

# HATS OFF TO SAAB

Left to their own devices, Saab might never have launched a soft-top, but prompted by their thriving US offshoot's certainty of an instant West Coast market and a worthwhile European spin-off, the Swedish company just *had* to build the 900 16-valve Turbo Cabriolet. **Jesse Crosse** was among the first to drive it, in the California sunshine.

**W**hen Saab showed their 900 Cabriolet concept at the 1984 Frankfurt Show, many were reluctant to accept that it was most likely to remain just that, another unfulfilled automotive dream.

But the truth was, despite a reticent look on the public face of Svenska Aeroplan Aktiebolaget, that the decision to go into production had already been made.

The spectacular new 16V Turbo 'ragtop' is the brainchild of Bob Sinclair, President of Saab Scania of America Inc; and Åke Jaerkvik, Chief Engineer, Special Projects Administration at Saab. It will be built at the Saab-Valmet Uusikaupunki factory in Finland.

Uusikaupunki (say 'Ooseecowpoonskee') ironically means 'New town'; ironically because it was established in 1617 by King Gustavus Adolphus II, and is one of Finland's oldest.

It's a town that was better known for shipbuilding, but it is the motor car which has caused the biggest increase in population, which expanded from 4500 to 14,000 in just two decades. The Saab factory is the biggest employer, with 1500 workers. It's a simple town of wooden

houses, sea, basketball and cars, says a brochure.

Now Saab's choice of this factory to produce the highly specialised Cabriolet is an interesting one; after all, it's a fair bet that not many people have even heard of the place, much less learned to pronounce its name.

Project Manager at Saab Valmet, Leif Hautala says the factory was chosen because of the flexibility of its production lines, low volume output and because of its experience with the up-market 900CD.

His main task is to coordinate the many facets of the Cabriolet's design and production – it is a car, like many, the design of which has been handled by more than one company. In particular, Saab employed a totally separate organisation, the American Sunroof Corporation (ASC of Detroit), to design the hydraulically operated soft top.

The Cabriolet, as Saab call it, is, to split hairs, a true convertible, with no central hoop to blemish its silken lines. The trim was designed at Saab Abingdon in the UK and the body at Trollhättan in Sweden. Prototype cars were built at Uusikaupunki, as was the original concept car. But many trips had to be made between Saab and ASC to tie up the detail of the roof itself, which though engineered by ASC was shaped by Saab's Chief Designer, Bjorn Envall.

The choice of the US market is clearly appropriate; despite the obvious appeal of a convertible on the West Coast of America, where the main thrust of the Convertible's selling operation will take place, it is a fact that that market is a growing one. More than one major manufacturer in the US has discovered that the convertible concept, so popular in the '50s and '60s, is once more popular with its car buying public. And in fact loopholes in the hitherto stringent US 'soft top' laws, allow the building of convertibles which, like the Saab, have no centre roll-over hoop.

Saab Scania of America, and its relaxed President Bob Sinclair (who apparently likes to do as much travelling as possible by motor cycle) is anxious to capitalise on that market, bolstered now by bigger competitors, to consolidate Saab's own position in the marketplace.

That position, mind you, looks encouraging already, for the Swedish

company is enjoying a sales record that has shown persistent growth since Saab went to the USA in 1958.

Since 1979, production of Saab cars has increased from 41,133 to 89,000; a rise of 116 per cent. 26,600 of the current figure comprises 900 Turbos, which represents 29 per cent of the total; but not as much as in previous years. During 1981 and 1982 for example, 32 per cent were Turbos.

In the USA things are looking up too. Sinclair (who also spent 18 years there with Volvo), is at pains to point out that his company has produced record sales every April since 1958, and in 1986, turnover should pass the \$750 million mark.

But his favourite statistic is that US sales have increased from 13,000 in 1979, to 45,000 in 1986 (246 per cent) while dealership numbers have increased from 300 to only 350. This, says Sinclair, demonstrates greater acceptance of the product.

Saab's US President will have to curb his enthusiasm for his new toy though, because only 400 Cabriolets will be built this year, with a current production rate of three cars a day due to rise to twelve in the autumn. And of the 2500 to be built in 1987 at a rate of 12 cars per day, Sinclair's US company will get just 2000 rather than the full quota (the rest will go on sale in Europe – including the UK). Saab hope to increase their overall sales by eight to 10 per cent per year, reaching 180,000 units by 1990. As for the USA, Sinclair puts the case simply.

'We intend to burrow our way into the American market bit by bit'.

## Construction

At first glance, construction of the car with which Sinclair hopes to woo the convertible buying public is simple. Saab Valmet start with three-door 900 Turbo body shells, delivered as separate components from Trollhättan, and simply remove the roof. But under the skin you'll find the familiar cabriolet story. The windscreen frame itself has a steeper rake for aesthetic reasons, is reinforced (and the screen is glued in to add rigidity) and there are special strengthening members in the doors, plus reinforced, 70mm high upper sills made from 2.5mm thick sheet steel. There is what Saab call a torsion case running across the floor of the car just behind the 'B' pillar and another behind

