



The Commer File

Written by Steve Loveys for the Classic Camper Club

Introduction

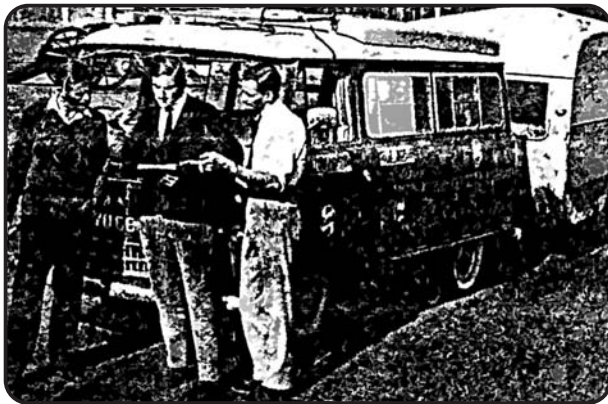
As I ponder the question “Why do I consider the Commer a ‘Classic’ among the cardboard cut-outs of today’s commercial vehicles?” I can only conclude that, as a wise man once stated, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. (Walking into an art gallery and seeing an ‘artistic arrangement’ of house bricks or old tyres must surely be proof of that statement).

That aside, this is a file of facts, figures and opinion, that I have undertaken to compile for you, the reader to peruse, hoping it may be of either ‘use’ or ‘interest’ to both owner and enthusiast alike.

As the Commer is generally a fairly reasonably priced vehicle, and its parts and maintenance are relatively easy and inexpensive, it has to be said that it is a truly ‘practical classic’.

“It’s the only way to travel.”

Toad, *The Wind in the Willows*



This ‘Bluebird’ Commer conversion has just arrived at the 1964 motor show, having first traveled to Egypt and back!

Furthermore, although Commers can still be found in ‘very good condition’ this tends to be the exception, rather than the rule.

Regularly visible today, the Commer in its vicarious Dodge form is often sighted as either postal or telecom vans on the streets throughout the country. In its heyday, the Commer was a best seller, popular among the commercial and recreational markets alike. As a camper, there are many reasons for the Commer’s popularity, and suitability such as its ability to house a transverse double bed, the maximum use of the given dimensions (due partly to the integral engine) the good performance and handling – for the day, and a good clean appearance (I personally like the ‘grinning grill plate’). A notably unusual feature of the Commer, were its front wheels, which ran on a narrower track than the rear ones (to allow for sliding doors later they said). Despite this however, the Commer continued in popularity and was produced for well over two decades.

History

Designed by ‘Rootes’ and powered by their 1494cc engine, (which also powered the Hillman Minx iii) the Commer van was first launched onto the unsuspecting public back in the January of 1960.

Taking its name from its manufacturer’s ‘Commer Cars Ltd’ the original van was fully titled the ‘1-1500’ the 1500 part referring to its three quarter ton payload. Soon after its launch, Rootes replaced the initial 1494cc engine with their new 1592 engine, which was in turn to be replaced itself in 1965.

Two and a half years into production, the Commer 1500 had a Commer 2500 introduced into the range, which was essentially the same vehicle, but with 2500 Logo on the side, updated suspension and brakes and a 1ton payload.

In the August of 1965 the Commer was renamed the ‘PA Commer’ and had Rootes new 1725cc five bearing crankshaft, 4 cylinder OHV engine, also fitted to their other mid-range cars (not least to mention the London-Sydney marathon winning Hillman Hunter). The most distinguishable feature of the PA Commer, was its new ‘grin’ (lozenge shaped grill, to be technical!)

During that popular month of August, 1967, several modifications were made to the old ‘PA’, namely the handbrake being moved to front axle operation, and a dynamo scrapped in favour of an alternator, thus ‘PA’ became ‘PB’.

At the time of the ‘Link Up’ between Giant American group Chrysler, and Rootes in 1964, Dodge Truck UK moved production from Kew In Surrey to join forces with Commer in Dunstable, Bedfordshire (in 1967). Hence some Commers were labeled Dodge K120 + K160 across Europe! In 1970 the 2000 series was introduced.



The York ‘Ebor’, named after the original Roman name for York – ‘Eborium’.



An unusual single rear door.

The next major alteration the Commer was to undergo was something of a drastic facelift. when in the late 1970's the old PB Commer was transformed in the twinkling of an eye, into the all new Dodge Spacevan. By now most of the mechanics of the vehicle had been updated and updated, including the novel idea of running the front wheels on the same line as the rear.

The main noticeable difference of the Spacevan has to be the blatant (and some say ghastly) 'postbox' front grill. Production of the Dodge Spacevan continued well into the 80's, kept going in its last days purely by the large orders placed by both Telecom and the postal services.

Data

Apart from the many and varying camper conversions the Commer was subject to, below is a list of the basic deviations from the panel van that were available:

- High Top Van
- Crew Bus (12 seats)
- Contractors Bus (14 seats)
- Sliding Door Van
- Chassis Cab Van
- Drive Away cab version (all available with optional petrol or Perkins diesel, manual or Borgwarner auto transmission).

Performance

The Commer is capable of a top speed of 70mph, a comfortable cruise speed of around 55mph and returns an average fuel consumption of 25mpg (Petrol engine\manual gearbox). The van has a turning circle of 37' , a ground clearance of just over 7", is 80" high, 75" wide and 167.75" long.

"Until now, nobody would seriously have compared motorised caravan performance with that of a saloon car. But Chrysler are inviting you to do just that.

You can order any Commer-based caravan with a hot new high-performance engine delivering 58bhp (DIN).

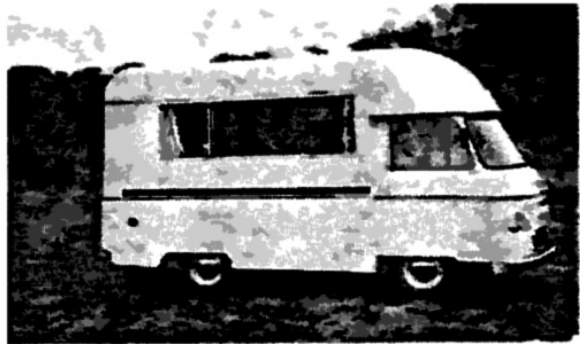
An engine that levels out hills and smooths you along motorways so effortlessly that it's very easy to forget you're driving a caravan at all. With the high-performance engine, you can also have an optional, overdrive for even more relaxed high-speed cruising and long-distance economy.



The authors's own Commer (Purbeck Hills, Dorset).

That's not the only advantage a Commer-based caravan gives you. There's full forward control for easier parking, and a cab interior that's better-equipped than many saloon cars. There's the low basic chassis price, which means that your caravan can cost less than the same conversion on another chassis. There's the Commer's space advantage. It gives the caravan-builder, and you, more room to play with.

And, above all, there's the Commer reputation for quality and durability. They may be old-fashioned virtues, but they do wonders for the re-sale value (don't believe us, look in the classifieds). Test drive one of the new high-performance Commer caravans soon. and 'get a taste of what Grand Touring really means.'



COMMER HIGHWAYMAN L Reg 3
owners from new, full history, 50,000
miles, fr dge, Porta Potti, MOT, Tax 4
berth plus one bunk £1 450 Tel 03

An example of a second hand vehicle.

Conversions

"Commer Car Camper – the only Caravan with the permanently made double bed."

Commer Campers

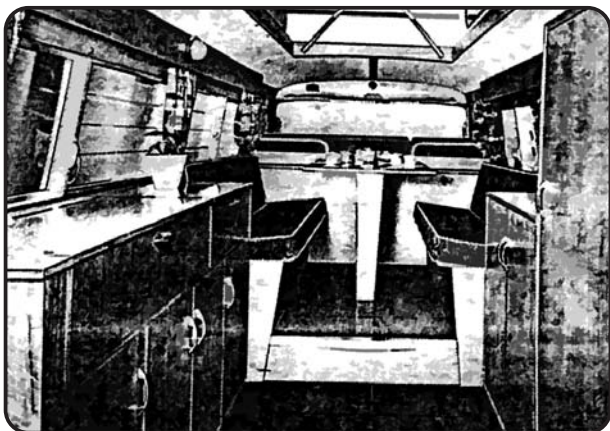
At the height of Commer's popularity, the late 60's early 70's, there were in the region of 2 dozen converters turning Commer vans into campers and coachbuilts in many varied and assorted fashions.

Among the Commer's attributes and lessons of suitability for conversion, these few should be mentioned. The bulbous line of the vehicle meant a 6' transverse bed could be installed, the shape, and gave maximum use of space, and the vehicle was a proven, tried and tested one. (The van's, handling and performance also spoke volumes when compared to its contemporaries of the day i.e. Thames, BMC, Austin etc).



A Commer 'car camper' with a Sherwood roof.

Among the convertors of the Coroner vans were 'Commer Cars' themselves with an 'automatic step' on a side opening door, and an inspired title 'the Commer Commer'. Car camper also made an interesting conversion on the van, with a Sherwood roof, louvered side windows and a permanently-made floor level bed (the table was used to isolate the cab on this model).



Inside this unusual car camper model is a false floor, which, when removed, reveals a ready made double bed!

Other convertors and models are listed thus:

- Commer Major (Sun Tor)
- Super Commer (Richard Holdsworth)
- Paralalian Commer
- Commer Wanderer (CIA)
- Commer Highwayman (CIA)
- Commer Teamster (AC)
- Commer Clearway (AC)
- Commer Roadranger (Jennings)
- Commer Roadranger (York)
- Commer Ebor (York)
- Commer Dormobile (Martin Walter)



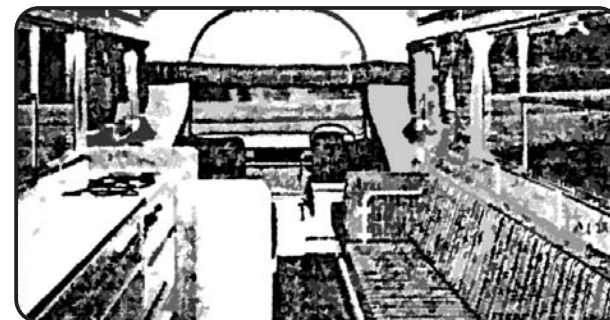
The Commer Ardvark (thus called purely to be first in any alphabetical listings) was believed to have been a 'one off' – note the unusual 'oriel' rear window.

- Commer Home Cruiser (Calthorpe)
- Commer Tourstar (European caravans)
- Commer Hi Top Executive
- Commer Olympian
- Commer Camper-coach
- Commer Nomad

- Commer Maidstone
- Commer Balmoral (Oxley)
- Cornmer Belvedere (Oxley)
- Commer Autocabin
- Commer Spacequest (Hoskins)
- Transworld Commer Colombus
- Commer Aardvark
- Commanche Commer
- Commer Motoplus
- Commer Calypso (Carahomes)
- Commer Overlander
- Commer Invincible (Catford)
- Commer Inca (Cooper).



A 'Super' Commer interior.



A Bluebird 'Highwayman' interior.



A Commer 'Wanderer' with novel 'Parkstone' design roof up, to give just over 6' clearance.



A Commer 'Wanderer' (Bluebird) interior.

Autosleeper

Of all the many non-coachbuilt conversions the Commer could boast of one of the all time greats – best seller of it's day, the Autosleeper.

Autosleeper started back in 1960 when Mr Trevelyan converted an Austin J2 van to enable the family to take a cheap holiday in France.

As it was, Mrs Trevelyan laid down the basic requirements of the conversions i.e. large kitchen area. etc. It is small wonder that the van was so practical for its designed purpose – to be a self contained camping van.



The very first Commer Autosleeper – note top hung 'caravan' windows.



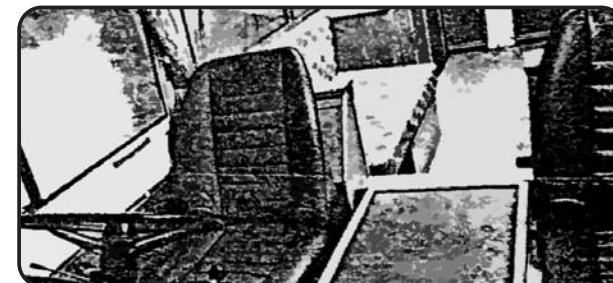
A late sixties Autosleeper sporting a specially designed roof rack.

The company started in 1960 when Mr and Mrs Trevelyan's home converted Austin J2 was spotted by a West Country garage proprietor who promptly put in an order for several!

The Commer was the van Autosleeper built their reputation upon, with its distinctive solid-sided raising roof, and long slide windows, the basic design was actually barely altered in well over a decade of production. Available in anything from two to seven berth configurations with a large kitchen area, situated at the rear of the van, which gave a generous 64" of worktop space. A portapotti could be easily housed in the rear offside wardrobe, and all Autosleepers came complete with a 24 piece cutlery set. The seating arrangement was such that you could face sideways or forwards, and the table, somewhat inevitably filled the gangway at night to make up the 6x4' bed. The solid sided roof provided varying degrees of ventilation as did the sliding side windows and the Autosleeper has a general air of quality about it.



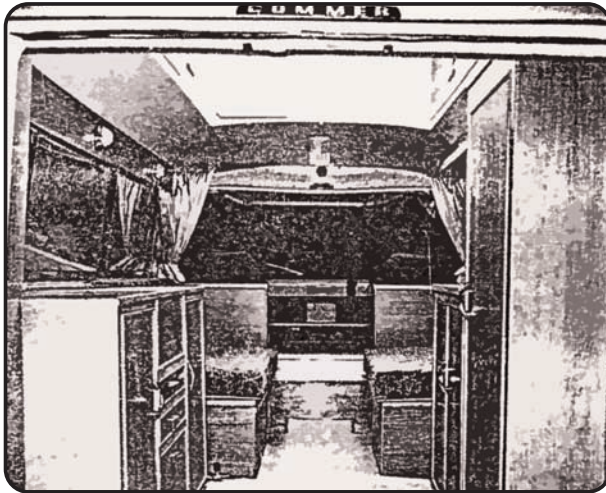
Inside the Autosleeper workshop (1969) at Willersley in the Cotswolds.



View to the back of the Commer Autosleeper, over the somewhat optimistically names 'Semi-walkthrough Bulkhead'.

Autosleeper employed only proven craftsmen, and made all their vans to order, avoiding the tackyness of mass-production.

When the Trevelyan's first bought the plot of land they built their workshop upon, building had to be delayed when the former landowner remembered a crop of unharvested onions planted there!



Looking in through the rear doors shows Autosleepers classic and much unchanged design.



Transworld Commer Columbus (Brighton, 1969).

Conclusion

It is my conclusion that a Commer is an ideal friend and companion. Affordable and a classic that is truly practical too. Spares are easily found and not charged at ludicrous prices and they are good solid fun camping vans.

I recommend camping to anyone and a 'classic camper' gives camping lust that extra buzz. You can if you are interested. Pick up a classic camper van from anywhere between £700-£2,000 and they are well worth a try.



Rootes own 'Commer Commer'.



A Commer Roadranger (Jennings).

Happy camping!

