the passenger seats and tiller steering; as things progressed, the name became attached rather to a close-coupled two-door four-seater convertible body, as opposed to the four-door Touring Car (or Phaeton). In the 1920s and 30s many manufacturers produced a Victoria, either as a factory body or, on the more expensive chassis, as a coach-built custom style. Both the design and the name were still common by the late 1930s - Howard Darrin was well known for the beautiful Victoria bodies he was designing for the Packard 180 chassis in the years immediately before WWII.

After the war, the auto industry had moved on in terms of the styles of body people wanted - the closed sedan was by now the most popular body although the common design of convertible followed the old Victoria plan of a two-door, four-seat soft-top car even if the name had fallen out of use.



1929 6th Series Packard Custom Eight Convertible Victoria

Another new development in the late 40s was the pillarless two-door hardtop body; the manufacturers all used a specific name for their hardtop cars: Chryslers were Newports, Buicks were Rivieras and so on. Ford introduced their hardtop body for 1951 in the Custom series - and they called it the Victoria. So the old name was revived, albeit for a rather different style of car! Ford kept the name Victoria for all of their pillarless cars until 1962, expanding it to cover the four-door version from 1956 onwards; perhaps the best-known are the Crown Victorias of 1955-6 with the eye-catching 'flying bridge' roof decoration. They had the option of a clear plexiglass front roof



panel as well, which had first appeared on the 1954 Skyliner (not to be confused with the later retractable!). This feature was dropped after '56 as it had resulted in many cases of instant sunburn due to the greenhouse effect...

Ford revived the Crown Victoria name in recent times for their full-size sedans like my own car - the last of the traditionally-built American cars with the engine in the front driving through the transmission and an old-fashioned rear wheel drive. My first ride in a Crown Vic was while Pat and I were on a rail tour of the USA - a brochure in our Denver hotel showed a nearby transport museum, and so a yellow cab was called for. It was a beat-up old thing, very comfortable but quite spartan inside and out with odd screwholes and fixings, vinyl seating and wind-up windows - very low-spec! It turned out to be a former police car that had done 300,000 miles, been sold off, given a new engine and resprayed yellow and then good for another 300,000 miles according to our chain-smoking, one-arm-resting-on-the-door driver. Oh, and the museum was great too, the old railway engines including a 'Big Boy'; carts, wagons and motor cars too. I got to sit in an ex-Elvis 28,000-mile Cadillac Seville!



My 1998 Crown Victoria is the LX model, so has lots of luxury - true full-size comfort never entirely went away even if rumble seats, vinyl roofs and push-button transmissions are only memories - with its stretch-out room for six people and a host of comfort and convenience features designed to make every trip more pleasurable. Power windows and door locks, speed control and tilt steering wheel; solar tinted glass helps the air conditioning keep it cool and pleasant. My car was one of twelve originally destined for Saudi Arabia from the Talbotville, Ontario Ford plant; they were imported here first but only

ten were sent on, leaving two in the UK. As a Canadian-built car, the underhood labelling is all in both English and French.

It has the 4.6 litre V8 engine, usually found in the Mustangs but also available then in the Rover 75 and MG ZT sold here in the UK - they must be very,very quick cars as my 71,000 mile Ford goes fast enough for me! I don't knowingly exceed speed limits but it sure gets up and goes if I want; and with good handling and braking it's a joy to drive. Used as a second daily driver with Pat's Fiesta, it comes into its own on holiday trips, returning as much as 27 mpg if you drive nice and easy. I knew the previous owner here in South Woodham, and used to watch it cruise around, so I knew it was well treated and looked after.

One snag - once on holiday in Worcestershire, I couldn't get the trans out of Park. We called the AA, and the man said to start the engine and apply the footbrake: "your brake lights are not working. A fuse has blown and the brain under the hood doesn't know that the brakes are on." It turned out that the brake light switch needed replacing - a new one from David Boatwright Partnership and some help from our good friend and neighbour Nigel Duchars came to the rescue - Thanks Nigel!



By the way - do you like the number plate? H 15 FCV or "His Ford Crown Victoria"! Closest guess at what that cost me from the DVLA gets bought a drink!