

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

When I first became a motoring writer I discovered that if one was based south of Birmingham most manufacturers would happily deliver cars for appraisal - but not to the north. Ford, with their factory at Halewood, Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port and British Leyland in central Lancashire were notable exceptions. Accordingly, I broke what appeared to be a golden rule by borrowing other cars from dealerships. The thinking was that to do this one lost one's independence; to my mind it was no different than taking a car from its maker. Over the years most manufacturers have realised that Mercia, Northumbria and beyond have become civilised and do send us cars - but it means that the golden rule remains the norm.

But I can look back on so many happy relationships that I struck with dealers that became profitable both for them sales wise and for my newspapers in terms of advertising revenue while I believe I managed to tread the fine line of fairness without fear or favour. A classic example came when I borrowed an early Peugeot diesel from a Chester dealership. It was pretty wretched and I wrote as much. Years later, the man who lent me the car and almost lost his job because of my piece, bought his own garage and immediately he invited me to borrow a vehicle for test because, he said: "I know you tell the truth." It was a lovely compliment - and he now runs the oldest established Hyundai dealership in the country and longest lasting in the world.

Also in our area is the very first Mazda dealership in Great Britain - and attending its opening cemented a friendship that's endured for more than 40 years. The managing director of a Vauxhall dealership was known to be "difficult" but, again without showing any bias, we became such good friends. I was probably the last person to visit him in hospital before he died.

I attended the same secondary school as the owner of the previous Peugeot dealership in Warrington and worshipped at the same church as the sister whose brother and cousin ran the most successful Austin Rover outlet in the town for many years. Such contacts were priceless on both a personal and professional level. One of the few privately owned dealerships in Warrington has its roots in a little known country lane in mid-Cheshire and I interviewed the then partners on what would become the forecourt. It began another friendship that has lasted a lifetime. Similarly, the town's most successful dealer in used cars is run by the son of the one-time sales manager at a Ford dealership in Knutsford. A man who truly knew the value of publicity and whose efforts hopefully yielded him thousands of sales outside of the dealership's official territory via my stories. The MD of Manchester's main Ford dealer since the days of the Model T was similarly minded and insisted on delivering a new model to my office once a month. Many dealers in Manchester and Liverpool were keen to promote their wares between the two cities and in affluent Cheshire. On only two occasions did this cause a problem for me when local garage owners objected. But I was adamant that I, not they, decided from whom I would borrow cars.

One of the dealerships eventually returned to the fold, as it were, and I ended up compiling their house magazine. The other soon went out of business.