

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

Time was when only Fleet Street motoring journalists were invited to drive cars before they were introduced to the market. Back in the mid-1960s new cars would be kept secret from the public until the day of their launch; for days before one of them went on sale it would be tantalisingly covered by a sheet in the showroom.

Out in the sticks journalists like myself were left clutching at straws, relying on contacts to get the faintest inkling of what new models were in the pipeline. The breakthrough came with the establishment of the Northern Group of Motoring Writers created by 15 writers and this was followed by the setting up of Southern, Midland, Western, Welsh, Scottish groups and Northern Irish groups.

It would be some time, however, before cars became available for testing out in the provinces and when they did it wasn't always plain sailing. To try out a car made by the manufacturer of most of the marques available, the British Motor Corporation, one had to hitch a lift to Leyland, there being no public transport, and collect the car from the plant. When it was returned there was the offer of a lift to the nearest M6 junction where once again it was a question of thumbing.

Matters improved not least because home producers like BMC (which became British Leyland) Ford and others were suddenly facing massive competition from Japan who had much more idea about public relations.

All was well until just before the turn of the century when the growing internet brought competition for journalists from bloggers - doctors, dentists, teachers, whatever..... who could set up websites to feature cars.

And manufacturers were delighted with the trend because of the increased, instant exposure that could be obtained for their models. Result - fewer cars for trained journo's.

Today there are far more bloggers covering motoring than us - and while these people are free agents so many journalists nowadays are virtually tied to their office desks, prevented from doing as I have for so many years - travelling the world.

Next came the placement people. They would be invited by manufacturers to drive their cars in order to try and persuade them to arrange for their models to be used in a new movie or television programme. For proof of the value of this remember how influential the cars used in Bond films have been. Now there's yet another form of competition that means there are even fewer places for us on new model launches.

"Influencers" are people who simply have to be photographed wearing the latest T-shirt or baseball cap, carrying the latest bag or whatever. All of them are young and all of them are good looking and naturally they have to be photographed alongside the latest car. It doesn't matter if they cannot drive - they are welcomed by motoring PRs with open arms.

Most of you will be perplexed by this - as indeed I am.

And so nowadays when I attend a car launch I know only the few motoring journalists who are surviving this onslaught; the rest of the guests simply ignore me.

I suggested to an "influencer" recently that I fancied doing a spot of brain surgery in my spare time. He wasn't amused.