



# SWAN SONG

## THE 1300 COUPES AND SEDANS WERE THE LAST CARS IN WHICH SOICHIRO HONDA HAD DIRECT INVOLVEMENT

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Cars can earn the epithet 'extraordinary' in all sorts of ways, and some are more laudable than others. But whatever their claim, those that are branded 'extraordinary' seldom blend into the background. Honda's 1300s, though, concealed their precocious novelty with neat elegant lines, and would have looked at home among Ford's contemporary Mark 1 Escorts and particularly the Capri 1300 GXL that would have been the 1300 Coupe's price benchmark if plans for UK sales hadn't been abandoned at the eleventh hour.

Extraordinary, though? How so? Well, how long do you have? Small as they are by our standards, the 1300 Sedans and Coupes were, at the time, the largest cars Honda had offered, having entered the four-wheel market with its little T360 prototype, S500s, N600s, L700s and S800s, all with motorcycle-like engineering, chain-drive trailing arm rear suspension,

double overhead camshafts and roller-bearing cranks, but the 1300 was the last project with which Soichiro 'Honda-san' was directly involved. He was well over 70 and the company's directors, uncomfortable with his unconstrained passion for novelty, constant revisions and unprofitable outcomes, persuaded him to step back to a respected presidential consultancy sinecure, and rolled out a short run of around 2500 fuel-injected water-cooled 145 Sedans and Coupes with subtly restyled 'faces' and, crucially, the more conventional liquid-cooled Civic that's still a successful brand today.

Everything about this Honda is exceptional, apart from its appearance. It's a pretty little thing, but not in any way eccentric, apart from the prominent wing mirrors still favoured by the Japanese. Its 'face' and outline are always said to have been influenced by Honda-san's much-loved but far larger Pontiac Firebird,







and its tasteful elegance contrasts with a lot of the UK's early Japanese imports, when open-minded buyers had to balance the challenge of fussy unfamiliar styling, on the likes of a Toyota Corona, with the appeal of equally unfamiliar quality build and all the usual extras being thrown in FOC. The 1300 Coupe's proportions are just so right that photographs give little clue to how small it is, unless accompanied by something familiar for scale, like a wheelie bin or post box. The first time a 5' 8" driver attempts entry can come as an unexpected surprise. This reassuringly respectable clothing, though, conceals a technical tour de force, and a seriously appealing driving experience.

The 1300 is so full of innovations that it's hard to know where to start. Maybe the almost-square five-bearing cross-flow hemi-head engine, with its chain-driven single overhead camshaft? By the early sixties, Honda-san's motorcycle company was the world's most successful, based on sound engineering and air-cooled engines, and it was his conviction that, as liquid coolant had itself to be cooled by air, why not cut to the chase and lose the liquid for this new project? But this is no typical air-cooled engine. No tinware and baffles anywhere, because it's more like a liquid-cooled structure but with air rather than water in its block and head galleries. The whole thing's cast aluminium with cast-iron liners. No lightweight at 180kg, its concealed cylinder fins are shorter and thicker than usual, supposedly to reduce noisy resonance. This has been reported as a response to the farty VW, which is strange because the predominant Beetle noise is from the exhaust, not its engine. Could that short thick finning have just made casting easier while providing a bit of a sales pitch, because the Honda's soundtrack is still hardly unobtrusive? An enclosed fan pushes the air through but there's no oil cooler, or rather there is but it takes the form of a heavily finned remote reservoir as this is a dry-sump engine, more familiar in racing cars or aircraft to avoid starvation in sudden changes of speed and direction. The dipstick atop the oil reservoir is a sealed screw-fit, the oil system being pressurised. Also heavily finned is the cast exhaust manifold to dissipate rather than concentrate heat at the front of the transverse engine's compartment.

A four-speed manual gearbox behind the engine has its own oil sump. Silently chain-driven like its smaller predecessors and driving the front wheels, it recalls the revolutionary 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado. The impression given on opening the bonnet is of a tightly packed bay full of 'stuff', like a modern. You don't see the ground as you look around the engine, as you would in a contemporary Escort Mk1, and the JDM (Japanese Domestic Market) car's bay is even fuller with the air-conditioning unit offered only to the home crowd squeezed into the front left corner. All the ancillaries look tailor-made to fit in like a jigsaw puzzle, the big air-con compressor making

it almost impossible even to find the engine number below it, particularly if it's dirty, which explains the blank space on this car's V5C registration document.

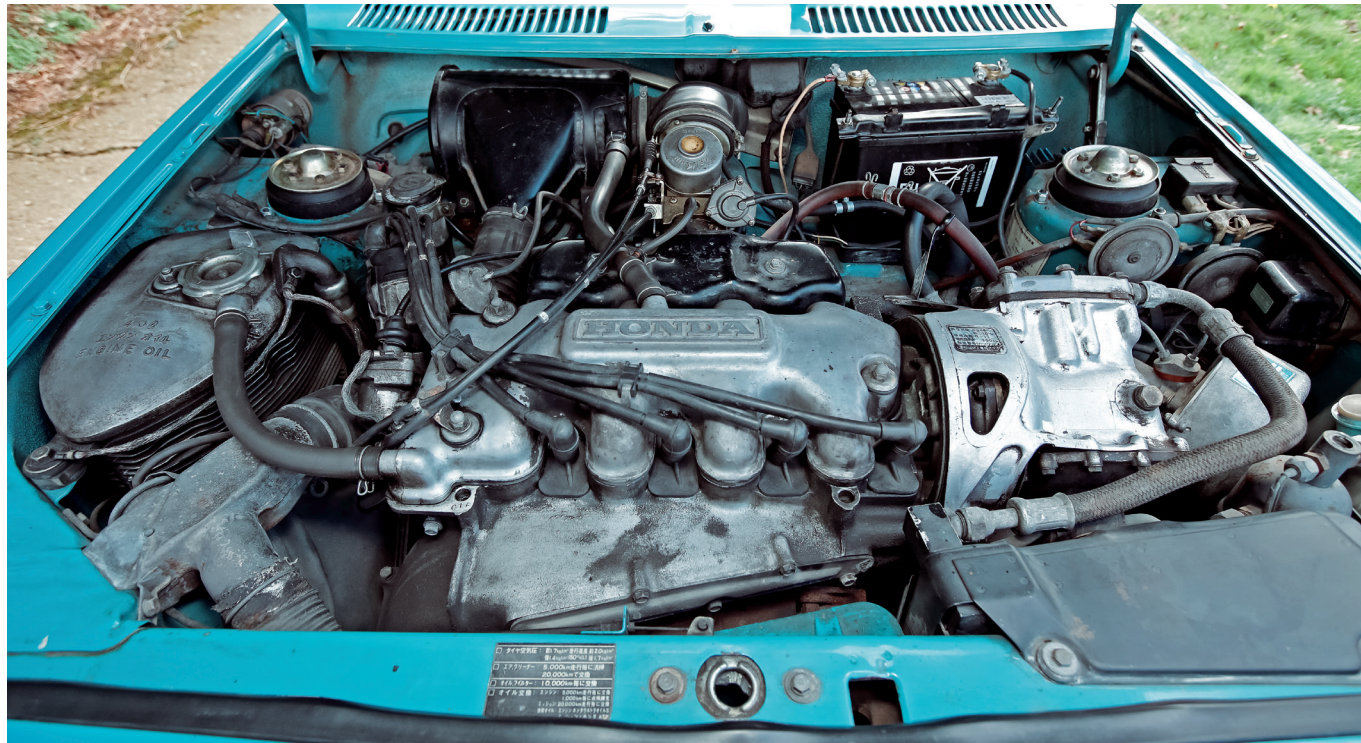
If some of that's a bit unexpected, it doesn't get any more normal if we move to the rear, even though longitudinal leaf springs might sound, at first, a bit ordinary. 'Nothing new under the sun' is a familiar mantra, and 'unique' can so often be challenged, but I think we can chance our arm here because, with no driveshafts or diff to accommodate, independent suspension is achieved with full-width cross-over swing axles, and where else have you encountered those, or even heard of them? The clever Honda's swing axles each pivot on the opposite side from the wheel that each supports, rather than somewhere short of the car's centreline; independent, but with the stability of a full-width beam, negligible camber change and no risk of jacking or tuck-under.

The inevitable arc movement at the wheel end of a normal swing axle rules out space-saving longitudinal leaf springs, but not here. Rather than traditional multi-leaf springs that require the leaves to slide on each other, though, and that can corrode and bind, we find fully 1.2m-long single-leaves with shorter single helpers that, still separated by rubber cushion stops, don't touch the main springs unless they're under load. The swing axles have a floating connection to each leaf, to avoid twisting them. This cross-over geometry has been used before, occasionally, but never at the rear. Before WW1, London and European fleets of Unic city taxi cabs employed a closely related 'long swing-beam' layout at the front, as did Arthur Mallock's 1963 U2 Mk3 racer, and the longest-running application of this geometry, still at the front, has been the 'Twin-I-beam' coil spring suspension that Ford used for 55 years on its F100 pickups from 1965.

Even the structure of the car was advanced and prophetic, with its integral 'Mohican' tub that's now adopted routinely. The giveaway is the pair of trim strips either side of the roof, when







contemporaries still had traditional gutters above the doors. Each side of the car is formed by an enormous single pressing, with bolt-on front wings, and the roof trims cover the seams with the roof. Apparently, Soichiro was troubled by the health risks faced by his workforce due to the extensive lead-loading necessary on his earlier cars, and this methodology greatly improved the factory environment as well as delivering, along with a substantial front sub-frame, commendable rigidity.

## AN UNEXPECTED PURCHASE

I thought I'd given *Classic.Retro.Modern*. 18 my full attention, but managed somehow not even to notice or identify a pretty little blue car that dominated page 55. It was a while later that I happened to spot a much smaller thumbnail of the same car, and a paragraph on it, in *Classic Car Weekly*. 'Air-cooled', I read, 'dry sump and four carburettors', so when my wife Kirsten asked if I'd seen anything interesting this week I was able to respond "Well, there's this". And now it's ours, or rather hers, because she fell in love with it immediately and I was able to relax with regard to 2022's Christmas present! Despite a bit of a cashflow situation and an absence of any more covered storage, we had our dormant trailer quickly upgraded and serviced for a mere £650, arranged an early visit, did the deal and towed it home as the ice abated just before Christmas.

The Honda 1300 was never sold in the UK, despite all being right-hand drive, and we'd believed ours to be the only example registered here, making it a nice fit with our Mercedes W23 130 and Tatra T97 (issue 16) that, as far as we know, are also the only UK-registered examples. We've since discovered that there's another on British plates and DVLA's database, but that it now resides permanently in Denmark. Most exports were to Australia and New Zealand, conveniently closer to Japan.

We've courted the unorthodox for decades, so we're used to factoring into forecourt refuelling and shopping visits the time to respond to questions and comments that our fleet has always prompted; our numerous Tatrás from 1938 to 1996 for example, a turbocharged Corvair 180hp Corsa convertible (issue 13), a Ro80 (issue 11), an Alpine GTA, a Škoda 120 and the 89-year old rear-engined Mercedes that we still campaign, and that was awarded

Car of Show at 2021's NEC Classic Motor Show. But this, our latest, attracts attention from a different and often more youthful audience, which is actually rather refreshing.

Four carburettors, though, like its S800 predecessor? Well actually no, not this one, because it's a Coupe 7 with one 36mm Keihin and slightly lower compression, not a Coupe 9 with its neat 4-pack delivering another 14bhp. Dealer Justin Banks, unaware of the weekly's sloppy journalism, had been mystified by several references to four carbs from telephone enquirers, and we were slightly disappointed.

But if all this is a bit more technical than entertaining, here's the thing: I've never driven a light car with sporty pretensions, that has better suspension. Yes, Citroën's brilliant 2CV might be perfect for its intended rural duties, comfortable, great fun and even with a quiet air-cooled engine, and my first car, a new 1970 Simca 1000 Spécial, was also thoroughly entertaining but uncomfortable, as if front and rear suspensions were designed by separate teams who weren't on speaking terms, which actually did happen a few years later on GM's notorious 1980 X-platform programme. This half-century-old Honda, though, a contemporary of that Simca, ticks all the boxes; supple for the first inch or so of deflection, and then progressively firmer, with little roll and effectively damped, so an impressive combination of comfort and control. The manual rack-and-pinion steering, quite heavy at low speed but progressively lightening up, has a complementary character, 3.8 turns lock-to-lock and impressively precise with great feel and absolutely no slop. Few affordable sports cars of this period drove anywhere nearly as competently.

## THE EXPERIENCE

The accommodation is as pleasing as the drive. Colour-coded geometrically patterned cloth upholstery is inviting and comfy with generously bolstered front seats. Some have wondered if it's original, along with our handsome Honda logo'd alloy wheels that I've only so far seen on a water-cooled 145 successor, and the steering wheel, none of which we've seen on internet 1300 images. But the spec. was constantly revised by Mr Honda, so who knows? The moulded plastic dash is impressively three-dimensional and with a BMW-ish curve, its speedo in kilometres

## PEDANTS' CORNER

For the Japanese and much of the world, learning and speaking English means American English, not our version; there are over five times as many US citizens as us, after all, and money talks! Our adopted description of a car like this might be coupé, with a French acute diacritic, but those of us already around in 1963 never heard the Beach Boys singing Little Deuce 'Coopay', did we? With its capital C and no accent on the Honda's boot, Coupe here is part of the car's official name, and it's just one syllable. So no letters of complaint please, that we've played fast and loose with our acute accents...







and with a very necessary rev-counter; the engine's redline might not be the screaming 10,000rpm of its little predecessors, but 7500 is pretty entertaining. The fascia is comprehensively populated, and the JDM-only roof console accommodates even more switches and a map light.

There's plenty of labelling in English and ten fuses are plugged into a removable tray that just slides completely out from under the dash for inspection. If taken with the driver after parking, this can serve as a high-security anti-theft device. The right-hand A-pillar accommodates an electric antenna that, with its own switch, avoids losing your aerial by inadvertently switching on the radio in a car wash, as I recall a boss of mine doing twice in six weeks. For its day the in-car entertainment is comprehensive with a Pioneer cassette player included. Door windows and pop-out rears are stylishly frameless. Front lap belts are easy to forget when you try to exit, and wonder why you can't get free, and the boot's another big surprise, literally, because what looks quite normal at first glance turns out to reach way forward, and is huge.

That boot was also concealing some tyre intel. The spare wheel stows neatly under the mat in a round well, and though inflated the tyre was clearly very old, almost certainly the original from 50 years ago. I got my garage to supply a new budget spare, and they not unreasonably ordered a radial of the same spec. as the four healthy tyres we were running on ...only to discover that the spare no longer fitted the well. Turns out that the 1300's tyres were specifically planned to be tubed Bridgestone Skyway 620H-13 crossplies, which was what was on the spare wheel, and a contemporary review reported that "The 1300 could not enjoy the benefit of the latest tyre development – radials. Weight transfer between left and right wheels is so great with so much power and narrowish tracks [that] the car needs crossplies with high sidewall stiffness". Anyway, it handles very nicely on its current tubeless Dunlop Enasave 165/80 R13 radials that look OK in their arches, so they can stay, possibly with pressures slightly higher than originally recommended for the crossplies.

This car's done hardly any miles since at least 2006. Possibly a bit cramped for tall Dutchmen, or maybe because it's right-hand drive, it remained in stock with a Dutch dealer for two or three years. We know that there were issues trying to register it, too, so is that why that Danish one is still on UK plates? When Justin Banks first sought

sourcing of reconditioned front strut tops has been typical of our efforts. Following her latest purchase, we've watched DHL's tracker logging their progress from New Zealand's South Island to customs clearance in flooded Auckland, Sydney Australia, Singapore, Bahrain, Leipzig, Luton, Heathrow and Oxford, with delivery about ten days after despatch. The strut tops are a design fault, sometimes failing after as little as 10,000 miles and putting a dent in the bonnet, and we've sent our old ones back into the food chain for repair and re-use.

All of our cars are tested regardless of age and exemption, and our pre-MoT inspection established that we had no left rear brake or hand-brake, worn lower front ball joints and tie-rod ends, a dead headlamp, no brake lights or heated rear screen, and perished wipers, but after cleaning the mess in the rear drum and fixing the parking brake we took a run out to Caffeine & Machine at Ettington and were overwhelmed by a fast tick-over and sluggish performance. When we repeated the drive a week or so later, though, we were thrilled to find the engine miraculously transformed. A tank of Super 99 octane and some exercise had suddenly freed everything up and we were flying. With quite an engine crackle and a rorty exhaust on the over-run, it's not exactly low-profile, and encourages a press-on driving style even if you weren't planning to go fast. Anyway, so far so good. This is real fun and, touch wood, a keeper.

## THANKS TO

*Lindsay Thachuk for all of his technical help and pointing us in the right direction for all sorts of things; Lindsay runs the Honda 1300 Coupe register from Canada ([honda-1300-coupe.com](http://honda-1300-coupe.com)), having shipped his car over when he returned from Australia. Graham Wallis in Australia for letting us 'borrow' his strut tops, get them refurbished in NZ, sent to the UK; we are now going to send our old ones back to NZ to be refurbed for Graham. Ian Tuttle in Australia for selling us a tie rod end from one of his three spare steering racks. Carl Squire & team at Overthorpe Garage, Banbury, for patient help (particularly with the electrics under the dash) and for getting the brake slave cylinders refurbished. Shane Murray at Vibratex NZ ([vibratexnz.nz](http://vibratexnz.nz)), various other suppliers around the world for all sorts of obscure parts, Justin Banks plus Dominic O'Sullivan at 3D Rapid Print ([3drapidprint.co.uk](http://3drapidprint.co.uk)).*