



The Auto-Sleeper factory in 2002 with a line of finished VW conversions outside...

Life begins at 40

Having recently celebrated their 40th Anniversary as a motorcaravan manufacturer, Auto-Sleepers are a true British success story with a great future ahead of them. **Peter Rosenthal** finds out more about what makes the company tick

Entering the quaint Worcestershire village of Willersey, there are few signs that it is home to one of the UK's most popular motorhome manufacturers, Auto-Sleepers. Only a small sign pointing to an industrial estate indicates the presence of the Britain's best-selling motorhome manufacturer.

However, while the company currently claim to control around 28-30% of the new



...and how it looked back in 1984, before the disastrous fire



Auto-Sleepers have a thriving owners' club - this CB22 (the company's first coachbuilt) was seen at the 1996 Club and Company Rally



The Commer formed the mainstay of Auto-Sleeper production throughout the '60s and remains sought-after by classic camper enthusiasts



In the 1970s the Bedford CF was king, later becoming the basis for Auto-Sleepers' first monocoque coachbuilt, the SV100, styled by the late William Towns (designer of the Aston-Martin Lagonda)

motorhome market, they started from modest beginnings in the late 1950s, as Anthony Trevelyan, who has been with the company since its inception, explained.

'It all started with my parents preparing for a touring holiday in France', he comments, 'and not wanting to tow a caravan over there.' With his father being a metallurgist - specialising in stainless steel applications, and having helped develop Rover's gas-turbine car - and his mother being a dynamic lady who had competed in the Le Mans 24-hour race, they were well-placed to try to create a more suitable holiday vehicle.

Plans were duly drawn up and it wasn't long before a team of subcontractors was developing what was to effectively become the first prototype Auto-Sleepers motorcaravan. It wasn't all plain sailing, though, and Anthony recalls that this early vehicle had its fair share of drawbacks: 'We had a great holiday, but had problems with furniture sticking in our ribs...'

Nevertheless, this early motorhome was sold on for a profit that almost paid for the holiday itself, and it wasn't long before the Trevelyan family had started work on prototype number two. This example proved far more successful and a second holiday to France proved even more enjoyable.

It was at this point, in the late 1950s, that a local garage expressed an interest in the motorhome and promptly placed an order to buy 12 vehicles over a period of a year. On January 6, 1960, the Auto-Sleepers company was founded, with Anthony also joining the fledgling family business.

The first Auto-Sleepers premises were in Manchester - reputedly having been bought for the princely sum of £99 - with the company relocating to Willersey, Worcestershire in the 1960s. They initially specialised in converting BMC J2 vans, before moving onto the Commer PB (from the Rootes Group). Significantly, they were one of the first companies to establish direct supply links with Rootes, which greatly helped their business.

By the 1970s the company were carrying out conversions on Bedford, Ford, Leyland (Sherpa), Commer (later Dodge) and VW (LT) base vehicles. Later came conversions on the first of the modern generation of front-wheel drive vans - the Renault Trafic and then the Talbot Express - but the oddball in the company's history was surely the short-lived Chevrolet high-top!

The '70s were also a period of growing export sales, with Auto-Sleeper motorcaravans going to Austria, Switzerland, France, Australasia and Japan. At this point, Anthony saw the company's future being with the export market. When President Mitterrand came to power in France in 1981 all this changed, however. Within just two months, Mitterrand's government had introduced new policies that made it uncompetitive for Auto-Sleepers to export to France. This was very much taken as a wake-up call and business strategies were rapidly revised to focus on the ever-expanding British market. By the 1990s Auto-Sleepers were not exporting any of their products, mainly due to the strength of the Pound.

One of the low-points in the Auto-Sleepers history was in October 1992 when a large fire completely destroyed the Willersey premises. Everything burnt down and it took 16 fire



The flagship of the 2002 range - the latest Ford-based Amethyst

engines, working around the clock, to bring it under control. Even when the fire had been finally extinguished, the embers were so hot that it reignited some five days after the start of the initial blaze.

This couldn't have happened at a worse time - the day before a motorcaravan show - and Anthony's first concern was that 180 employees suddenly had nowhere to work. After a 3am emergency management meeting in a nearby house, a plan of action was formed and by the end of the week - with lots of help from suppliers, dealers, insurers and employees - they had managed to restart a mini-production line. By the end of the year they were back in full-scale production and, frankly, have never looked back since.

Offsetting such low-points in the company's history are some great successes, with Auto-Sleepers winning many prestigious awards over the years. Of these many industry awards,

Anthony is most proud to have been awarded five gold medals - on separate occasions - for coachwork quality, by the Institute of British Carriage and Automobile Manufacturers.

The latest chapter of the Auto-Sleepers history began to unfold in August 2000, when Ian Capes - a leading figure in the automotive industry - and his management team acquired the company and Ian became the new Managing Director. At the same time he also acquired the Marquis dealership network, enabling him to have much greater control in the manufacture, distribution and after-sales back-up of the motorhome market.

A GROWING NETWORK

Prior to the merger, the Marquis network of motorhome sales centres was privately owned by Dave Willis, who initially started out in business in the mid-Seventies running a garage. After taking in a VW camper as a trade-in and

displaying it on the forecourt, he was soon offered another motorhome to sell and he rapidly realised that selling leisure vehicles was the way to go.

Three years later the business was thriving and he employed a schoolboy called Mike Crouch to help him out. After Mike left school he went to work for the company full-time and is now the Marquis MD!

In the early Nineties the group was expanding rapidly and acquired additional retail outlets, mainly around the South West. By 2000, they had eight Marquis branches based in Hampshire, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Surrey, Berkshire, Sussex, Lancashire and Hertfordshire. At around the same time, Dave Willis decided to offer the business up for sale and was duly bought out by Ian Capes and his team.

Today the company is going from strength to strength and I spoke to David Hart, who has been with Marquis for six years and manages the Tewkesbury branch, to find out why they have been so successful. 'One of the key things about Marquis,' he pointed out, 'is that we only sell motorhomes. We don't sell caravans and we don't sell cars. We're very focused.'

'We also have a good geographical spread and, as we only employ around 8 to 10 people per site, we can give each customer the ultimate in friendly service. The salesman that sells you your motorhome will usually look after you throughout your ownership of the vehicle. We have a big company image, backed up by a personalised small company service.'

Quite clearly there are many customers who share David's enthusiasm for the company, and the Marquis group are responsible for selling around 1,600 vehicles a year, with roughly half being brand-new.

Marquis concentrate on selling British motorhomes and offer the Swift, Auto-Sleepers, Bessacarr, Autocruise and Auto-Trail ranges (in descending order of sales volume). Being a multi-franchise outlet is clearly a great strength for the firm and enables them to offer



Upstairs in the Willersey factory is the trimming and upholstery department



Sandwich construction coachbuilts, like this Palermo, are built 'inside-out' with most of the furniture going in before the side walls and roof being fitted



Van conversions and GRP monocoque coachbuilts are built side-by-side



A variety of brands at Tewkesbury, including special editions built solely for Marquis



The parts and accessory shop at Marquis Tewkesbury

something to suit most tastes and budgets.

The company also have several exclusive motorhomes, including the Lifestyle range (built by Swift), the County high-tops (from Auto-Sleepers) and the Majestic range from Autocruise. They also have the exclusive UK distributorship for the Mirage range of Italian A-class motorhomes.

Not all Marquis branches sell all of the above marques, though, and one thing that the new management team has taken great care over is not to upset any nearby Auto-Sleeper dealers. For example, Marquis Tewkesbury do not sell Auto-Sleepers, as Cotswold Motor Caravans in Gloucester have a long-standing relationship with the Willersey-based manufacturer.

AROUND THE AUTO-SLEEPERS FACTORY

The Auto-Sleeper factory is a fascinating place to visit - go along to one of their open days if you get the chance - and it's quite incredible the amount of work and effort that goes into producing their conversions. The company have three main production lines split into panel vans, sandwich construction coachbuilts and monocoque-bodied coachbuilts. The last type is quite clearly the jewel in the crown of the production line, and rightly so - the intricate GRP moulding is a masterful creation and, being made in one piece, it cannot leak.

Watching how either a panel van, or chassis-cab, enters the Auto-Sleepers factory and then evolves into a well-made British motorhome is a real treat. As you'd expect, there are teams of workers swarming over the vehicles, and racks of fixings, interior trims and

appliances waiting to be slotted in place, but that's not what impresses the most.

No matter which department in the factory you go in - be it the paintshop, the woodworking room, the fabric trimming department, or the main assembly line - it's clear that all the employees really put their heart into what they do. Their sense of pride in their workmanship is clear for all to see.

It's all the little details and thoughtful touches that impress. Take the main production line for example. To ensure that the bodywork of the vehicles doesn't get scratched or marked in any way, each vehicle is swathed in blankets, bubble-wrap and cloth covers to such an extent that it's quite hard to tell whether a Ford, VW or Peugeot lurks underneath.

It's also fascinating to see how the vehicles are actually constructed. For example, the GRP flagship models have all the outer bodywork fitted before the interior trim is installed, whereas the sandwich construction coachbuilt models have the interiors partially built before having the roof, sides and rear panel installed.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

The future of the Auto-Sleepers Group certainly looks healthy, with both companies looking to expand their businesses and offer more services to the customer.

Marquis are concentrating their efforts on consolidating their existing eight retail sites, rather than trying to open 20 branches across the country. Instead they're aiming to try to make each site a true one-stop shop for whatever motorhome needs you may have. Where they can, they're adding mechanical

service centres, bodyshops and MoT workshops to their existing branches. They've also recently started offering their own brand of insurance and warranty products.

Auto-Sleepers have recently introduced their Vivanti range of motorhomes, which can be hired for motorhome holiday packages throughout Europe. They're also becoming even more focused on the quality of their products and the amount of back-up they provide to customers.

With this in mind, Anthony Trevelyan is now devoting his attention to the production and quality side of things, with his brother Charles being involved in the after-sales and customer support side of the business (and enthusiastically showing me around Auto-Sleepers well-equipped new service centre). Rob Axton has now been appointed as the company's group marketing and development director.

The current Auto-Sleepers line-up for 2002 includes vehicles based on Peugeot, Ford and VW vans and chassis-cabs, with a wide variety of high-tops and coachbuilts being offered. Prices range from just over £26,000 for the smallest van conversions to almost £40,000 for the flagship Ford Amethyst.

After visiting both the Auto-Sleepers factory and Marquis Tewkesbury, it's very clear that the Auto-Sleepers Group as a whole are all singing off the same song-sheet and are utterly obsessed by offering the best service they can to the motorhome buyer. And with both Marquis and Auto-Sleepers looking to enhance the quality of their products and services, this looks to be a very exciting time for the group. Here's to the next 40 years! ■