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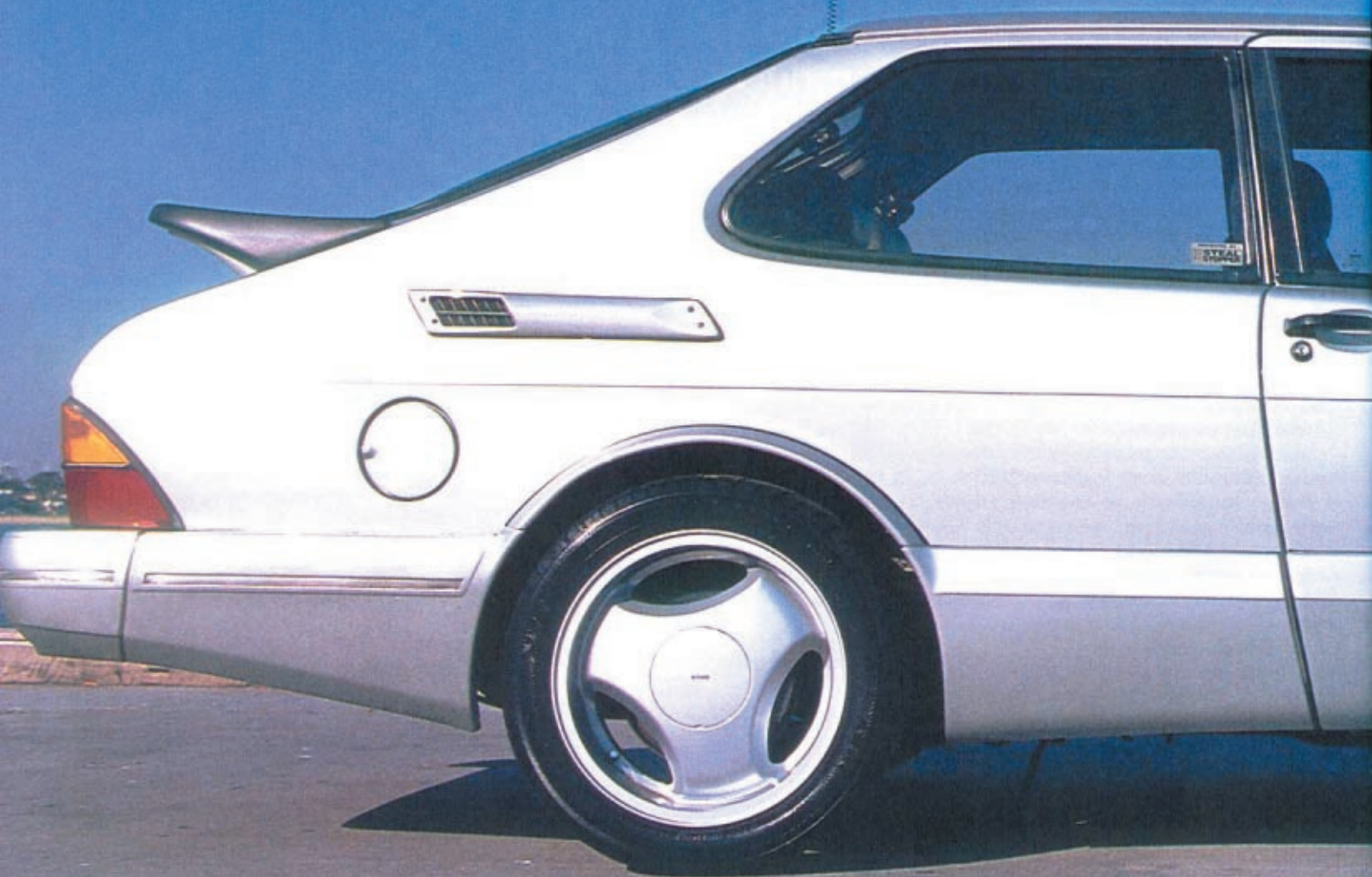


Morley's tips for buying yesterday's heroes

flight deck

STORY David Morley PHOTOS Ellen Dewar

Saab farewelled the old world when it launched the 900 Aero in 1985, ushering in a new era of high-tech performance



Okay, Sweden has two car-makers, right? Right, but with which one do you most closely associate behaviour of a remotely sporting nature? More pointedly, which Swede – in a historic sense – is the least likely to turn out a four-wheeled twin-set and pearls? It's Saab and Saab, no?

Exactly, and even if Volvo has peeled off the tartan leg-warmers of conservatism just lately, it's still the Saab brand that is most likely to get petrol-heads excited.

And the original Saab Aero is one of the landmark models that helped bring this image to the brand.

Oh sure, the two-stroke rally cars driven by the likes of Eric Carlsson set the mould, but it was high-tech stuff like the 900 Aero of 1985 that confirmed our suspicions that the folk at Saab understood the primal urge to go quick on four wheels.

Remember when

If you're old enough, cast your mind back to 1985 and take a squizz at what was the mechanical norm under most bonnets. If it was imported, chances are you were looking at a single overhead camshaft and maybe, just maybe electronic fuel-injection. If the bugger

in question bore a local badge, the underbonnet landscape was far more likely to consist of pushrods and a carburettor. Awesome, eh.

So you can begin to understand what a stir the Saab Aero caused when it lobbed with a twin overhead camshaft four-cylinder motor, four valves per cylinder, electronic fuel-injection and a turbocharger. Hooly dooly; there was even an intercooler involved, backing up the theory that Saab knew a good bit more about turbo technology than just about anybody else at the time.

In fact, you could argue that the Swedish carmaker was responsible for the 1980s rush to bolt a snail to anything that moved. Never mind, we won't hold that against them.

Back we go

The car that spawned the 900 Aero was the 99 Turbo of the late 1970s. Its funky alloy wheels, subtle body kit and three-door bodyshell gave the blown 99 real presence, but it was the turbocharger that had everybody talking and which made the 99 Turbo the headline act it became.

Okay, so it's nothing especially out of the box in 2001, but back then, hoo-ey; this was the stuff of dreams.

And so it was in 1985 when the 900 Aero lobbed. The newer 900 bodyshell owed heaps to the 99's, but it was more contemporary, smoother and more integrated while still retaining enough Saab-ness to make a statement.

In the three-door form used by the Aero, it was a bit swoopier than the five-door but still had the curved, upright windscreen, high waistline, clamshell bonnet and general stance that meant it couldn't possibly have been mistaken for anything else. Very Saab, as the adverts would have you believe.

They said it

It was hard to forget that the Saab was still a turbo. Drips and drabs of sluggishness would still occur, although once mastered it was easy to give it a bit more squirt and move away cleanly from lights
Michael Stahl, April 1985

Its acceleration is smooth and rapid, and the car is a very comfortable and reassuring tourer

Greg Ritchie, April 1985

The Saab ... has a style and character all of its own. (It is) a car which responds to being driven, which delivers the goods to someone willing to learn to live with its different ways of doing things
Barry Lake, August 1990



Emmachizit?

As little as \$12,000 gets you in the game for an early model Aero which, considering the performance involved (even if you forget about that nebulous 'prestige' thing) seems pretty good value. Prices go up from there, but \$16,000 would buy the best of them from 1990. Mind you, even a '90 model will probably have covered nearly 200,000 km, so a careful check (and an independent, professional inspection) is good insurance – unless you know exactly what you're looking for

She's-a mine!

Why a Saab 900 Aero? For me the answer is simple: you don't always keep seeing yourself on the road! These are great cars to drive, with stiffer suspension, lower ride height than a stock 900T and, of course, that great turbo rush. All this in an extremely safe and unique car. I'd recommend buying a car with as much service history as possible and with a pre-purchase inspection from a knowledgeable Saab mechanic. You can be confident that a car with over 200,000 km on it will last another 200,000 km with ease. These are strong engines that can go forever – I've seen a head that was taken off after 480,000 km and it still had the original factory hone marks on the cylinder walls. The auto gearbox, however, should be avoided. It's only a three-speeder and tends to need work at around 200,000 km. The manual option isn't bulletproof, but it's the better option for those wanting to upgrade the performance. Don't rush through the gears though, as a slam change will break things, and quickly. To talk with other Saab owners or seek out assistance through your local Saab Car Club, send emails to saabmissions@saabclub.org.au or log onto www.saabclub.org.au/

STEVE BUNTON

SECRETARY – SAAB CAR CLUB VICTORIA



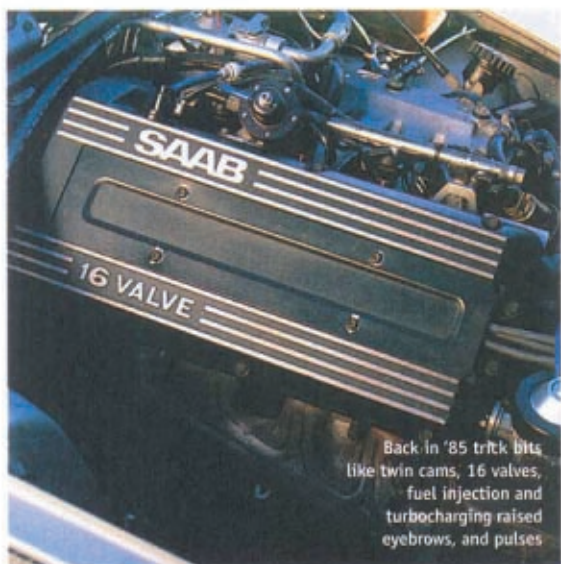
High interest investment

Aside from the engine, perhaps the most interesting technical aspect of the Aero (or the whole 900 range, for that matter) was the front-drive layout that used a longitudinal – rather than the more front-drive-friendly transverse – engine.

The drive was eventually turned through 90-degrees in the transaxle and sent to each front wheel, which is a bit more complicated than a transverse set-up, and also hung the engine further forward than it might otherwise have, which had the potential to upset the weight distribution.

But, just like an Audi which has its transverse engine hanging out over the front axle-line, the 900 worked pretty well, and while it would eventually understeer (particularly in grunter Aero form) it had roadholding that made most other things of the era look pretty clumsy.

Leaving the line in a hurry would produce plenty of wheelspin if you didn't finesse the clutch and there was a bit of torque steer if you booted the Aero in the slats in a lower gear; worse if the road was wet.



Back in '85 trick bits like twin cams, 16 valves, fuel injection and turbocharging raised eyebrows, and pulses

the Aero was one of the great hot-poop cars you could get into

The turbo motor also had its share of lag, and while it was streets ahead of anything else with number plates and a hairdryer, it still took a little while to spool up.

That was thrown into higher relief by the fact that the two-litre mill wasn't a particularly strong low-rev performer, thanks partly to the oversquare dimensions (90 mm bore, 78 mm stroke) but mainly to the lower compression ratio required to prevent detonation when the snail was turning up the wick a bit.

A five-speed manual box was your only option, but seriously, the three-speed auto was pox and would have instantly ruined what was otherwise a great driver's car.

And that's the bottom line: flawed though it may have been in a 2001 sense, back in '85, the Aero was one of the great hot-poop cars you could get into. End of story, and anybody who didn't want a 900 Aero was probably already driving a Corona.

Spotto

You'll spot an Aero first by the body kit. Only available in black or silver, the basic shape was helped along by a deeper



front spoiler, a subtle rear lip at the bottom of the rear hatch and those gorgeous three-spoke alloy wheels that still look the biz.

Saab delivered the cars with a dark-grey body kit, but just about every dealer made the effort to colour-code the plastic bits which improved the look out of sight.

Inside, the basic quirky (damn, I promised myself I was going to finish a Saab *Past Blast* without using the word 'quirky') layout was adapted to include a black dashboard with a more comprehensive instrument pod containing a boost gauge among other things. But if the Aero you're looking at isn't all black inside, don't assume that it's a cheater; for some reason Saab delivered a few cars with a colour-keyed interior.

The highlights were the front pews which were orthopaedically designed for great support over long distances yet were still comfy when you first jumped in. Oh yeah, and Aeros got an all dead-cow interior.

Talk dirty to us

Thanks to ULP, the very first cars from 1985 were the gun units. The lower octane of mid-'80s unleaded meant Saab in 1986 had to drop the power of the engine (eventually settling for an across-the-board specification for all its two-litre turbo engines, including the Aero).

So, later engines got 118 kW at 5500 rpm and a still-handly 255 Nm of torque at 3000 rpm. Compare that with the 129 kW at 5300 rpm of the '85 model and you can see why dirty is nice.

Either way, though, you'll find that even an '86 or later model will still feel nice and pokey thanks to the turbo rush that, for better or for worse, is more or less a thing of the past with today's more docile, low-pressure turbo mills.



Orthopaedically-designed front pews draped in dead-cow were a highlight

Nightmare anyone?


Saab's turbo technology is well proven, but that's not to say the whole Aero package is without potential dramas.

A car that has been abused over time will show outward signs of neglect, but it's the problems you can't see that are the real worries. Okay, so that goes for any performance car, but Saab repairs and parts aren't exactly in the bargain basement category.

A worn engine is bad news and any smoke from the tailpipe should up your heart rate. Same goes for any noises in the engine and, apart from a little valve clatter, a Saab four-cylinder shouldn't be mechanically noisy.

Gearboxes aren't the problems that some Saab autos can be, but they have been known to fail in service.

An equally big chance is that the car you're looking at has been stuffed into something solid at a decent clip. Hot cars are like that.

The bottom line is that if repairs have been done properly, you shouldn't be able to spot them. 

FAST FACTS

engine

front-mounted 2.0-litre, 16-valve, DOHC in-line four, fuel-injected

bore x stroke

90.0 x 78.0 mm

compression ratio

9.0:1

drive

front-wheel

power

129 kW @ 5300 rpm

torque

273 Nm @ 3000 rpm

specific power

65.0 kW/litre

weight

1300 kg

weight/power

10.1 kg/kW

transmission

five-speed manual

suspension

upper and lower control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar (f); tubular dead axle, lower trailing arms, upper leading arms and Panhard rod, coil springs, anti-roll bar (r)

wheels

15 x 5.5-inch (f);
15 x 5.5-inch (r), alloy

tyres

Pirelli P6,
195/60 R15 (f); 195/60 R15 (r)

track

1430 mm (f); 1440 mm (r)

brakes

280 mm discs (f);
269.5 mm discs (r),

length/width/height

4739/1690/1425 mm

wheelbase

2517 mm

price when new

\$37,250 (1985)

Futuristic Aero was all the rage with wannabe pilots back in the days when Duran Duran were kings. "Sweden Air, this is ground control, you are cleared for take-off in lane two..."

Show us yours

Do you own a clean and original Honda CRX or Volvo 740 Turbo, live in Melbourne or Sydney and can spare the time to have your car photographed? Can you tell us in 200 words or less what you love and loath about it? If so, we wanna hear from you. Contact Cameron McGavin on amotor@acpaction.com.au or write to MOTOR at Locked Bag 12, Oakleigh, Vic, 3166, and your Past Blaster could grace these pages



Flash bodykit and neat three-spoke alloys set the Aero apart from its more pragmatic relatives

