

# *Torque Tube*

## **Introduction**

When the VVCAA was formed in 1967, the eligible years for Chevrolet vehicles were 1911 to 1942, the latter year marking the cessation of production due to the entry of the USA into World War II. The upper limit was subsequently (mid-1983) raised to 1948 in recognition of the fact that post-war Chevrolets were essentially a refinement of the 1942 model. This same year also marked the end of production of Holden-bodied Chevrolets sold in Australia, providing further evidence in support of the 1948 cut-off.

Up to 1948 Australia was unique in having Holden-bodied Chevrolets, as GM products sold in other RHD markets (e.g. New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom) predominately had Fisher bodies. Chevrolet components imported into Australia were often sourced from GM's Oshawa plant in Canada, because of preferential trade agreements between British Commonwealth countries.

In general, Holden-bodied Chevrolets were remarkably similar in appearance to the contemporary Fisher bodied vehicles, but the experienced eye can detect fine differences from year to year in the body pressings. Up to the mid-1930's, both Holden and Fisher used the traditional body building technique of metal skins applied over timber frames. However, all-steel bodies debuted during 1936 for Fisher and in 1937 for Holden and continued thereafter (except for some "woody wagons").

Three into one. Three different entities: General Motors - the vehicle manufacturer - and the Fisher and Holden family companies - vehicle body manufacturers. All had separate origins, but Fisher and Holden were later absorbed into the GM empire. GM acquired a controlling interest (60% of the stock) in Fisher in 1919 and took over completely in 1926. Holden was contracted by GM in 1923 to produce bodies for GM vehicles sold in Australia, merged with GM to form GM Australia in 1926, followed by a full takeover in 1931 to produce that iconic Australian company, GM-Holden.

Most members will be familiar with the Fisher and Holden logos. Fisher used the (horse-drawn) coach as its trademark, whereas Holden (in the era covered by this article) is recognised by the lion and ball. Both logos have evolved over time, while retaining the essential core design.

## **A new beginning**

Australian-delivered Chevrolet sedans from 1949 to 1968 differed significantly from their Holden-bodied predecessors. This substantial change coincided with the introduction of "Australia's Own Car" – the 48-215 Holden and the market repositioning of Chevrolet (also Pontiac, Buick and Cadillac) as luxury vehicles. Such was the demand for the new Holden cars that GM-H's production facilities were stretched to capacity building bodies and mechanical components in ever increasing numbers. Something had to give and the decision was taken to discontinue local body production for Chevrolet and other GM passenger vehicles. Consequently, from 1949, GM-H imported bare Fisher 4-door sedan components in addition to the mechanical components. GM-H assembled the cars, painted the bodies, added leather upholstery, floor carpets, door armrests, tyres, batteries etc. before being sold. Chevrolet paint colours were selected from the

Holden colour palette, but with a restricted choice. These bodies may be identified by Fisher body front door escutcheon plates and a small GM-H badge on the passenger side of the front seat frame.

In 1949 the Holden 48-215 sedan was £675 whereas the Chevrolet cost £1150; even though it could be argued that the Chevrolet was a better-appointed and more prestigious vehicle, it essentially did the same job as a Holden in terms of everyday transport. No wonder that car buyers swung in favour of the cheaper vehicle. Luckily, enough buyers stuck with Chevrolet to enable us to enjoy our hobby today!

However, GM-H continued to produce Holden-bodied Chevrolet coupe utilities, until they also met their demise in 1952 as the 48-215 Holden utility production capacity increased. GM-H also continued to manufacture bodies for Chevrolet trucks into the late 1950's.

## **The Fisher Years**

Putting aside consideration of the older veteran Chevrolets, the 1948-49 disjunct effectively divides the history of Chevrolet in Australia into two sections. Much has been written about Holden-bodied Chev 4's and Chev 6's up until 1948, but the more recent Fisher-bodied models have been less thoroughly covered, possibly because such Chevrolets were ineligible vehicles in the VVCAA charter.

Our "Fisher Years" concept includes Australian-assembled Chevrolet 4-door sedans from the "new" post-WWII 1949 models through to 1968. This is somewhat of an arbitrary cut-off as a trickle of Chevrolets was available from dealers into the 1970's, but the 1968 Chevrolet models were the final ones to be finished in Australia from imported components, prior to delivery to GM-H dealerships and agencies for sale. We leave post-1968 models to others to write about. We have also eschewed dealer 'special imports' and the recent 'flood' of other body style variants imported from the USA as a result of relaxed legislation allowing LHD vehicles to be driven on Australian roads.

**1949 -1952.** The 1949 Chevrolet had a new look, appearing longer and wider than previous models, but this was an illusion as both the wheelbase and overall length were slightly reduced. The Chevrolet available to Australian buyers was relatively plain compared with the variety of body styles and levels of trim available in the USA and was designated a 'Styleline' model. No doubt due to the small size of the Australian market, the only model offered was a base series 4-door sedan, albeit with locally made leather upholstery and quality trim. Mechanically identical with USA models, in reality the "new" 1949 Chevrolet was little different from the 1948 Chevrolet under the skin, although the front suspension was modified with airplane style shock absorbers. 1950 – 1952 models followed this trend, with annual facelifts to distinguish each year's cars. All models used the 216.5 cu in. engine and manual 3-speed transmission. Bendix brakes were introduced in 1951, replacing the former Huck design. All years shared the same dashboard of 1949 design, with its circular instrument binnacle, unlike the USA where a different dashboard was used in 1951-2.

**1953 – 1954.** Chevrolet changed its model designation for 1953, the base '150' series and mid-range '210' series sitting below the 'Bel-Air' models. The second new body design since WW II was introduced, immediately distinguishing the 1953 Chevrolet from previous years; the mudguard line was raised and a one-piece windscreen introduced. The Australian 1953 Chevrolet was based on the '150' formula. Engines were designated as "Blue Flame" with 235.5 cu in capacity. A substantial leap in appearance came with the release of the 1954 Australian Chevrolet, based for the first time on the mid-range '210' series, "dressed up" with lashings of stainless steel body garnish surrounding the windows, at mid-height along doors and mudguards and the gravel shield adorning the front of the rear mudguard curve. Styling changes for 1954 included the wrap-around rear window and revised grille and tail lights. A manual transmission remained standard in both years.

**1955 – 1957.** The Australian "Tri-Series" Chevrolets were again based on the '210' series and were quite attractive in their own right. Not only did they look lower, they actually were by at least 2½ ". Totally new sheet metal was carried on a revised frame that had greater twist resistance even though lighter in weight. A new ball joint front suspension debuted, banishing king pins forever! There was also an open tail shaft with

two universal joints instead of the former torque tube connecting transmission and differential. These mechanical upgrades ushered Chevrolet into the modern era of automobile design.

The 1955 Chevrolet looked distinctly different from the 1954 it superseded - one is immediately struck by the wrap-around windscreen and vertical "A" pillar that continued through 1957 (setting the style for the FB and EK Holdens). The 1955 dashboard was also common to all three years, unlike the USA where 1957 Chevrolets used a revised instrument cluster. The 1956 Chevrolet received a minor face lift, while the 1957 featured a heavily revised frontal treatment and those fabulous fins (if you like such things) at the rear. No V8 engine was offered here, Australian Chevrolets continuing with the tried and true 235.5 cu in six and manual transmission. The popularity of 1955-7 Chevrolets continues today, particularly 1957 models.

**1958.** Worldwide, the appearance of the 1958 Chevrolet raised eyebrows and Australia was no exception. Gone were the exaggerated tail fins of the 1957 Chevrolet to be replaced with wide, flat tops to the mudguards and quad headlights for the first time. The wrap-around windscreen was retained (and would finally be phased out on the 1961 model). 1958 was a stand-out year design-wise for Chevrolet but the design was not perpetuated as was previous custom of using the same basic body with yearly face lifts for 2, 3 or 4 years; the 1959 Chevrolet was very different again. With revised model nomenclature in 1958, Australian Chevrolets were badged 'Biscayne', equivalent to the former '210' series, still using the 235.5 cu in six and manual transmission. Two-tone paintwork was a common feature of 1958 Chevrolets sold in Australia and some very nice colour combinations were available.

**1959 – 1960.** If 1958 Chevrolets raised eyebrows, the 1959 models raised them further because of the radical rear styling with 'gull-wing' fins and 'cats eye' tail lights. Model nomenclature was again revised, with the 'Bel-Air' line now the mid-range Chevrolet predominantly sold in Australia, for the last time fitted with the 235.5 cu in six and manual transmission. A few fully-imported top-of-the-line Impala models were sold by some dealers and most of these were V8-powered with automatic transmissions. Local regulations caused GM-H to attach those small amber turn indicators underneath the gull wing fins – looking very amateurish at least. From 1960, GM-H lifted their act by manufacturing amber turn indicator lenses, a move made possible by the multiple tail light/indicator arrangement developed by Chevrolet stylists. In GM-H's defence, this was not feasible with the single lens 'cats eye' on the 1959 model.

The 1960 models received revised front- and rear-end treatment that toned down the radicalism of the previous year. GM-H finally relented and introduced V8 engines and automatic transmissions to its Chevrolet range in Australia and this combination continued to the close of Australian assembly of 1968 models in early 1969. 1960 models had the 170hp, 283 cu. in. version of the V8's offered overseas.

**1961 – 1962.** The 1961 Chevrolet was substantially restyled; gone were the wrap-around windscreen and tail fins. The 'Bel-Air' 4-door sedan continued to be the model designated for Australia with its roofline overhanging the back window and giving a very distinctive appearance. The quality of the interior appointments continued in the vein of previous years. A new dashboard/instrument panel was introduced, a RHD version of the 1961 Pontiac sold in the USA and would continue to be used until 1964.

The traditional facelift distinguished the 1962 'Bel-Air' from the 1961 and resulted in a cleaner look, but the mechanical detail was essentially the same. Later in the model year some GM-H dealers offered fully-imported 'Impala' 4-door hardtops, but in low numbers compared with Australian-assembled 'Bel-Air's.

**1963 – 1964.** GM-H continued to assemble their version of the 'Bel-Air' pillared 4-door sedan, that for the first time featured a heater/demister and power steering as standard equipment. Styling was again new with a squared-off look front and rear. Smaller numbers of fully-imported 'Impala' 4-door hardtops offered by the bigger dealers gave Australians a wider choice – for a £400 premium. A mild facelift characterised the 1964 model year; power brakes became standard equipment and a metallic paint option became available.

**1965 – 1966.** The slab-sided look of the 1964 Chevrolet was replaced with "Coke-bottle" styling that transformed its appearance and made for a much more attractive car. For the first time, GM-H assembled both the 'Bel-Air' 4-door pillared sedan and the 'Impala' 4-door hardtop, but the latter had much lower

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Australian content since most of the interior trim was imported. A new dashboard/instrument panel was introduced along the lines of the 1965 USA Chevrolet, with a return to circular dials. Mechanically, the 'Bel-Air' had a 195 hp 283 cu. in. engine, whereas the 'Impala' featured the 230hp 327 cu. in. version.

The two-model concept continued for 1966 with only a minor facelift front and back. In another *ad-hoc* move, GM-H "stuck on" amber turn indicators beside the boot lid on the 1966 sedans, mirroring the makeshift arrangement used on the 1959 model.

**1967 – 1968.** Another pigeon-pair duo of similar looking Chevrolets, still with the "Coke-bottle" look and most easily told apart from the rear, where the 1967 has wide "strip" tail lights below the lower boot edge and the 1968 has 3 separate lights set into the bumper bar on each side. Both available models were from the 'Impala' range, 4-door sedan and hardtop. Mechanicals were similar to the previous models.

By 1968, the writing was on the wall for Chevrolet with the introduction of upper-echelon models from Holden – initially the Premier and later the Brougham. Pontiac, Buick and Cadillac had already fallen by the wayside. So came the end of an era of local content in Chevrolets sold in Australia. From the 1969 model year, any Chevrolets sold new here were full imports.

*Further reading:* Carl Kelsen, a founding member of the Chevrolet Car Club of Victoria Inc. has published a series of articles in that club's 'The Bow-Tie' magazine commencing in May 1997 entitled "Australian Assembled Chevrolets 1958 – 1968" in which he provides additional information to that given above. Carl gives production numbers, retail prices, information on NASCO accessories etc. as well as the protocol for approaching a GM-H dealer by anyone wishing to purchase a Chevrolet or Pontiac back then. See also the G&D April 2019 issue for a story on his 1962 Chevrolet 'Impala'.



*1967 Chevrolet 'Impala' sedan for sale in Brisbane during 1974*