

CLASSIC CHOICE
600 HEARSE



JUST THE FACTS



Mercedes-Benz 600 (W100)

Engine M100 6,332cc V8

Power 247bhp@4,000rpm

Torque 369lb ft@2,800rpm

Transmission 4-speed auto, RWD

Weight 2,475kg

0-62mph 9.7sec

Top speed 127mph

Fuel consumption 15.9mpg

Years produced 1964-1981

OVERVIEW

Iconic in their day as symbols of wealth and luxury, 600s have lost none of their status and appeal, and although standard cars are rather rare, a hearse conversion such as this is in quite another league

Figures for a standard 600, fuel consumption determined at 3/4 of top speed (not more than 110km/h, 68mph), plus 10 per cent

LOST LOVE

Such an unusual conversion of a coveted classic needs a good tale to tell, and this car's is longer and has covered more miles than most

WORDS & IMAGES CHRIS ECKERMANN



“Extra body panels and windows were added carefully so it appeared to have always been that way”



△ Plenty of room out back but 600s do not give drivers a lot of space.



△ The coachbuilders originally converted it and helped in the rebuild.



△ The classic 600's details have not been lost despite the conversion.

INTRODUCED IN 1964, THE W100 600 was the pinnacle of the Mercedes-Benz range, and soon became the car for presidents and royalty the world over to be seen in, the original VIP Mercedes.

It was in this decade that a German farmer we only know as Mr K made his fortune selling land for housing developments. He wanted to show off his new found wealth, and what better way to do this than with the crown of German engineering, a 600. So in 1967, he bought a brand new Mercedes-Benz 600 in gold champagne metallic. It was a sign of his new life and to match, he wanted his house redesigned, so he employed an architect. But one day Mr K came home to find his wife, the architect and the 600 gone. He received a call from Paris

airport telling him that was where he could collect his car – his wife and architect were off on their travels. Perhaps understandably, the 600 no longer represented all that was good in his life and Mr K asked the Mercedes dealership in Hanover to collect and sell it.

Around 18 months after the 600 came into Mr K's life, it caught the eye of an undertaker, Carl Holthoff, from Hanover who thought it would make a wonderful hearse. He bought it and commissioned coachbuilding company Conrad Pollmann with the task of transforming the imposing, elegant 600 limo into a fully functioning hearse. This company has a long history of building one off, bespoke vehicles, specialising in converting production cars into hearses, so this unusual project was really quite

normal, although working with such a prestigious and expensive car brought extra responsibilities with it.

The first thing they did was cut the car in half, as standard 600s are simply too short. Extra body panels and windows made the car the required length and the work was done carefully so it appeared to have always been that way. The car then needed to be repainted in a more funereal colour, before the interior refit began. Such a hand built conversion is a painstaking process. Even today, a complete conversion takes about six months.

Fortunately, Carl Holthoff was pleased with the finished item. As well as being a unique addition to his business, it was a vehicle he enjoyed driving. Of course the running costs ▷

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“At a drag strip it completed the quarter-mile in just 16.6 seconds – with the help of a nitrous kit!”

▷ were huge, the mechanics were very delicate and the hydraulics had a habit of playing up. However, from 1970 when the conversion was completed until the late 1990s, Holthoff and his son used it as a hearse.

However, even the most precious classic car can succumb to corrosion, and although the 600 hearse looked good from the outside, on closer inspection it was a different story. It was sent to a workshop for repair, Holthoff hoping to restore his hearse, but everyone was surprised by the colossal amount of work needed. Months passed as the intended three-month restoration soon proved impossible, and the work was left undone.

And so the 600 hearse ended up in America in the care of Karl H Middelhaue, a well known figure in the world of Mercedes 600s. Something of a specialist in W100s and their M100 engines, German born Middelhaue runs a repair and restoration shop and is known for some quite crazy 600 based creations, like his own take on the 600 coupe and a 600 pickup! Always looking for unusual versions of his favourite Mercedes, Middelhaue was delighted when he came across the hearse and after negotiations, it arrived by ship in Boston in May 1999.

Middelhaue stripped the car before working out what to do. Talking to the coachbuilders Pollmann, the rare parts needed for the rebuild were sourced and he came to understand what work had been done. As time passed it became

clear that the entire car was corroded almost beyond repair – this was a massive task, and more expensive than anyone had ever imagined. He had to approach it from a different angle.

Middelhaue wanted to preserve the unique hearse, so transferred the bespoke bodywork to a different 600 in much better condition. It was a much more solid basis, and slowly the carefully crafted coachbuilt extras were added to the new base car. Finally, in June 2000 it was ready for the primer, then painted black in August 2000.

RETURN JOURNEY

The interior also needed attention. The floors were covered in dark velour carpets, curtains added behind the driver's cabin, the original wood was restored, the door panels and the dash trim were covered with black leather for a new, fresh look, and all the chrome was carefully restored. Under the skin, the rear axle was overhauled, the brakes were rebuilt, the notoriously complicated hydraulic system was restored and the mighty 6,332cc V8 was rebuilt. But Middelhaue wanted something better and more modern than the standard article and installed a computerised fuel management system by Berrel Automotive for cleaner combustion, better throttle response and more palatable fuel consumption. He also added an original specification air conditioning system.

The work was finally finished in 2001, the last few jobs hurried so it could make an

appearance at Lode Star Fest 2001 in Portland, Oregon. This meant a cross continental drive in a freshly restored car, complete with show coffin, but the 600 covered the 10,562 miles without any problems. It was even taken to a drag strip where it completed the quarter-mile in just 16.6 seconds – with the help of a nitrous kit! After all his work, Middelhaue was finally able to enjoy his car.

Then, in 2004, Middelhaue got a call from an undertakers in Germany. Elmar Baur was looking for a classic Mercedes hearse and thought this would be perfect for his business. Joining his two E-Class based hearses and Vito van hearse it would complete his Mercedes line up. Baur flew to America and bought the 600 in November 2004, and it came home to Germany the following month. It then made a return trip to Conrad Pollman Karosserie to be adapted to conform to German regulations. In May 2005, the hearse resumed service, and Baur's company, Bestattungen Baur, is now very well known for its special vehicle. Customers appreciate having a true classic car and Baur loves to drive it.

After its convoluted history it is good that the 600 is once again being used regularly. Not everyone would agree that turning a glamorous limousine into a hearse is a positive move, but it is one that keeps this classic in use and brings a glimmer of happiness and pride to people at a difficult time in their lives – everyone deserves the chance to be treated as a VIP at one time. ▣



△ Elmar Baur enjoys using the 600.



△ The M100 V8 has been rebuilt but it is now as strong as ever.



△ The 600 conversion is seamless, very smart and fully functioning.