



SURF'S UP!

When Paul Knowles bought a Split Screen, named it The Bear, and turned it into a 1960s-themed surf wagon he was fulfilling a long held ambition

Words and Photos Mike Trippitt



“S

trangely enough, I have a picture from a 1966 *Surfer* magazine. There was a competition to win a VW surf van, and I always kept that magazine. It was my inspiration to buy one,” says retired civil servant Paul Knowles.

Though Paul was a founding member of the East Kent Surf Club at Joss Bay back in 1966 it would be more than 40 years later that he and his 1965 13-Window Deluxe came together. There was only so much he could fit into a busy life.

“I’ve always been involved with classic cars since I was a teenager,” Paul explains. “I started off with a Morris 8 back in the sixties, but for nearly 40 years I had a collection of old pre-war MGs, right up to the early two-thousands. I did a bit of motor sport – track racing and classic rallying – and I was surfing as well. I had a car that I could put a surfboard on, so a VW didn’t figure for quite a while.”

But in 2003 Paul and wife Debs bought a VW Beetle to add to their classic car collection. It was something she had wanted for a while, and buying it gave rise to the idea to part with the MGs in favour of a vintage VW Bus: “I was still involved with surfing and I decided I really fancied a Split Screen. It was a progression to something different and what I had wanted to do for a long time.”

Pure speculation

‘The Bear’ joined the Knowles family in August 2007, having been built in Germany in November 1963 for export to the USA. It was first registered in New York State on 1st January 1965, and then later registered in New Jersey. It was never converted to a camper or surf wagon whilst in the USA, but little is known about its time there.

The Bear displays VW’s iconic Sealing Wax Red and Chestnut Brown paint, but Paul knows that it’s not original. He says that the colour code on the original identification plate does not match any of the codes used by the manufacturer at that time, causing Paul to speculate.

“There is a scene in *French Connection II* where Gene Hackman comes off a subway in Brooklyn. There is a 13-Window Deluxe next to the sidewalk. I think, wow, my Van was probably there too. It lived in that part of Brooklyn for many years and over the Hudson in New Jersey. I’ve often wondered whether it was this vehicle.”

Though not conclusive, The Bear’s dashboard is black and looks original. It’s enough for Paul to think it was probably all



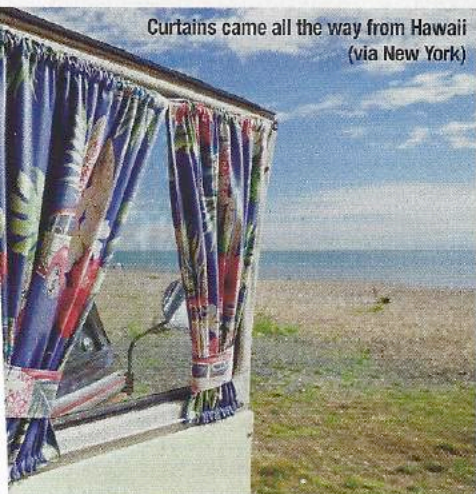


◀ Paul created his surf themed Bus as a homage to his sixties surfer roots. Albeit in Kent, not California!

▼ Seats were recovered by Browns Trimming in Broadstairs five years ago and still look fresh



Curtains came all the way from Hawaii (via New York)



black back in those days. The Bus in the film is blue and white, and Paul admits "it's probably not mine. They exported hundreds of them out to the USA," he adds.

Blighty bound

It arrived on these shores in 2004 when DVLA gave it the 1965 plate FKJ 257C. It was resprayed prior to Paul's ownership, though many original features remain. Wheels, mirrors and the front seats are all original, though obviously the seats have

"I decided I really fancied a Split Screen. It was a progression to something different and what I had wanted to do for a long time"

been re-upholstered.

"It has the original push button radio that unfortunately doesn't work," says Paul, "but the original clock still shows the right time." However, he knows that the fitted European Deluxe bumpers without overrides are not the original specification, but does not know when they were changed.

Paul says the steering and suspension remain unmodified, and says the driving experience isn't too dissimilar to the old MGs he was used to. "To me it wasn't any different. I was still driving an old vehicle with drum brakes. I did not have a learning curve in how to drive it. I was used to heavy, non-powered steering, and all the usual things that modern motorists find difficult when they step from a modern vehicle."

Unfortunately since Paul bought the Bus the engine has had to be replaced: "The original 1500 departed this life two years ago. I was doing a modest 45mph on the by-pass into Dover and everything just seized up. It was not salvageable, as the crankcase was broken. So we now have a re-conditioned VW 1600cc twin-port, single carburetor engine."

Surf theme

Since 2007 the transformation from Bus to surf van has been completed. Though mechanically stock, apart from the engine, the interior is very different to when it made its way across the Atlantic all those years ago.

"It's got a retro-style camper interior. It was a kit of some sort that came with the Van when I bought it. It was already installed, but not finished. It was bare plywood, so I had to varnish it to make it look better."

But, says Paul, Browns Trimming of Broadstairs in Kent did the upholstery five

years ago. "They did the door cards, the rear seats, and the driver's and passenger seats."

Paul has created a vehicle that is an homage to the sixties surfing scene. He built an extended roof rack to carry his vintage surfboards and found a vintage American Automobile Association New York section badge on an internet auction site to adorn the front bumper.

It's curtains

There's no doubt it has worked. The Pacific surf even ripples through the soft furnishings. "We have Hawaiian-shirt material that actually came from Hawaii for the curtains," says Paul with a smile. "Everyone asks where did we get our curtains. I tell them Hawaii via New York."

You see Paul and Debs' daughter lives in Brooklyn, and Paul came across the material when they were visiting. "I bought them by mail order [from Hawaii], had it delivered to my daughter's and then I brought it home in a suitcase. A friend of my wife's made the curtains for us. They are quite unique and people love them."



▲ A surf mag from the sixties provided the inspiration to one day get a Split Bus

Bus isn't totally original,
but it doesn't seem to
bother Paul



"I just like hanging out in it as a day van really, just turning up somewhere – like a beach hut on wheels"

These days Paul doesn't take The Bear far, preferring instead to head for the beaches close to his home at Walmer on Kent's east coast.

"I drive to a local beach and do a fry-up. We have camped in it, but haven't done so for ages. As you get older, and you've done it a few times..." His voice tails off, as though he's reluctant to say that he is getting too old for camping now. "I just like hanging out in it as a day van really, just turning up somewhere – like a beach hut on wheels."

Young at heart

Paul Knowles' beach shorts, baseball hat, shades and tan belie his age. He is easy to talk to, and The Bear is easy to talk about. He admits that he's not surfing as much

these days, but sometimes takes a board down to the beach.

"I'm 72 now and the bones are getting a bit old, but when the weather is right I still do. When I go to Kingsdown beach I always meet somebody to chat to. Someone will come up to me smiling and say that the Van is lovely. It makes someone's day if they remember having one when they were younger, or that their parents had one. Particularly near a beach, there is often someone, sometimes the owner of a modern campervan, that will come across and talk."

So why The Bear?

It's a question Paul is often asked. "We have quite a nice surfing community in Kent that goes back to the sixties. Back

then we started our own company making surfboards. (In the surfing world making a surfboard is known as 'shaping'). A couple of the shapers moved to Devon and set up business there. One of them is still doing it today. We had a reunion in 1989 of all the original surfers who surfed Joss Bay from 1966 to 1970, inspired by the movie *Big Wednesday*. (In the film the three original surfing friends got back together in later life.) A lot of people identified with the film and many surfers regard it as one of the ultimate in surf movies."

So when Paul wanted a name for his new surf Van, 40 years after seeing a competition in a surf magazine to win one, he turned to *Big Wednesday* for inspiration.

With a twinkle in his eye, he reveals: "The Bear is the guy in the movie who shaped surfboards at the end of the pier, you see."