

FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

Right from the start, following my promotion to the post of what was then called, in true American tradition, the Series Bureau Editor - aka commercial features supremo - I was charged with increasing my newspapers' revenue from advertising.

Motoring coverage was obviously a key part of that and my approach was somewhat different from just about every other motoring correspondent I knew. For the most part they were content to borrow cars from the manufacturers in whatever way they could - and in 1970 that wasn't easy for anyone working out in the provinces. To sample a British Motor Corporation car, then our biggest manufacturer, for instance, one had to travel to Leyland and collect it...and that meant going there by the only stopping train in a morning. Returning home after dropping off the vehicle was much more difficult. There would be no train for hours and the press officer would give me a lift to the M6. From there I would thumb a lift back to Warrington. From the sublime to the ridiculous!

Two goes at that game convinced me of two things: (a) cultivate a relationship with all the dealerships in my area and (b) form a group of northern motoring writers to try and make things better. The Guild of Motoring Writers, in those days, was very London-centric. My first idea was greeted with horror by my contemporaries who felt they would lose their independence to appraise a car without any influence from a garage. I decided to tread that fine line - and it worked. Most of the dealerships I approached were delighted to lend me their cars for me to write about - and in turn to take advertising space next to it. But there was more: I could also write about all their special events - and that more than countered any upset they may have felt when I did include some words of criticism of their cars. Not to have included those words would have let down the readership. As the years went by the relationship between myself and those working in the dealerships became something special and I still maintain many of those friendships today.

The second idea became just as successful though only after an inauspicious start. A preliminary meeting of like minds was held at Ford's Halewood plant and the inaugural session was planned to follow the launch of the Austin Allegro in Harrogate. Unfortunately by then it had been agreed by my "friends" that only daily newspaper writers would be admitted as full members. I came in as one of just two second-class members - something that I would soon insist on changing! The group has now been operating successfully for more than 40 years - I am their general secretary - and I like to think that we played our part in making the job much easier. Cars started to be delivered and collected and some of us were privileged to travel all round the world for new model launches. We in the "sticks" became confidantes of those in the highest echelons of the motor industry. However, newspapers have changed dramatically in recent years and nowadays it appears few writers are able to leave their offices and communications have been reduced to emails.

The best days have gone and will never return.

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