

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

In our last issue I reflected on the pessimism of many of my colleagues, nostalgic for the past, unable to recognise the good things happening in the present and failing to see new opportunities in the future. What certainly has changed for the worst for motoring journalists has been the quality of the staff of motoring press offices. In my early days the offices were all headed up and mostly populated by journalists who had crossed to the "dark side" of public relations. They knew what writers wanted having gone through the rigorous training required to survive in a newspaper office and been keenly interested in specialising in automotive affairs.

Today it appears for the most part that only university graduates without any experience of the media are those chosen to work with us. Little wonder they get things wrong. How often, ahead of a press conference, are we handed a pen rather than a pencil and a notebook with pages without lines. They must never have heard of Pitman's Shorthand, not realising it is a basic requirement of the craft. How often are route maps placed in test cars at odds with the advice of the satnav equipment even after a fourth rota day of driving along the same route? What on earth is the point of a press fleet if the person in charge of it considers the cars to be their property and refuse to lend them to journalists?

These and many other shortcomings are increasing as the old guard retire and are replaced. What I have found is that the companies who, in modern parlance, are posting increased sales are those with effective, enthusiastic press officers - the likes of Toyota, Volvo, Suzuki, Kia and the Volkswagen Group.

It cannot be a coincidence that those without are gradually disappearing. Austin Rover died taking a host of prestigious marques with them - the afore named along with the likes of Morris, Triumph, Vanden Plas, Daimler, Riley and Wolseley. Mercifully, Jaguar and Land Rover escaped their fate before the axe fell. Mini found salvation with BMW and MG is still kicking in part of what was the Longbridge factory, once the second largest outside the United States. Rootes models never to return - Hillman, Humber, Singer, Dodge, Talbot and Sunbeam - were subsumed by the now defunct Chrysler GB who were in turn taken over by PSA, the merged Peugeot and Citroen group who now also embrace Vauxhall. Amusingly, the latter's current advertising slogan reads "British since 1904." Really? On what, one wonders did General Motors spend \$2.5bn back in 1925?

Daewoo cars were turned into Chevrolets before that arm of General Motors withdrew from Britain. And a few weeks ago the giant Fiat Group comprising the named brand, Lancia, Abarth, Alfa Romeo, Dodge, Jeep and Maserati, announced their intention to merge with PSA. Lancia withdrew from Britain years ago and they were followed by Daihatsu and latterly Infiniti. Polski Fiat, Lonsdale, Lada and FSO, so unloved, are hardly remembered. The prestigious Jensen and the reliable Saab along with Simca and Reliant now belong to history. Without exception all of these marques have suffered from negative publicity and lacked any driving force at the end. But there is one piece of good news on the horizon. Borgward, makers of superb saloons and convertibles in Germany in the 1950s are coming back - and their press office is raring to go!