

Unexpected reunion

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30/09/2020 A young motoring journalist, a charismatic head of development and a Porsche 928 S4: the anchor points of an incredible story that shows that some cars really do have a soul.

When Tobias Aichele, author ("Porsche 911 – Forever young"), journalist and organiser of classic car events, saw this 928 S4 again by chance after decades, it was THE déjà vu of his life. The car on sale reminded him of a very productive phase of his career spanning more than 30 years.

The year was 1987. At that time, Aichele (born in 1960) was still a junior editor at the Stuttgart-based Motor-Presse, who was due to conduct an interview with Porsche's head of development Helmuth Bott as part of a monograph on the Porsche 911. The interview was to be held on-site in his office at the Development Centre in Weissach. "It was there that I saw his company car parked for the first time. It stood out immediately because of its unusual colour and peculiar antenna for the Network C phone," recalls the Stuttgart native. What he couldn't have known then was that this 928 S4 was no ordinary model: it was being used by Bott simultaneously as a test vehicle, enhanced by the 5.4-litre engine with

a power output of approximately 350 PS and other prototype parts which only later made their way into series production.

The interview – at that time the questions did not have to be submitted in advance – was, to the delight of the initially still somewhat nervous young writer, very informative and agreeable. "Personal questions were also allowed. So I discovered that he still owned a 356 SC Coupé, as well as an older 911, which had a catalytic converter installed as a test component, and he even drove a Porsche diesel." At this first meeting, Bott exuded a strong charisma from the outset, recalls Aichele. "He was engaging, you felt at ease in his presence. But compared to the then chief designer Anatole Lapine, he was introverted." Latvian-born Lapine had also recounted an anecdote which perfectly characterised Bott's personality. He was not the kind of man who engaged in small talk; being in a car with him was usually a very quiet affair – until the music lover suddenly burst into operatic song!

In 1992, Aichele embarked on writing his book "Porsche 911– Forever young", which, compared to all of the previously published 911 bibles, was to be the ultimate chronicle of the 911 saga. Helmuth Bott had already entered early retirement in 1988 at the age of 63, and had agreed to review the chapters of the emerging opus; the pair had never completely lost touch in the years following that first interview. And so it happened that Aichele travelled regularly to the small village of Buttenhausen (around 70 km south of Stuttgart) where Bott was spending his, by no means quiet, retirement.

"He continued to be very busy. There were sweeper robots going around his yard constantly. He would go for long runs on his grounds," recalls Aichele. "He also had a small museum for his cars. He seemed to be in excellent physical health and had obviously found his peace of mind."

When the initial chapters were sent back – in those days still by fax – Aichele sat down to review this first critique. However, what he found in front of him was an untouched manuscript. This prompted the following exchange: "But Mr Bott, did you not have time to look at it?" To which Bott replied: "Mr Aichele, you have interviewed modellers, designers, engineers – it's not my place to make corrections, since I only have an executive's perspective. But I've put a few crosses in pencil next to the passages that I would like to tell you more about." In the end, Bott only added to the manuscript, but didn't correct it. "I found that so remarkable, and it really characterised this charismatic man," says Aichele, still impressed in retrospect.

Bott died unexpectedly in 1994 at the age of just 69. At that time, Aichele had been working at Porsche as head of national news since 1993 and drove a 928 which, back then, was much in demand as a company car right up to the executive level. His had a tow hitch, "because I always had a lot to transport". The affinity felt by 911 aficionados with the 928 grew and led to the founding of the Porsche Club 928 in 1997.

Fast forward to 2019 and the Retro Classics trade fair is taking place in Stuttgart. By an incredible coincidence, Aichele comes across a 928 at a stand with a red registration number which seems strangely familiar to him. He hesitates, then reads the small sales notice: "For sale, former executive car". After making a call to the seller and a thorough inspection of the delivery note, his lingering doubts

turned to certainty: "I held the maintenance record up to the light. Even though it was covered, I could still make out the handwritten 'Mr Bott'. Then all of the memories came back to me, and I knew I had to have it". Thanks to an unbroken paper trail, Aichele was then able to piece together the life of the 928 S4. The letter J in the tenth position of the chassis number revealed the model year 1988. This made it clear that a number of extras had been built in which normal customers could only dream of.

Registered on 7 December 1987, the car already featured a 5.4-litre engine – first used in the new 928 GTS in the 1992 model year. The hydraulic limited-slip differential was first used in the 928 GT, which was launched globally in spring 1990. The tyre-pressure monitoring system (TPMS), which was first tested in motorsport, made its way into the 928 for the first time in the 1989 model year, as did the new on-board computer, which now showed multiple functions in connection with differently displayed instruments on two LCD displays in orange plain text. Another new feature was the on-board diagnostics, which allowed mechanics to view faults directly. Only the heavy Network C telephone could be ordered at that time as special accessory M496, and has remained in the car to this day. A relic of the early mobile phone era, it can only be operated when the large folding cover is open.

That Porsche executive vehicles were lavishly fitted out was a given. But what set Bott's 928 S4 apart was the fact that it was also a prototype and test vehicle. "For us, every drive was a test drive," recalls Bott's widow Doris. In May 1988, the car again appeared in press photos. They show Bott presenting a 959 to the Baden-Württemberg Minister Erwin Vetter in Weissach, and him getting into the adjacent 928 S4 painted in Brick Red Metallic (811), a colour which at that time could not be ordered.

"Helmuth Bott must have handed the car over as scheduled no later than 1989," says Aichele. In order to get the car ready for onward sale and a new registration, certain modifications were required, such as replacing the plastic bonnet with the standard aluminium bonnet and fitting the serial number 001 to the carefully reinstalled 4.5-litre engine. In other ways as well, all of the other components had to be refitted to series standard.

The second owner from Munich purchased the car on 24 January 1991 with 19,200 km on the odometer. By the time he came to sell it for reasons of age, it had clocked up 210,000 km. Aichele: "The 928 fan had invested so much in the car that it would have ended up costing virtually the same as if it had been new. It was given a full professional repaint a few years ago, as well as regular services. The leather seats also appear to have been restored, although there is no receipt for this." When Aichele visited Doris Bott in the course of his research on this 928 S4, "I received just as warm a welcome as I had done 27 years ago. It was wonderful to see how young and eager for action she still was at the age of 76." In her home in Würm near Pforzheim, there is also still a Helmuth Bott room. "A large picture hangs in this room – as it had done in his office – of the test track in Weissach that he had played a major role in developing. That was obviously very important to him."

Then Aichele managed, at long last, to get his hands on the original number plate: S-PW 980. Now with the addition of the letter 'H'. Thus the spirit of Helmuth Bott lives on in this 928 S4 and reminds its third owner of a very productive life and a very special encounter on every drive. Some cars really do have a soul.

Porsche 928 S4 (model year 1988) – Technical specifications

Engine: V8, water-cooled
Gearbox: four-speed automatic
Displacement: 4,957 cm^3
Mixture formation: Bosch LH Jetronic
Ignition: electronic EZK ignition with diagnostic function
Maximum power output: 235 kW (320 PS) at 6,000 rpm
Wheelbase: 2,500 mm
Top speed: 270 (automatic: 265) km/h

Info

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