



FEATURE CAR

MK 1 GOLF CABRIO CLIPPER



Photo: Ken Coervens

CLIPPER Class



Concept C might be the Cabriolet of the future, but there's still plenty to be said for the classic Eighties soft-tops, particularly when a caring owner has sympathetically upgraded Volkswagen's already interesting Clipper specification. Richard Copping reports



Interior has been kept largely original - sill trims are an addition, though

Neil Kelly has only had one serious brush with the law, or at least that's all he was admitting to while I met most of his family. Apart from Neil, I chatted to daughter Donna, a grateful character witness if ever there was one as she is now the official owner of the car that brought her dad into contact with the plod. Then there was her boyfriend David Howell, a decent sort of bloke, but to say the least a bit vague when it came to corroborating the story. Never had a notebook so many crossings out on a single page!

We should also have met Neil's wife Lynda, for it was for her that he contemplated a tangle with the 'old bill' in the first place, but sadly she was elsewhere, even when it came to the

compulsory 'mug - shaf', while at that crucial juncture Donna complained bitterly that she couldn't do anything with her hair!

In March 1997, Neil travelled from his home in Mansfield, in Robin Hood Country to Wakefield in West Yorkshire to view a certain soft-top Golf Clipper, primarily because the private advert he'd seen listed red as its colour - Lynda's all-time favourite shade. The Cabrio was first registered to a high-ranking officer in the West Yorkshire Police Force.

Sadly, for the owner matrimonial life had been far from straightforward in recent times, indeed a divorce was imminent. Needless to say, this was the main reason why the car was for sale, a sad reminder of far happier days. When it came to price, this



M3-style tail-lights suit the car, while the split-rims are pure class

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factor was all important, for although a 1989 car should have been going at between £5,500 to £6,500, the owner simply wanted to see the back of it as quickly as possible and was quite happy to accept just £3,400. This seemingly amazing deal was tempered with a few off-putting factors, like an above average mileage of 127,000 in a seven-year life span, coupled with a complete lack of any service history, or for that matter any other paperwork.

However, although documentation was singular by its absence, Neil accepts that the local main dealer had in all probability serviced the Cabrio throughout - certainly its performance suggested someone had tinkered with it on a fairly regular basis.

In a way, Neil's succinct remark of 'no rust, no dents and no shine' summarised the best and worst of the rest. To say that the car was dirty was an understatement! With the deal done and Mrs Kelly at the wheel, when it pulled up outside the house, daughter Donna thought there must have been some mega last minute change of plan. For here was Mum driving a rather sad looking Golf ragtop with a black hood, when the car Dad had promised her was supposed to be pristinely red with a grey hood.

To make matters worse, at some stage the hood had been 'stabbed', ripped, or deliberately damaged in some way. Apart from the noticeable visual disfigurement, inevitably when it rained the interior got wet, to the long-term detriment of both carpets and upholstery. It was like a paddling pool

As for the interior itself, the kindest remark any member of the Kelly family could come up with was that it was 'absolutely filthy'. Every seat was covered in enough dog hair to suggest that the owner had worked at a kennels, while the carpets were in a similar condition, too. However, on the plus side there was no lasting damage, while the dash and other vinyl covered areas were free from difficult to remove scuffs and scrapes.

Although not the most powerful soft-top option, the Clipper version of the Golf Cabriolet, which was introduced in 1988 to replace the previous GL model, boasted a 1,781cc engine, pumping out a healthy if not earth-shattering 90bhp, which achieved a useful top speed of 106mph and was capable of 0-60 in a less than sluggish 10.5 seconds.

As the distinctly angular lines of the Mk 1 Golf had begun to look dated by the mid to late Eighties, Volkswagen's stylists had worked hard to introduce smoother moulded bumpers, an integrated front spoiler and rear apron, plus sill and wheelarch extensions, all of which were more in keeping with customer expectations of the day. All models in the range benefited from the same treatment and it is perhaps for this reason if no other that the Clipper name was devised, giving an impression of exclusivity to what after all was even its most basic form a premium-priced car.

The Clipper was offered initially in four colours, Alpine White, Helios Blue, Sapphire Grey and Lynda Kelly's preferred option of Paprika Red. All had colour-keyed bumpers,

wheelarches and door mirrors. Within a short space of time, the number of available colours had increased to eight, while there were three shades of hood to select from and an exciting new range of rather classy upholstery for each. Although for the first time some 1990 models benefited from an electro-hydraulically operated hood, the Clipper, which was to remain a chore element of the original Cabriolet range until its demise in 1993, continued to function via good old manpower.

Once the Clipper was safely in the Kelly garage, Neil set about the process of tidying to such a standard that, not only would Lynda be proud to be seen behind the wheel, but also to enter the odd Concours here or there would be seen as the most natural thing in the world. However, when that initial work had been completed, and Lynda got behind the wheel, she decided that the Clipper wasn't really the car for her after all, as if the unassisted steering was far too heavy. Fortunately, there was another member of the Kelly household only too ready to take over and between 1998 and 2003, the car became daughter Donna's daily driver, covering a round trip of 20 miles per day, five days per week.

Nowadays, as the Clipper is taxed just for the summer months, Donna delights in a new daily driver which she describes as a 'really 'orrible' Mk 2 Golf GTI, which, apart from the 270,000 miles on its clock, is 'absolutely hanging'! Suddenly feeling guilty for the feelings of her latest set of wheels, she adds, 'but it is very, very reliable...'

Nowadays, the Clipper isn't entered into official Concours line-ups anymore, despite its relaxed summer only existence, principally because it doesn't really conform to either the classic or custom set of rules. To have any hope of winning in the former, the car should be as close as humanly possible to Volkswagen's original specification. When points can be deducted for an engine that is too highly polished, you know how finicky the rules are. On the other hand, as the very word customised implies, the odd tweak here and there isn't going to impress a judge who is searching for the wildest and most individual approach he can find out of the assembled entrants.

However, before some of the tweaks shortly to be described were put in place, the Clipper picked a tidy handful of trophies and rosettes, including a runner's up ticket in the Daily Users Concours at BVF in 2000, a 'Highly Commended' credit at GTI International the following year, and a treasured 'First in class' at the Volkfest

Engine bay has been cleaned and detailed to show standard - nice!



“...when found, the hood was ripped and the interior resembled a paddling pool...”

Wales in 2002. Perhaps the Clipper's star has shone brightest north of the border, with a number of gongs being awarded, culminating in an outright win at the 2002 Scottish Volkswagen Festival held at Biggar. Now and for the foreseeable future, it looks as though the car will join the odd display at selected events, one of which will certainly encompass the activities of Club GTI.

After spending many, many hours simply cleaning everything that could possibly require such attention, Neil decided in the late autumn of 1997 that to restore the paintwork to anything like its original condition, considering the myriad of tiny scratches and stone chips, a re-spray was required. Looking at the finish today, this doesn't come as any surprise, but what does is that the work was carried out at home in the garage rather than by some glossy professional charging an arm and a leg price!

Neil's secret wasn't for example in taking the body back to bare metal. On the contrary, it was in the thoroughness of his preparation, the basecoats, his application of one rich coat of Paprika Red and five coats of lacquer. Allegedly done to stop the susceptible shade of red from fading, in reality it gave a sheen few can match and certainly better even than the boys at Wolfsburg could achieve.

Another project in late 1997, involved the car being professionally kitted out with a Clifford Alarm, while Neil undertook the task of adding an immobiliser himself. The original steel wheels were discarded in favour of a set of BBS alloys, which in turn have been replaced in April 2004 by another set, this time BBS RS split-rims, which were picked up in Germany, via the wonders of E-Bay. As far as Neil and Donna's boyfriend, David were concerned, the new set were a real bargain at the equivalent of £600. The alloys, dating from 1988, have been brought up to spec by the seller, who earns a crust by buying up what he can, refurbishing them and then moving them on. Neil was the first to admit that such wheels aren't the easiest to clean and that he 'hates' the job, but it was no use, he simply had to get them out of his system!

It won't come as a great surprise to hear that the hood has been replaced, considering the condition of the original, initially Neil's thoughts were to go for grey mohair to at least

stay in the spirit of the original, but practicalities prevailed and a matching shade of maroon was chosen instead. Once again, the garage became a temporary workshop, this time with a local firm being employed to do the work. Complete with the 'inners', the bill came close to £900.

Although the main reason for the new hood wasn't aesthetic, the addition of a VR6 front spoiler, which was picked up secondhand from a stall at BVF for the magnificent sum of £10, could be described as such. Undoubtedly in that category, comes the alloy filler cap, while something that is currently being contemplated also qualifies. Looking at the car's pristine upholstery, we were surprised to learn that the seats are likely to receive the full Kelly design treatment, with a combination of grey leather and red piping being the preferred option, just leaving the current cloth in the middle sections.

When the mechanical side of the Clipper was discussed, Neil's first words were to condemn the original carburettor. 'Throw that Pierburg carb away', was his recommendation, something he did as soon as he realised that there were better options to choose from. The Clipper now sports a Weber conversion, a Super Sprint exhaust, and has Bilstein suspension.

When the mileage reached 172,000 in 2003, Neil decided that it was time to 'do the head', inevitably replacing the gasket and for good measure, fitting a new clutch at the same time.

Probably the only thing we haven't mentioned concerning the Clipper, has nothing to do with the specific model, no relevance to Neil's improvement programme, but it is Cabrio related! There can't be many who don't believe that the intrusive nature of the hood reduced the available boot space to little more than a convenient out of sight place to store a small overnight bag. As a result, it was fascinating to discover that a 10? stone German Shepherd was content to travel on quite long journeys sat in the boot, even if the parcel shell did have to be removed first! Perhaps then, Mr VW, if Concept C becomes reality, you'll wish your ad men to encompass such info into whatever startling blurb they conjure up to promote the latest generation of soft-top VW!



Replacement burgundy hood suits the car well and has been well fitted



In the interests of reliability the engine now breathes through a Weber



Eye-brow spoiler, clear indicator lenses and split-rims are subtle mods

TECH SPEC

Model: Golf Cabrio Clipper (Paprika Red)

Engine: 1,781cc four-cylinder transverse developing 90bhp in stock form, 81mm bore x 86.4mm stroke, Weber carb conversion, K&N pancake-style air-filter, fully detailed engine bay with repainted rocker cover, chrome parts and braided stainless steel hoses. Supersprint exhaust system

Brakes: 239mm vented front discs, 226mm drums at the rear

Suspension: Macpherson struts at front, torsion beam at rear with semi-independent trailing arms. Bilstein suspension kit fitted.

Wheels / tyres: 15-inch BBS split rims / 195/50-15 tyres

Exterior: Full respray by owner in Paprika Red with five coats of clear lacquer, M3-style tail-lights, new maroon hood

Interior: Original grey patterned trim thoroughly cleaned