



THE GERMAN BUILT GS150 IN DETAIL

Collectively, but inaccurately, known in Britain as “Messerschmitt’s”, the thirty thousand or so GS150s built or assembled in Germany between 1955 and 1962 enjoy at least as good a reputation as the Italian built ones and are eagerly collected –and not just in Germany. This makes for a rather interesting contrast with the Lambretta situation where if it’s not made in Italy then people rather turn up their noses at it.

After Messerschmitt took over the German Vespa franchise from Hoffman (a story for another occasion), they first assembled the GS150 VS1 and then manufactured a version of one themselves at their factory in Regensburg alongside their bubble cars, sewing machines, and all the other sundry items they made in order to keep their factories going . They also made cheaper “Vespa Tourers” using the GS body parts, but that is beyond the scope of this article. After only a couple of years or so Messerschmitt pulled out. The reasons for this are not absolutely clear, but are likely to be connected with falling sales. Scooter sales peaked in Germany slightly earlier than in Britain and elsewhere, the German public embarking on a brief micro car craze before ditching them in favour of normal cars. In fact for a while Vespa managed to consolidate its market position in the declining market and, together with Heinkel, they wiped out other German manufacturers such as Zundapp and NSU.

But this was not enough to keep Messerschmitt on board. The ban on Germany producing warplanes expired in 1958, and Messerschmitt would have been keen to return to its core business. There was also an accumulated debt of 500,000 marks. The German government agreed to pay this and award aircraft contracts on the provision that the money was not used to subsidise non-aviation-projects This may be the reason why the manufacturing rights to the bubble car were sold off at around the same time.

After the split a new organisation was formed called “Vespa GMBH Augsburg”. This assembled Vespas at a factory in Augsburg. Confusion is often caused by the fact that there was also an existing Messerschmitt factory in Augsburg, but as far as is known it had no connection with scooters. It should be noted that the Vespa GMBH factory used initially Messerschmitt and subsequently Italian frames. Establishing the order and nature of specification changes has not been easy. There are various books and web sites dealing with the matter, but the information contained in them is often contradictory. In the end, all you can do is to check frame numbers and specifications of individual machines and work back from these. Even then the type numbers do not appear on the VIN plates. So the following represents a “best guess” if you like.

GS1 VS1T

200 VS1s were imported in kit form and assembled by Messerschmitt. Other than badges, it is believed that there were no differences from the usual Piaggio assembled version except that possibly leg shield trim was standard.

GS2 Type 62 VDS1T 1001-7000

Messerschmitt manufactured version of VS1 using their own, less curvy, leg shield pressings, German electrics, Denfeld seat, VDO speedo and alloy trim on the side panels. According to Messerschmitt’s own data, this model weighed seven kilos more than the GS1. Despite the commonly quoted frame number range ending at 7000, the German GS2 register has never come across a frame number later than 2600 something. It seems unlikely now that any significantly higher number will turn up, so it seems that production was only 1600 or so.

GS3 Type 112 VDS2T 7001-10480

This is where things get a little tricky, since this model appears to bridge the changeover to non-Messerschmitt production. In terms of specification, things were similar to the GS2 except for the VS2 headset with enclosed cables and the appearance of the rather distinctive Hella rear light. The completed machines were badged "Messerschmitt", but it seems certain that a lot of them were actually assembled by Vespa GMBH Augsburg using Messerschmitt produced leg shield pressings and other parts. The 200 machines imported into Britain by Douglas were of this type. Production of this model definitely started in March - April 1957, some months before the official formation of Vespa GMBH Augsburg. This opens up the possibility that the first ones might have been assembled by Messerschmitt

GS3 Type 162 VDS2T 10481 -13300

This model definitely had no Messerschmitt connection, and in fact the Messerschmitt badges had now disappeared. The frames are believed to have been imported complete from Italy and have therefore more curved leg shield pressings than the type 112. In other respects the specification was much the same, including the "star" shaped wheels. This version roughly equates to the Italian VS4 model.

GS3 Type 212 VDS2T 13301-35177

The last version of the German GS 150 was essentially a type 162 with VS5 style hubs and wheel rims. It retained the square speedo though, so it could be considered a sort of VS4 ½. The 212 is easily the most numerous of all the types, more being produced than all the others combined. Late versions have indicators on the side panels to comply with new German legislation, and the final batch was painted white instead of the usual silver.

Some people will be disappointed by this article. There is a certain cachet to the Messerschmitt name doubtless because of the reputation of its war time fighter planes. However, in truth, the only GSs Messerschmitt definitely made were about 1600 GS2s. They assembled a few GS1s from Piaggio parts, and sold left-over GS2 parts for Vespa Augsburg to make the first GS3s from. Messerschmitt seem to have also built nearly 14,000 Vespa Tourers, but that is for another time.

So how should we view the German GS in comparison to the Italian original? They could be said to fairly represent the differing priorities of their respective countries. The German version is better built and has a reliably functioning electrical system. Unfortunately, German attempts at styling are predictably clumsy, and the attempts to "improve" on the original in this respect are unsuccessful. The side panel trims make no concession to the natural curvature of the panels, and the Hella rear light doesn't blend in at all. However, these are small transgressions in the overall scheme of things, and German GSs are rightly considered to be the equal of the Italian ones.

This has been an exceptionally difficult article to research, and there is not complete agreement even in Germany about who produced what or even which factories were used. However, thanks are due to Peter Harris and Paul Impey for checking the specification of their machines and to John Gerber and Julian Harajda for supplying additional information.

Detail from a German Vespa Club wedding photo showing clearly the differences between the GS1 and GS2. The Messerschmitt-badged GS1 has a very curvy Piaggio built frame, while the GS2 has a much "flatter" Messerschmitt manufactured one.

After the end of GS150 production at Augsburg there must have been a lot of unsold stock as the type 212 was sold alongside the replacement GS160 GS4 for a while. Late type 212 had indicators. The Denfeld seat does not blend in quite so well as an Aquila one. On the other hand, it is more comfortable....