

Brief guide to the SAAB 9000

1.0 Introduction and origins

SAAB management first began thinking about the design for an entirely new car in the 1970s but the same financial constraints that precluded development of a new engine delayed any serious design work. Of course, SAAB were not the only manufacturers concerned about the enormous costs associated with the design and introduction of new models and eventually this resulted in a quadripartite alliance of makers in a venture that became known as the Type 4 project.

Alfa-Romeo, Fiat and Lancia were SAAB's partners in the Type 4 project and the principal objective was to reduce costs by using a number of common parts. Alfa – Romeo's 164 was styled by Pininfarina but the Fiat Croma, Lancia Thema and SAAB 9000 were all the work of design studio Giugiaro Italdesign. Differences of opinion between engineers led to friction and ultimately, very few components were interchangeable between models.

When it was first introduced (1986), motoring journals perceived the SAAB 9000 to be an accomplished executive car with spacious accommodation and admirable build quality. Buyers were sufficiently impressed to countenance long waiting lists for the new car but this was entirely understandable, as SAAB philosophy is based on iterative refinement of existing designs, rather than copying other makers who see fit to introduce a new model every 45 years or so. Indeed, in 1987, one commentator jokingly said that it was very likely that buyers would have to wait patiently until 2001 before SAAB would introduce another new design!

Today, the 9000 range represents excellent value for money, as even the youngest cars are now four years old and many will have racked up impressive mileages. Traditionally, SAAB cars have quite steep initial depreciation – one dealer stated that this was largely because trade price guides were compiled from auction data and values reflect higher than average miles the cars could achieve in a year. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant – depreciation makes SAABs an excellent proposition for the second hand buyer.



Above: the original 'flat front' shape 9000. This car is a 1990 2 litre Turbo manual.

1.1 Production history: 1985-1991

The SAAB 9000 made its UK debut in turbo charged 2 litre 5-door hatch back form in late 1985. By the expedient of adopting a transverse engine layout, engineers succeeded in offering better accommodation in a car that was slightly shorter than the old 900. Indeed, the internal dimensions satisfied the American EPA criteria for 'Large cars' – the only other imported car to fall in this category was the Rolls Royce.

The first normally aspirated cars appeared in the first quarter of 1986. All these early hatchback cars have 'flat front' styling and are powered by variants of the twin overhead cam 16-valve 1985cc B202 engine. SAABs engine designations are fairly logical: the 20 part refers to the capacity (2-litres) while the final number (2) refers to the number of auxiliary shafts - in this case a pair of camshafts.

Equipment levels were par for the class with the 9000 range: plush velour trim was standard, although leather seat facings were a popular extra cost option. Alloy wheels were standard with turbo charged cars and electrically adjusted door mirrors (the mirror lenses are electrically heated) were fitted to normally aspirated cars too. Not all cars shipped with electric windows to all four doors – the author has seen a few early cars with manually operated windows all round. When all doors have the power window option, a switch is provided to disable the rear window lifts – this can prove a boon when transporting inquisitive youngsters! Whereas makers like Mercedes-Benz and Audi favour vacuum actuation, SAAB used electrically operated central door locking for the 9000 range. This system also secures the petrol filler door when the doors are locked. A pictogram on the instrument panel provides a visual warning when doors or tailgate are not properly closed.

Improvements introduced during 1987 comprised provision of seat heaters and more significantly, ABS brakes (as an extra cost option), whilst a ZF 4-speed automatic gearbox was offered for the first time.

Below: the opulent cabin of the 9000SE with wood door cappings and front centre armrest



With a growing list of options, SAAB decided to target the UK market with an SE variant of the Turbo hatchback in 1988. Since this model was not offered elsewhere, the author believes it seems reasonable to suppose that it was aimed fair and squarely at owners who still hankered for traditional English trim, as epitomised by makers such as Humber, Rover and of course, Jaguar. Seating in the 9000 is a strong point, as the design is said to have been influenced by orthopaedic specialists. Support is nothing less than superlative but when leather facings and electric adjustment is provided too, the effect is enhanced. The really distinctive part of the SE package, though, was the walnut door cappings, console and fascia. With climate control as standard, the cabin had an unmistakable air of opulence.

SAAB's climate control (CCS) is quite different from air conditioning which is fitted to some models. With air conditioning, the same rotational dial controls are carried over from non-a/c equipped cars and the air conditioning is actuated by a push button switch marked with an ice crystal icon. Throughput is governed by the ventilator blower fan. By comparison, climate control is more sophisticated, and the switch panel is correspondingly more complicated. By default, the system is on, maintaining a cabin temperature selected by the driver, although an economy mode and off button is also provided. When CCS is fitted, the heated rear window and rear door demister controls are incorporated in the button array.

An alternative body style appeared in 1989, in the form of the CD, a booted 4-door saloon. It is possible that the SAAB marketing team were concerned that potential sales were being lost because buyers seeking a traditional saloon may have preferred instead offerings from Mercedes Benz or even Ford's Mk III Granada.



Above: The CD saloon. This car is a 1994 model year 2.3 CDE full pressure Turbo

In contrast to the 9000 hatchback, the frontal styling of the CD saloon has a more pronounced aerodynamic slope. Although owners lost the ability to fold down rear seats due to provision of a full rear bulkhead, boot space was still impressive and a 'ski hatch' behind the folding rear armrest allowed longer loads to be accommodated. For the first time, a button switch appeared in the driver's door card – this was to facilitate remote opening of the boot. Many owners are convinced that the saloons are slightly quieter and more refined than the hatchbacks. Whether this is true or not remains open to discussion but the saloon makes an excellent platform for a coach built long wheelbase, 6-door limousine conversion, which is held in high esteem by the carriage trade. Overall, the author believes that the styling of the CD version of the 9000 was much better executed than Ford's efforts with the Granada MK III.

When the CD saloon became available, buyers were also offered a larger displacement 2.3 (2290cc) engine (still 4 cylinder) which was fitted with 2 balance shafts, in the interests of extra refinement. Initially, cars could be had with the 2.3 turbo-charged engine only. With a pair of camshafts and two balance shafts, the engine designation B234 makes perfect sense. This engine was fitted with direct ignition from the outset, which dispensed with the need for a distributor and ignition leads. With this system, each cylinder has its own coil pack contained within the red coloured Direct Ignition unit which is fitted directly to the spark plugs. Eventually, this ignition system was applied to 2 litre engines, starting with turbo charged models.

From 1988, a special high performance version of the 9000 turbo was introduced in the form of the Talladega, which was built to commemorate the endurance records set by three standard turbocharged SAAB 9000s at Talladega Speedway in the US. In total 19 new international records were set. In the UK alone, the Talladega was marketed as the 9000 Carlsson. A trifle brash for some tastes, this model used a revised ecu with revised programming to allow higher boost pressures and a different ignition advance curve. A twin tailpipe exhaust completed the engine modifications that produced an additional 20 or so BHP.

Externally, the Carlsson made its presence felt with colour coded wheel arch mouldings, colour coded sill extensions and bumpers, together with a less than understated tailgate spoiler. The external appearance is very much an acquired taste but inside the cabin, differences are confined to the fitment of a stylish leather bound Momo steering wheel. All the cars I have seen have been fitted with air conditioning and some have had suede seat inserts in the sides of the leather facings. Carlssons should be fitted with 16" alloys: either the crosswire style or the more desirable dished, two tone super aero style so beloved of enthusiasts. Early Carlssons will invariably be fitted with the 2 litre turbo engine but later sloping front hatches could have the 2.3 (B234) engine fitted, probably with SAAB Traction Control System (TCS) and anti-lock brakes (ABS). Specialists reckon the saloon version of the Carlsson is quite rare. Officially, the Carlsson was only available in white, graphite metallic, red and black. Automatic transmission was not a popular option with this car and the author has seen but one example so equipped!

1.2 Production history: 1991-1998

For the 1991 model year, hatchbacks received the same aerodynamic sloping front that the CD saloon had been fitted with since its introduction. A number of normally aspirated models were also sold with XS specification, which usually offered drivers extra value for money option packs that came in just beneath the company car tax threshold.

The hatchback received a major makeover for the 1992 model year with an entirely new front end, including different wings, bonnet, grille, lights and bumper. At the back of the car, the rear quarters lost their quarter glasses, whilst a revised tailgate, back lights and bumper completed the transformation.

Below: two views showing the CS hatchback styling to good effect. The car on the left is a 1994 3-litre V6 CSE auto: the car on the right is a 1997 fpt 2.3 Turbo manual.



As a styling exercise, it was an object lesson in achieving an entirely new, contemporary look without the need for retooling the entire production line. Inside the cabin, changes were confined to resiting the hazard light switch and redesigning the window switch gear in the centre console. The remote boot release button that appears in the driver's door card became standard with the new models. Air bags started to appear in steering wheels soon after, though not all cars had them as standard. These new shape hatches were offered in CS (standard trim) and CSE guise. Engine choices were as before but gearboxes were revised for a slicker change about this time.

Turbo charged 2.3 cars in CS form with TCS could look surprisingly innocent without alloy wheels – only the discreet turbo badge on the front grille gave the game away. As a rule, CSE models were better equipped, with the majority of cars having a climate control system (CCS) and alloy wheels. By now, the standard alloy wheels sometimes known as teardrops (because cleaning is fun?) but more properly known as short spokes had given way to an anodyne, 3 spoke directional wheel which did not meet with universal enthusiasm.

Below Left: CSE fascia layout is little changed from earlier cars but note airbag equipped steering wheel. The luggage boot (Right) can be made larger still by folding the rear seats.



For a while, elements of the Carlsson continued in much more subdued form before a new, quicker CS Turbo variant was announced for the 1993 model year. The new

CS Aero was more discreet than the Carlsson models, although it featured a colour coded tailgate spoiler, wheel arch mouldings and different bumpers and sill covers.

Below: the 225bhp CS Aero. Note wrap around bumpers, sill extensions and black moulding inserts that run along the flanks and through the bumpers. The silver car has been debadged and has standard seats whereas the blue car (**Right**) retains the discreet Aero decal and optional Sports seats.



These subtle changes were complimented by black, rather than the standard black with chrome effect door mouldings of other CS models. Revised spring rates and deep-dish 16" Super Aero 3 spoke alloys were also part of the package, whilst inside, superb new figure hugging sculptured leather seats were available as an extra cost option. This machine, with its 225bhp engine had a top speed only just short of 150mph with acceleration to match. Unfortunately, sales were relatively poor, perhaps as a result of the high price tag and one specialist told the author that in 1993, an Aero with the optional Sports seats cost over £32,000. Whereas the figure hugging sports seats offer superb support and keep occupants in place, even during fairly spirited driving for which the car is designed, it must be conceded that some of the versatility is lost, as the capacity to accommodate three rear seat passengers is compromised.

Below: supportive Sports seats in the Aero but note the deep divide between the rear cushions. Not all Aeros have Sports seats, although the feature was standard on later cars.



While the hatch continued in revised form as the CS, the saloon soldiered on unchanged until the same frontal treatment was applied for 1994 model year cars. The effect was not entirely successful because overall, it was only half a makeover and aside from reworked rear lights, the rear of the car looked very similar to previous models.

Another trim level, known as the Griffin also became available shortly after GM acquired ownership of SAAB. The Griffin trim included all available options as standard. General Motors management also saw a new market for their 2969cc V6 engines. This engine (designation B308) also powered the Vauxhall/Opel Omega, and the reasoning was that buyers who previously spurned the 4 cylinder Turbos for being 'too reactionary' might well be impressed with a refined six cylinder 3-litre engine. In reality, the anticipated sales boom never transpired, although the car itself was a very relaxed and competent cruiser. Fuel consumption was surprisingly good but the author feels that this is because the big, lazy engine seldom breaks into a sweat. Irrespective of use, the author managed to return 28mpg even on short, town journeys. Owners who had previously owned 9000 turbos would find the lack of outright performance and acceleration in particular belied the 210bhp rating of the engine.

Below. the GM V6 (B308) engine installed in a 9000 CSE



After 1994, the 9000 CS and CD continued virtually unchanged until production ceased in 1997, although a few vehicles were not registered until 1998. A light pressure turbo charged engine (known as the Eco or LPT) was announced that bridged the gap between normally aspirated and full pressure turbo cars. These engines benefited from a lower insurance loading, whilst offering more power without any turbo lag. Such models are easily identified as they do not have a boost gauge on the dashboard. The popularity of the light pressure turbo was such that by 1996, the normally aspirated engine models were withdrawn. To confuse matters, at some point in the mid '90s, the tag Eco was applied to all models, irrespective of whether the LPT or full pressure turbo engine was fitted.

Inside the cars, some owners were disappointed when passenger airbags appeared, as this meant the loss of that useful and capacious lockable glovebox. In its stead, a pocket was fitted to the centre console. More observant owners who had owned 9000s previously would detect signs of penny pinching and blame General Motors 'bean counters' for the deletion of the useful under bonnet lamp. They might also note that there was considerably less carpet beneath the rear seats on the CS & E models than on previous cars.

The XS specification varied slightly from year to year but consultation of the 1995 model year brochure confirms the availability of 4 option packs. Option packs 1 and 2 combined either air conditioning or full automatic climate control with alloy wheels, driving lamps and leather bound steering wheels and gear knobs. A further two packs were also offered in the form of 'comfort' or 'driving'. The former offered leather seat facings with the SAAB car computer and cruise control whilst the latter was more basic, providing just cruise control and the car computer.

Engine blocks and transmissions altered about this time too, in a move intended by GM to promote standardisation across the entire product range. Engine management systems changed also in a move that was to cause complications for repairers later in the vehicles' lives when it would be discovered that earlier parts could not be adapted to fit.

The range's swansong was the Anniversary, so named because it coincided with the maker's 50th Anniversary. Engine options remained unchanged, with cars being offered with either of the light pressure (LPT) engines rated at 150 and 170 bhp respectively or the 2.3 FPT (200bhp). Smart new 8 spoke alloys complimented the Aero style body-kit that included colour coded wrap around bumper covers, sill extensions, front and rear spoilers and wheel arch mouldings. The side mouldings on the doors and front wings had black as opposed to the normal chrome effect inserts, in common with Aero and CS Carlsson variants. A special steering wheel with wood inserts gave the cars a special feel whilst leather seat facings in either rocky black (suede inserts) or sand beige (alpaca inserts) were standard, along with textile over mats. Reflecting the maker's aviation connection, seat backrests were embossed with the SAAB aeroplane logo. Colour choice was restricted to Black, Scarabe green, Midnight blue, Amethyst violet or Imola red.



Above: Anniversary models had either Sand beige or Rocky black interior trim. Note embossed logo.