

The real thing

Today almost any new high-performance vehicle is routinely dubbed a supercar, but in 1974 the 911 Turbo was every inch the genuine article. David Sutherland reports from the driving seat of one of the very first right-hand-drive models brought to the UK in 1975. Photography by Graham Harrison





Three decades later the Turbo's (or perhaps that should read turbo's) characteristic whale-tail rear wing still has countless imitators – and there's no denying that it still looks fantastic. No fancy steering wheel, though (far right)



Thirty years after the event it's difficult to describe the reaction to the Porsche 911 Turbo when it was introduced at the September 1974 Paris motor show. Even those of us old enough to remember the period struggle to recall precisely the shock and awe that surrounded this extraordinary machine.

Certainly the car had first been shown as a 'Studie' – a concept car, if you like – at Paris a year earlier, but that was before the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent embargo on exports by the Middle East oil-producing nations – and the inevitable huge

price rises and shortages that inevitably generated here in the west.

With good reason the rest of the motor industry must have wondered if the Porsche management had taken leave of its collective senses. If ever there was an inappropriate time to launch – for volume production – a hugely fast, hugely thirsty, totally extrovert and fearfully expensive sports car, then surely this was it. Many observers justifiably wondered just what sort of market there would be for the 911 Turbo – if any.

As if all that wasn't enough to contend with, motor-vehicle exhaust emissions were just starting to become a big issue, and attempting

to create the world's greatest sports car wasn't exactly a gesture of concern for the environment. We didn't use the phrase at the time, but the 911 Turbo was about as politically incorrect as it was possible to imagine.

You had to be there – and preferably of driving age – to appreciate just how depressing it was for car drivers back then. As if high fuel prices weren't enough, there was still the prospect of petrol rationing, coupons having been distributed in the autumn of 1973. And a 50mph speed limit had been in force on motorways until March 1974, and on 'A'-roads until May (and would be reintroduced on 'A'-roads in December 1974). You were made to



feel guilty about using your car for any journey that wasn't strictly necessary.

The general feeling was that, with petrol apparently no longer a cheap and abundantly available fuel, the fun had disappeared from motoring for ever. But within a year the crisis had passed, as a crisis generally does. You could use as much petrol as you wanted without anyone disapproving, although it was much more expensive now. And the Porsche 911 Turbo that had seemed almost a preposterous idea was now seen for what it was: a very desirable supercar.

In fact, Porsche wasn't alone in refusing to be deterred by the events of 1973 and 1974. A year or so later, in 1975, Mercedes-Benz introduced the ultimate super-saloon, the 6.9-litre, V8-powered 450SEL, a car that greatly boosted the marque's somewhat staid image

when it became almost the standard-issue road car for grand-prix drivers at the business end of the starting grid.

There was nothing else quite like the 911 Turbo, priced at a hefty £14,749, but there were certainly rivals. Ferraris of the day were the shapely V6 Dino, the V8 308, the front-engined, V12-powered 365, and the flat-12 Berlinetta Boxer. Also from Italy were the Lamborghini Urraco and Maserati Bora, while Alfa Romeo's 2.5-litre V8 Montreal fastback coupé was an interesting diversion, if not a totally credible alternative.

German competition for the Porsche came in the form of the BMW 3.0CSL (the Mercedes SL was too heavy and too softly sprung to be considered a sports car), while 1974 was the final year for the Jaguar 'E'-type, then in 5.3-litre V12 form. Aston Martin's 5.3-litre V8

probably qualified as a competitor, although it was more of a heavyweight grand tourer, as was the Jensen Interceptor.

Today, almost exactly 30 years after the 1974 Paris Show, we're revisiting the original 911 Turbo in the form of this black 1975 (but 1976 model year) example belonging to John Ward, who is the 911 Turbo Register secretary for the Porsche Club GB. And the car has an interesting early history. It was delivered to Porsche Cars Great Britain in Isleworth in December 1975, but wasn't registered until May 1977, having been sent on a tour of duty round UK Porsche dealerships, where it was put on static display in showrooms.

Interestingly, the original documentation suggests that at this point Porsche still hadn't decided on the precise equipment specification for the Turbo – always intended to be the



range-topping flagship. This car's paperwork marks the full leather, air-conditioning and electric sunroof as extra-cost options, but these became standard soon after. The other option on this car is chrome rather than black for the headlamp rings and side-window surrounds. The UK price in 1977 was £17,499, sufficient to buy you quite a decent house in many parts of the country.

The outline of the Turbo is a truly enduring image of the mid-1970s, with its massively bulging wings, eight-inch-wide rear and seven-inch-wide front wheels, deep front spoiler, and characteristic whale-tail rear wing. The black paintwork emphasises the Porsche's menacing stance. Thirty years ago black was emerging as a colour with attitude, the soon-to-appear VW Golf GTI and Saab 99 Turbo using it to equally great effect.

There were essentially two forms of early 911 Turbo: the original cars, from 1974 on, and those built from 1978. The former's 3.0-litre engine produced 260bhp, which might have sounded a lot, but was just 50bhp more than that of the previous exotic 911, the 1973 Carrera 2.7 RS (although the Turbo did, of course, have a lot more torque).

In some respects the Turbo might have been seen as a backward step, too. At a time by which all manual 911s had a five-speed gearbox, the Turbo used a specially adapted four-speeder, a fifth gear not appearing in it until as recently as 1988. At the time Porsche claimed that the engine's wide spread of torque meant that four speeds were sufficient, but it's more likely that the five-speed gearbox simply wasn't strong enough.

For 1978 the Turbo's engine capacity rose

to 3.3 litres, delivering a meaty 300bhp, and a muscular 303lb/ft of torque at 4000rpm, 50lb/ft more than before. The original brakes, which amazingly lacked servo-assistance, were upgraded, now featuring ventilated and cross-drilled discs with four-piston callipers, and not least a conventional (and very necessary) vacuum servo.

At the same time wheel diameter rose by an inch to 16 inches, partly to accommodate the larger brakes, and although rim widths remained as before, at seven and eight inches, a nine-inch-wide rear wheel was optional. Of greater significance, though, is that by now the Turbo was running Pirelli P7 tyres – the world's first genuinely low-profile, high-performance tyre, introduced in 1975. The sizes were 205/55 at the front, 225/50 at the rear.

The new 911 Turbo was welcomed as a big



improvement. But three decades on that's not quite how John Ward sees things. He owns a 3.0-litre car because he prefers it, and having had both he's qualified and able to make a direct and valid comparison.



John, who works in film and television post-production, bought a 1984 911 Turbo in 2000, which replaced a Ruf-modified lightweight 911SC. Having lived near Silverstone race circuit during the mid-1970s, and having seen 934 and 935 Turbo racers dominate proceedings, ownership of a road-going 911 Turbo was a dream, one that was finally realised in time for his 50th birthday.

But he never really liked the 3.3-litre Turbo. 'It was shatteringly fast in a straight line,' he says, 'but it felt big and heavy, so I looked around for something else.' John had driven a 3.0-litre Turbo, and reckoned that despite its brakes it would be preferable for him. 'The

engine is half an inch further forward [the 3.3's larger clutch required the engine to be moved further to the rear], and that makes a big difference to the handling, believe me! And the 3.3's ride is choppier because tyre pressures were upped from 28psi to 34psi to compensate for rear-end weight bias, which had got worse.'

A good 3.0-litre obviously wasn't going to be easy to find, but in 2001 the perfect opportunity arose. John heard that the owner of the black 3.0-litre he had tried wanted to get rid of it but couldn't sell it, and after John made contact the two owners concluded that the best deal would be a straight swap, after which, they hoped, the other owner would have better luck selling on John's old car.

John recalls what must have seemed a strange, even suspicious-looking scenario. 'We turned up at a motorway service area, in two Porsches with two sets of documents, handed

over the documents and the keys, and then drove off in two Porsches again. It felt very odd. I can't imagine what it looked like!'

The Turbo silhouette evokes a very particular image – the ultimate 1970s' sports car – but slide into John's 911 and you can't help but think how similar it is to a Carrera 3.2 built a decade later – and even a 964- or 993-model 911. There's the same, much-criticised but also much-loved instrumentation and control layout, with only the early three-spoke steering wheel, and the rubber gaiter for the gear lever, dating the interior.

And, as with a 911 from any generation, there's not a great deal to distinguish the Turbo interior from the regular car. The 3.0-litre Turbo didn't even have a boost gauge.

Thirty years on the 911 Turbo still feels a very special car to drive. But it does have a remarkably basic feel to it, too. The lack of



This car's current owner, John Ward (above) has had both 3.0- and 3.0-litre Turbos, but clearly prefers the former

power-assisted steering in more normal 911s wasn't an issue, given the relative lack of weight over the front of the car, but the wider front wheels stiffen up the steering considerably. But the rack-and-pinion system feels responsive and accurate, and it's worth bearing in mind that 1970s' power-assistance usually left steering far too light and vague.

The aspect that most dates the 3.0-litre Turbo is the braking. The all-disc system does stop the car, of course, but a mighty push is required. It's particularly noticeable at low speed, and rolling neatly and comfortably to a halt remains a delicate operation at the best of times. Conversely, this car – on the later 205/50 front and 225/50 rear tyres – rides more compliantly than might be expected.

Early Porsche turbo engines are often considered to have crude, on-off power curves, but this simply isn't the case. True, nothing

much happens below 3000rpm, but from there on the boost surges in quickly but progressively. Other blown cars from the later 1970s, such as the famous (or perhaps that should be infamous) Saab 99 Turbo, suffered much more from lag than the Porsche. And, if nothing else, the engine can rely on its 3.0 litres for a strong mid-range pick-up.

Inevitably the Porsche feels quick, but not super-quick as it would have done in its day. The appearance of four subsequent and ever more sophisticated and powerful 911 Turbos has had a taming effect. In those far-off days the Turbo's standstill to 60mph time was a little over six seconds; the current 996-model 911 Turbo shaves a full two seconds off that.

Drivers of any 1970s' 911 will be familiar with the Turbo traits: a clonky and vague gear shift, and a none-too-light clutch. Seats that are comfortable if perhaps not quite supportive

enough, and the heating system is a thing of mystery. But despite being a handful to drive, the 911 Turbo was also practical in a way that no other supercar was. Back in the 1970s you expected a powerful thoroughbred to be a temperamental beast, requiring a very particular starting technique, and reluctant to pull from low revs. You didn't expect it to be reliable or well built.

True, John Ward's car is usually a little tricky to fire up when hot, and prolonged stop-start driving during the 25 degrees Celsius temperature of our early-September photo shoot saw it running a little hotter than was desirable, but generally the Porsche was untemperamental. The engine is tractable, and the idle is a fairly even burble.

A good 911 Turbo from the 1970s, be it a 3.0- or 3.3-litre, can probably be found for around £20,000. That's tempting, given that a



Turbo's interior much like that of any pre-996 911, but somehow feels so redolent of the 1970s. Four-speed gearbox is a real anachronism

The cars of 1974

Despite worries over petrol and the effect on the car market of war in the Middle East, 1974 was a vintage year for new cars, and easily the most significant newcomer was the Volkswagen Golf. The transverse-engined, front-drive hatchback, styled by Giugiaro, was as fresh and modern as the rear-engined Beetle, which it effectively replaced, was old-fashioned. Its configuration became the standard template for small family cars.

The newly launched Citroën CX was probably as close as a car would ever get to looking like a spaceship, and with hydropneumatic self-levelling suspension and futuristic interior (including a wonderful rotating-drum speedometer), it was among the coolest large cars of the day. Lotus started its move up-market, abandoning the Elan in favour of the radical, wedge-shaped Elite four-seater.

Less exotic newcomers included the second-generation Ford Capri and the Fiat 131 Mirafiori, the latter a conventional, medium-priced saloon yet one with a typical touch of Italian glamour.

British Leyland, which in a much-criticised move attached larger 'Federal' rubber bumpers and raised the ride height of the MG Midget and MGB (to comply with US crash-safety regulations), was in so much trouble that it had to be bailed out and in effect taken into state ownership. The car

empire's woes finally allowed arch-rival Ford to take market leadership, which it has retained every year since.

Motorsport

Brazilian driver Emerson Fittipaldi became 1974 F1 World Champion at the wheel of a Ford Cosworth-powered McLaren. But the season was arguably more memorable for the emerging stars.

Austrian driver Niki Lauda had signed to a resurgent Ferrari, and after two victories and nine pole positions in 1974 would win the championship the following year, the first of his three titles. Hesketh Racing – with the youthfully minded Lord Hesketh and former public schoolboy James Hunt – may have looked as committed to partying as it was to racing, but it was during 1974 that Hunt's considerable potential became clear.

He won the non-championship BRDC International Trophy at Silverstone, and although failing to finish in nine of the 15 F1 races took three third places, one of them at the final race at Watkins Glen in the US. He would win the title – and lifelong international-playboy status – in 1976.

In those days Bernie Ecclestone owned Brabham, but 1974 was the year in which he took the first steps to owning the whole of F1, taking over the promotion of the Belgian Grand Prix. Future GP names born that year were Marc Gene (Williams test-driver) and

Alexander Wurz (formerly Benetton).

Unlike now, Porsche contested Le Mans – and produced a sensational result, with the Martini Racing RSR Turbo Carrera coming second. That was in June, and three months later – with Porsche's demonstration of turbo pace and reliability still fresh in the memory – the road-going 911 Turbo was unveiled.

With an all-pervading oil-crisis atmosphere, a couple of international rallying events were cancelled early in the season. But perhaps more memorable than that was the stunning Ferrari-engined Lancia Stratos rally car, which won for the first time at the San Remo Rally.

Entertainment

Working out what to do with your leisure time was a lot simpler 30 years ago. There were just three TV channels (BBC1, BBC2 and the regional ITV network), with satellite TV still something out of science fiction. Computers were the size of wardrobes – the PC as we know it today was still almost 10 years away – and only nerds could work them.

So you watched whatever the BBC or ITV served up, and then, as now, programme makers were keen on police shows (*The Sweeney*, *Kojak*). The alternative was going out to the pub (no videos in those far-off days, of course).

Pubs generally still looked like traditional pubs, rather than the continental-style



Blown flat-six offers a relatively modest 260bhp, but an exciting drive none the less. Infamous turbo lag not half as bad as legend suggests, says Sutherland

brasseries that many have become, and wine bars were still pretty exotic establishments. But things were changing. The residents of Woolwich in south-east London could check out the first of a new hamburger chain in Britain, McDonalds.

There were some memorable movies. The Mob-fest sequel, *The Godfather Part II*, was released, while Mel Brooks' *Eazing Saddles* comprehensively spoofed every aspect of westerns, with a non-stop delivery of racist, sexist and lavalatorial humour.

In what some regarded as the silliest Bond movie yet, Roger Moore for the second time packed his Beretta and eyebrowed Moneypenny in *The Man with the Golden Gun*. The Bond Girl was Britt Ekland (Mary Goodnight), and the plot paid respect to the fuel crisis by concerning itself with a chase for a vital solar-energy converter.

Pop group Mud found themselves with a doleful Christmas number one, *It'll Be Lonely This Christmas*, while Supertramp's *Crime of the Century* album stood a good chance of featuring in any record collection. (*And it's still in mine!* - Ed)

A more serious listen in this pre-punk year was *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* double album from Genesis, and after emerging from a three-year heroin haze the incomparable Eric Clapton released *461 Ocean Boulevard*, this comeback album still rated as one of his very best.

Politics

We were definitely a far more politically conscious population in 1974, a year with two general elections. Conservative prime minister Edward Heath took his fight with the miners (who wanted a bigger pay rise than he was prepared to give them) to the country, calling a snap election in February. 'Who rules Britain?' was the not terribly difficult question for the electorate.

Voters, fed up with the 'three-day week' and power cuts decided it wasn't going to be Heath. Especially when Labour leader Harold Wilson - seen as twice the political operator that Heath was - promised to get the miners back to work immediately. Labour won 301 seats to the Tories' 297, but Heath held on for another five days before resigning, during which he unsuccessfully attempted to form an alliance with the Liberals. In October Wilson called another election, consolidating Labour's lead with a 43-seat majority.

There was high political drama across the Atlantic, as Richard Nixon became the first US president to resign office, rather than face impeachment over the Watergate affair, the bugging of the Democrats' headquarters.

News events

If the world seems an unstable place now, we had our fair share of worries 30 years ago. Inflation in Britain was running at over

20 per cent, and would remain in double figures until the early 1980s.

Depending upon your point of view this was caused either by excessive wage demands by unions (and companies agreeing to pay them rather than face potentially crippling strikes), or the result of the Middle East crisis that had resulted in the original oil-price hike.

In January four-star petrol (with plenty of lead in it, of course) cost just 42 pence a gallon, but by August it had risen to 72 pence, and we were grimly expecting the 80 pence gallon in the new year. Happy days...

Possibly the most famous vanishing act ever took place in 1974, with Tory peer Lord Lucan disappearing following the murder of his children's nanny, and an attack on his estranged wife. More bizarrely still, American newspaper heiress Patty Hearst was caught on camera while taking part in an armed robbery at a bank in San Francisco, apparently acting on behalf of the Symbionese Liberation Army. She had been kidnapped and brainwashed, it was reported.

Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips had a narrow escape when 26-year-old Ian Ball attempted an armed kidnap on the couple's chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce in the Mall in London. Six shots were fired and four people wounded (not the royals) before Ball, who had intended to seek a £3m ransom, was brought down and arrested. ■