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It all started with the Allegro

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ngmw News

WELCOME to this very special edition of NGMW News in which we celebrate the Northern Group's 50th anniversary.

We make no apologies for selecting nostalgia mode in taking this long drive down memory lane - although we do have to apologise for the quality of many of the images which have been rescued and restored from our heritage collection. Hopefully, they will jog a few happy memories.

Thanks to all our contributors and especially our PR friends who have kindly agreed to share their experiences with the group and its members and helped make this our biggest-ever newsletter.

There have been many highlights over the past 50 years and the group has achieved much - we don't like to boast, but it would be remiss of us not to mention some of those achievements.

They've been golden years and we've had plenty of fun along the way - hopefully, this special edition also reflects that.

Read on, relax and enjoy as we take the long and winding road back in time...



NGMW News is produced by the Northern Group of Motoring Writers, England's longest-established regional motoring writers' group. The Northern Group represents journalists working for print and digital media with regional, national and worldwide audiences.

Opinions expressed in NGMW News are those of the individual contributing authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Northern Group of Motoring Writers.

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Contributions for future editions are always welcome - send your stories and pictures to Alan Domville at e.domville@btinternet.com



Memories of a golden era

It's October 1973 and regional motoring writers gather in a London restaurant on the eve of the Earls Court motor show.

Little did we know it at the time but this jolly get-together provided the launch pad for astronomical change in regional motoring journalism...



RAMPANT inflation and crippling price rises; a stock market crash; oil crisis; strikes by rail workers, civil servants and ambulance drivers; ministers and peers forced to resign over various scandals. Does this sound familiar?

Yes, it could be right now, but by an incredible coincidence that was Great Britain in 1973 – the year that the Northern Group of Motoring Writers was born.

There were other important landmarks that year. The UK joined the European Economic Community and Bob Stokoe's Sunderland shocked the football world by winning the FA Cup – neither of which will ever likely be repeated. In addition, the Austin Allegro was launched by British Leyland, a car which, in hindsight, was pretty much unrepeatable in itself. However, it was alongside the press launch of the Allegro, at the Majestic Hotel in Harrogate, that the NGMW was formally launched at a meeting attended by 13 motoring journalists working for newspapers from throughout the north of England. Representation stretched from the Scottish borders to the north Midlands.

But the roots of the Northern Group go back to the previous year and the London motor show. Staged at Earls Court, it was a must for any motoring hack and one of the few events for which our editors could be persuaded to pay expenses to cover.



☐ The scene at the Old Vienna where the Northern Group 'plot' was first hatched, above and, bottom of page, the Mintex Press Driving Day was the first major event to be staged by the group in September 1973.

There were entertainment highlights too – not least a dinner laid on by Ford for the regional motoring press. In 1972 it was staged in the dimly lit basement of the Old Vienna restaurant on New Bond Street.

Back in the day, full-time motoring writers were a rare breed outside of the national press - most of us had other positions on our newspapers. At the time, I was a district chief reporter and, like most of my contemporaries, had to fit in motoring alongside what my editor considered my primary duties and, usually, on my day off.

“ A root and branch change in regional motoring journalism was well under way... ”

Over that alcohol-fuelled dinner in central London, the conversation quickly turned to the fact that regional motoring writers felt they were getting a raw deal from what were considered to be London-centric motoring public relations departments.

You could fill a filing cabinet with press releases but test cars were not freely available if you operated north of Potters Bar, while the vast majority of new model launches were in the south and Midlands.

It was time to do something about the north-south divide which, the northern writers present at that dinner felt, was preventing them from keeping their readers properly informed of developments in the motor industry.

Step in Brian Morris, Ford's regional PR man at the company's Halewood plant on Merseyside with encouragement and the offer of a meeting room at the factory.

That meeting took place in December 1972 and was attended by Maurice Glover of the Stoke

Sentinel, Mike Grumett of the Liverpool Daily Post, David Williams of the Newcastle Journal and myself, representing the Evening Gazette, Middlesbrough.

Between the four of us, it was decided to form what would become the Northern Group of Motoring Writers. We embarked on a recruitment drive and by April 1973 had persuaded nine more like-minded colleagues to join us, representing some of the region's biggest morning and evening newspapers.

The Northern Group was born and by the end of that year, membership had rocketed to around 30. The rest, as they say, is history.

Over the coming years, other regional groups were formed in the wake of our success in obtaining better facilities for our members and a root and branch change in regional motoring journalism was well underway.

Keith Ward, my good friend and the group's chairman for our first decade, credits me as being the 'prime mover' behind the formation of the Northern Group.

But the many achievements of the past 50 years have solely been down to the sterling and devoted work of our chairs and officers who have so ably and enthusiastically served the group and its members. And, of course, to the support and encouragement we have received from our many friends in motoring public relations.

Over the last half-century, the Northern Group has cajoled, campaigned, innovated and entertained. Our members have travelled the world and helped raise many thousands of pounds for charities and good causes.

Many of the highlights and memories feature in this special edition of our long-running newsletter. I hope you enjoy looking back over our golden years - there's plenty of nostalgia ahead!

- David Whinyates
Editor



Here's to the next 50 years



□ Group membership has moved with the times and now includes some excellent YouTubers



FROM THE CHAIR with ANDY HARRIS



I AM honoured to be chairman of England's oldest group of motoring writers as we prepare to celebrate our 50th anniversary. This issue of the newsletter is prepared as usual by David Whinyates, who was one of the founding members all those years ago.

I cannot claim such a long association with the group, though I was delighted to join when invited to do so some years ago by the then chairman, Steve Teale. I have gained much by joining, not least the support and friendship of fellow members.

During my extended stay in the hot seat, I have endeavoured to increase our membership and to move with the times. We now have some excellent YouTubers in our midst, representing as they do a new way of reaching an increasingly online audience.

I am aware of the fact that when I

was signed up, I was the first journalist with a purely online audience and not all approved. I would like to think that I have proved them wrong.

The function of the regional groups has undoubtedly changed, with the NGMW originally being set up due to the reluctance of manufacturers to send cars to the frozen wastes of the north.

Thankfully that is no longer the case, with one or two exceptions, so I see the group now as a collection of motivated individuals, all striving to report the latest developments in the automotive world.

We support one another, encourage, and share tips to best do our jobs. Being a diverse bunch, our meetings are usually lively, with exciting ideas bandied around the room.

We continue to improve what we do, a good example of which is our Car of the Year awards. A shortlist of cars is now assembled for members to drive back-to-back, with the winning car announced at the SMMT Test Day North and a presentation duly made. The miners' lamp is still much coveted I am told.

What next for the group? Well, we have our AGM and anniversary celebrations in the planning stage for later this year and I hope to organise a few smaller, but equally exciting events for our members to join in with.

I will be sad to hand over the reins later this year and return to the back benches, but I would like to think I leave the group in rude health, ready to face the undoubted challenges of the next half a century.

In the hot seat

A TOTAL of 21 members have chaired the Northern Group over the last 50 years.

The position is normally held for two years but the group's first chairman, Keith Ward, remained in place for 10 years and he and David Whinyates are the only members to have held the post twice.

In 1988 Val Jessop was the first female member to be voted as chair followed by Julie Marshall who was elected almost 20 years later.

Current chair Andy Harris has remained in the chair since 2019 - his term was extended as a result of the Covid pandemic and ongoing problems in both the motor industry and media.

1973	Keith Ward
1983	David Whinyates
1984	Don Booker
1986	Geoff Rumney
1988	Val Jessop
1990	Bernard Gent
1992	Howard Hill
1994	John Ratcliffe
1996	Bradley Roberts
1997	David Whinyates
1999	Les Oliver
2001	Bill Duckworth
2003	Alan Domville
2005	Keith Ward
2007	Frederic Manby
2009	Mike Torpey
2011	Maurice Glover
2013	Derrick Grocock
2015	Steve Teale
2017	Julie Marshall
2019	Andy Harris



□ Group members look on as Andy Harris and Alan Domville present the 2019 Northern Car of the Year award to Kia PR chief Dan Sayles. Like many other group activities, our awards system continues to evolve.



Flat caps and the ferret

Black puddings and caps from Rochdale Co-op - we're proud of our northern traditions says long-time chairman **KEITH WARD**

AS England's first regional group of motoring writers, we were able to cash in on an image strong enough to be envied, perhaps, by many a marketing department in the industry. In our case, unashamedly of the north.

Our first annual dinner was in Manchester, at the Post House Hotel. We were fortunate to have been 'adopted' as a sponsor by the enthusiastic PR chief of calendar-famed Pirelli in the UK, Bob Newman, a Londoner, no less, and married to an opera singer.

It would also be the launch of our independently-judged annual Pirelli Awards to our members for journalistic excellence.

Around 100 bigwigs from the industry would be invited. Bob, it was who insisted it should be a proper 'black tie' do. And, he specified to the banqueting manager, there must



❑ Reg Mellor presents Keith Ward with the group's ferret mascot and, below, Keith with Mitsubishi president, Dr Kubo, after presenting him with a flat cap in Tokyo.

be starched linen napkins, not paper. I never forgot that. Real class.

We also insisted on the northern tradition of a Yorkshire Pudding served as a separate course, before the mains. Unfortunately, the head chef being Italian, that dish emerged from the kitchens as not so much a lightly raised golden batter, but more a flat, multi-coloured pizza.

As the inaugural chairman of the Northern Group, I would be required to give a welcoming speech. To break the ice (and calm my nerves) I stood up and whipped out a flat cap to wear. That seemed to go down well.

A flat cap, always purchased in Rochdale, home of the Co-op pioneers, was to become a group emblem. It was presented to generations of industry executives, male or female, who we judged worthy of our annual awards, along with a garland of famous Bury black puddings (not always wholeheartedly welcomed by ladies in their finery) and a genuine miners' lamp, made in Eccles for the coal industry.

The gift we commissioned for appreciative guests at one annual dinner was a ceramic cartoon, professionally sculpted in Hebden Bridge, of Compo and Norah Batty from TV's *Last of the Summer Wine*.

In 1977 four of us Northern Groupers (David Whinyates of the *Middlesbrough Gazette*, Mike Grumett of the *Liverpool Post & Echo*, the *Sheffield Morning Telegraph*'s Ron Newell Evans and myself from the *Manchester Evening News*) were in a UK press party invited to Japan by Mitsubishi. We four packed our flat caps - and took a spare.

“ Dr Kubo wore his flat cap on his frequent golfing trips to Britain ”

The social highlight of the trip was a gala dinner at the splendid Mitsubishi guesthouse in Tokyo, presided over by the company's global president, Dr Tomio Kubo, a figure of typical Japanese formality and courtesy.

As Northern Group chairman I gave a speech of thanks and proceeded to solemnly present him with our item of ceremonial dress, size six and

seven eighths. Dr Kubo received it with due respect. He insisted on wearing it for the rest of that evening and, we were later told, during his frequent golfing trips to Britain.

Our regalia was to be further enhanced at a special Barnsley night organised in his home town by the late Don Booker. Featured entertainment was by the local World Ferret Legging Champion, Reg Mellor.

Reg, a dapper, broad Yorkshire, Brylcreemed, bespectacled little man then in his seventies, had achieved his title by walking on stage, tucking his trouser bottoms in his socks, undoing his belt, stuffing a sharp-toothed little ferret down his trousers and keeping it there for half an hour or more, timed against all challengers.

"I don't mind telling you," he confided to me on first introduction (taking a quick look round), "I'm not a complete man.."

After dinner that night he presented me with a stuffed and mounted ferret. It became the group's mascot, handed on from chairman to chairman.

So here we are, 50 years on - flat caps, ferret and all.



Mintex memories



IT WAS a daring and ambitious move - and one which would put the newly-formed Northern Group of Motoring Writers firmly on the map.

With members not being able to easily access and test the latest models or attend the annual SMMT test day staged at Silverstone, the group decided at its inaugural meeting to stage its own event.



❑ A crowded paddock at the 1978 event (top) and, above, Ford's Escort RS2000 was one of the stars of the first Mintex Press Driving Day in 1973.

A venue and financial assistance were provided by Yorkshire-based brake and clutch lining company Mintex and, a mere six months after that first group meeting, an astonishing 79 cars lined up at the company's proving ground, a former airfield at Sherburn-in-Elmet.

The concept had fired the imagination of many southern-based motor industry PRs and it's fair to say that the positive response amazed everyone involved. British Leyland sent no fewer than 11 cars to Yorkshire ranging from a V12 E-Type to an Allegro; Daf used the event for the official UK launch of the new 1300 Marathon; there was high-performance exotica galore from the likes of Jensen, TVR, De Tomaso, Lotus and Ferrari.

In all, 25 different manufacturers' PR departments made the long trip up north with cars from 34 different brands ranging from Alfa Romeo to Volvo.

There to put them through their paces were 42 motoring journalists from the north and Midlands and even a handful from southern-based magazines such as Autocar.

The driving force behind the event was Mintex PR man Terry Norris who along with his hard-working assistants Jane Scott and Dennis Hopwood, recruited further support from Michelin tyres, Shell-Mex and BP and the RAC.

It was a weekend event and social events were wrapped around track and road testing on Saturday. The nearby Cocked Hat Inn earned a place in motoring writers' folklore as the venue for a raucous traditional northern knees-up.

Arguably, it was the mix of business and pleasure which ensured the success of the Mintex Press Driving Day and the event quickly became an annual diary must for both motoring writers and the motor industry PR community.

Over the years, the driving day grew in size and scope and was staged for 17 successful years. But with the onset of the 1990 recession, Mintex was forced to withdraw its financial backing.

For the next two years, northern-based Britannia Rescue provided support for a scaled-down event but the test day had had its day and, ironically, its demise owed much to the Northern Group's success.

By 1992, thanks to the group's campaigning, much had changed. Northern and regional new model launches were becoming the norm and more of our members were able to access cars for road tests and were being invited to join both national and international events.



Enter the class of '73



THE Austin Allegro will be remembered for its so-called quartic steering wheel and little else - but it has a significant place in the annals of the Northern Group.

The Allegro's press launch was based on the Majestic Hotel in Harrogate in April 1973 and these sumptuous surroundings also saw the launch of the group at a meeting sponsored by BP Petrol following the Allegro test drives.

Rated as the second worst car of all time by Auto Express, the Allegro was a flop and was replaced after only nine years, although that flat-bottomed steering wheel can now be seen as being ahead of its time.

But it was one of 1973's most significant newcomers alongside the

first Volkswagen Passat which, with front-wheel drive and a hatchback certainly was ahead of its time.

Like the Allegro, the Passat was one of the most in-demand models to grace the paddock at the first-ever Mintex Press Driving Day in September 1973.

Also at Mintex was one of the first examples of the Triumph Dolomite Sprint, a yellow-liveried, rally-modified version of which was ultimately loaned to the group and which saw action on several special stage events.

Other significant new model introductions in 1973 included the Reliant Robin and the odd-ball Enfield 8000 - a two-seater powered by a 6kw electric motor and lead acid batteries. It had a claimed 40-mile range.

Only 120 of them were ever built, but the tiny Enfield was a sign of things to come.



Driven to help charities

FROM its earliest days, the Northern Group has helped support good causes and charities based on our own 'patch' and beyond.

No fewer than 40 charities and fundraising efforts have benefitted from our largesse ranging from providing a headstone to mark the grave of one of our former members who died at a tragically young age, to providing minibuses to help transport blind and disabled people.

More than £5,000 has been donated to charities and organisations fighting the battle against cancer, including the motor-industry-based Women on the Move Against Cancer (WOMAC), Cancer Research and Macmillan.

A £1,000 donation went to Staffordshire First Responders after ambulance crews saved the life of group member Maurice Glover's wife, Myra, when she suffered a heart attack at the wheel of her car and crashed into a ditch.

As a tribute to late member George Exley, the long-serving secretary of Scarborough lifeboat, the group donated £3,000 to the RNLI, while several local hospitals and hospices benefitted in memory of group members who had died.



□ Cars line up on the dockside at Hull ready for the start of the 1988 Charity Drive.

But by far the biggest donation came following an ambitious 800-mile European charity drive event which was organised by the group in 1988.

“ Our charitable efforts could not have been achieved without the help of our industry friends ”

Manufacturers were asked to provide cars and set 'real-life' target fuel consumption figures with a promise of cash sponsorship for each mile per gallon achieved above the target figures.

The event received wholehearted backing from motoring PR departments with no fewer than 18

cars entered, ranging from a Lada Samara to a Bentley Turbo R, and including models from BMW, Vauxhall, Renault, Saab, Mercedes-Benz, Peugeot, Ford, Toyota, Citroen, Nissan, Hyundai, Mazda, Fiat, Honda and Rover.

The circular route took in four European capitals - Brussels, Bonn - then the capital of West Germany - Luxembourg and Paris on motorways and A roads.

The crews were drawn from the Northern Group, the Guild of Motoring Writers, the Scottish Association and leading freelancers and their light-footed, frugal driving - would you believe almost 35mpg in a Sierra Cosworth! - ensured that the sponsorship offered by the manufacturers was maximised.

The result, which also included funds raised through local

sponsorship by group members, was a cash pot of £20,000 -

sufficient, at the time, to purchase two cost-price Transit minibuses which were presented at Ford's Halewood factory to Henshaws Society for the Blind and the British Sports Association for the Disabled.

Like most of our charitable efforts, this could not have been achieved without the help and encouragement of our friends in motor industry PR.

Your contributions to the raffles and tombolas staged at group dinners and other events plus revenue from your handbook advertising have helped us help others in many ways and we owe you a debt of gratitude for your support over the years.



Half a century of helping out ... Where our donations have gone to

1974 NUJ Widows and Orphans Fund
 1975 NUJ Widows and Orphans Fund
 1981 Cancer research
 1983 Cancer research
 1985 Bradford City stadium fire appeal
 1988 Henshaws Institute for the Blind
 British Sports Assoc for the Disabled
 1989 Simon Weston Trust Minibus Fund
 1991 Women on the Move Against Cancer
 Motability appeal
 1992 Womac
 1995 Womac
 1996 Chrysler Meningitis Trust
 1997 Womac
 NSPCC Coventry
 1998 Womac
 Linda McCartney Centre Liverpool
 1999 Children's Aid Fund
 2001 Scarborough Lifeboat
 2002 Katie Trust
 Rosie Henry Trust
 Womac
 2003 Vauxhall Children's Fund
 L'pool Forget-me-not cancer appeal
 Alan Fawcett headstone
 Womac

2004 Blackpool Victoria Hospital
 Macmillan Outpatients' Facility
 Weston Park Hospital
 Huddersfield Royal Infirmary
 2005 Newspaper Press Fund
 2006 Christies Hospital Manchester
 Huddersfield Hospice
 Keighley Manorlands Hospice
 North Region Macmillan Nurses
 Cancer Research UK
 2007 Christies Hospital Manchester
 2008 Wakefield Home Farm Trust
 Zoe's Place Middlesbrough
 Castleford Beethoven's Buddies
 Fund
 2009 Wearside Children's Hospice
 Sunderland Grace House
 Sunderland Presents for Mothers
 and Children
 Allison Eden sponsored cycle ride
 Paul Ormond marathon Oxford
 Childrens' Hospice fund
 Harewood Hill Climb trophy
 Macmillan Cancer Support South
 Yorkshire
 2010 Womac
 Moorlands Hospice
 East Cheshire Hospice

2011 James Cook University Hospital
 Middlesbrough
 Tim Jackson hospital fundraiser
 2012 Staffordshire First Responders
 2014 Cancer Research



□ The Duke of Westminster presents Tanni Grey-Thompson - now Dame Tanni - with the keys to the British Sports Association for the Disabled minibus at Ford's Halewood factory. Val Jessop and David Whinyates represented the Northern Group.



Dressed for dinner...

IT'S HARD to think that it was 30 years ago that Jackie – my wife at the time - and I went to our first annual dinner.

It was in Hull and it was a sparkling affair. Everyone was there – all the major car companies and their heads of PR.

Despite being the newest and youngest member (how times have changed) we were

on a good table. I recall it was the first time I had met Peter Frater, who for many years, until very recently, was one of the major figures in motoring PR.

And if my memory serves me right, Paul Buckett from Volkswagen was also there. It was important for a young gun like me to network, but above all it was fun.

It was a proper black-tie event and it symbolised how important such an event was, not only for the group but for the industry. We both got a lot out of it - no wonder our dinners were 'must-attend' events for many years for all concerned.

And there were many memorable events to follow. Liverpool and Manchester stand out for me, and Liverpool's vibe was stunning. Dinner in the maritime museum in fancy dress was an occasion.

In Manchester, we had dinner on the set of Baker Street and visited Coronation Street. Harrogate, Kendall and York were fabulous too and we had a superb time in Blackpool with a German oompah band.

And Wigan – mainly thanks to Alan Fawcett's magnetic personality – was brilliant.

In fact, every dinner was an occasion to remember.

- Steve Teale



...sometimes very strangely

□ There's nothing our members and guests like more than dressing up and fancy dress has been a feature at many of our dinners. Clockwise from above: Steve and Jackie Teale, seagoing at the Liverpool dinner in 2003; Les Oliver, Peugeot's John Evans and Mike Grummett, in uniform at Bradford, 1994; David and Pauline Whinyates, Paul and Josie Buckett and Wayne Bruce and partner, rocking at Sleaford Hall, 2008; lederhosen for the oompah band, Blackpool, 2012.





On the red carpet

STARS of stage, screen and sport have entertained our members on launches and at group events over the years. Aussie jazz legend Wilma Redding posed with us when she sang on a Ford launch in Portugal in 1985 (top) while famed cricket umpire Dickie Bird, above right, and Stan Richards - Emmerdale's Seth - left, both joined us at the group's legendary Barnsley nights. TV personality and quiz show host Noel Edmonds, above left, was a regular guest at the Mintex driving day while Jimmy Tarbuck, right, gave us a laugh at a Mazda event and chatted to guests in the bar after his performance. Other celebs who have graced the red carpet over the years include rock legend Chuck Berry at a Mitsubishi motor show dinner, racing drivers James Hunt and Stirling Moss and the infamous It's a Knockout presenter Stuart Hall. Say no more - nudge, nudge; wink, wink!



Our strange bedfellows

General secretary
ALAN DOMVILLE
remembers some of
our more colourful
members from
yesteryear...



NO FEWER than 114 newspaper journalists, broadcasters and new media practitioners have been granted membership of our illustrious group since 1973 and naturally there have been quite few eccentrics among them – and probably I should be included among them.

Bernard Smith was certainly the first of them and he always seemed to find himself in hot water. Although living in Sheffield he decided to enlist my help in starting an Advanced Motorists' group in Mid-Cheshire.

On arrival at what should have been the inaugural meeting we faced an angry mob from other IAM branches objecting to the proposal because they would lose some of their members.

We were followed inside the room and the verbiage was livelier than PMQs; it all ended in uproar with Bernard and I making a swift exit.

Peter Myerscough, below, our man in Blackpool, was up there with the best of the group's eccentrics. He admitted to me he would have been happier as a postman delivering the mail along Swaledale.



One of the popular side attractions on car launches back in the day was a medieval banquet at Bunratty Castle in the Irish Republic.

The staff, attired in colourful costumes of the middle ages, played their

parts brilliantly – especially the compere who, during the meal, would pick on someone to be the knave who would be taken away and locked in a cell while the rest of us enjoyed the fare.

Peter was the victim on the first occasion I attended the banquet and he was led away to his fate. Towards the end of the meal the compere asked the audience whether he should release the knave. From a group of American tourists sitting close by me came the cry "If he's English hang the b***er...!"

Peter's driving partner for many years was **Geoff**



Rumney, above, who best enjoyed launches when he could get us all singing as we had a nightcap or two after some sumptuous meal. He was the son of a vicar but, when it came to the hymns, Geoff rarely knew the words and I often acted as his prompter.

The legendary Hugh Cudlipp of Daily Mirror fame called his autobiography "Publish and be Damned" and he would have been proud of **Mike**



Grumett, left. With the aid of his typewriter back in the day "Grum" was never afraid of trying to right wrongs and write stories that some PRs would have preferred to remain confidential. His "Grovel" column in our newsletter often landed him in trouble but I think deep down the PRs greatly respected him.

Brian Longworth, below, was an equally fine journalist and hardly ever seemed to stop working, invariably hotfooting it from a car launch to cover a parish council or similar meeting.

But he had a terribly embarrassing moment during a group dinner at which the self-styled world champion ferret legger, Reg Mellor, was the guest speaker.

After volunteering to help with a demonstration, poor Brian had ferrets running up and down the inside of his trousers and was anxiously hoping they wouldn't bite.

In addition to being an accomplished journalist



Don Booker, right, was a magistrate and a churchwarden – but that didn't stop him from snipping a cutting from the alleged Burning Bush where God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert during a Peugeot event. The new bush has thrived in South Yorkshire but is unlikely to obtain UNESCO preservation status!



Harold Hodgson, below, whose tippie was something quite appalling called crème de menthe, was a joy to know and while he was often the butt of some joke he never seemed to stop smiling.

Arriving for a Mercedes launch in Northampton, Harold checked into a hotel, went up to his room and decided to take a shower. The phone rang and a dripping wet Harold was told he'd booked in a month too early.



Even more eccentric was Harold's partner **Biddy Waplington** who was a vegan before the word was invented. On several car launches she so dominated the Q and A session that we journo's could hardly get a word in.

Eric Purnell often railed against a smoking ban in meetings and one evening I came across him sulking outside the door of the meeting room. He had been banished and was enjoying the solace of a Capstan full strength before going home. Sadly we didn't see him again.



Continued on Page12

Great guys who were game for a laugh

BACK in the day, corporate responsibility simply didn't come into the thinking of some PR execs and their bosses.

The industry abounded with characters who often couldn't resist a prank or a hair-raising stunt.

One such was Daf PR man **Tom Northey** (below). At the end of a press day at the Earls Court Motor Show he invited me to "somewhere special."



It was the most downbeat, albeit atmospheric, pub in London's East End and to get there he drove a Daf Marathon at astonishing speeds, weaving his

way through the busy city traffic. If I'd had hair it would have been raising.

The PR who was involved with our Group from the very start was **Bill Blakey**, BP's publicity man for the north, who had organised a sumptuous buffet for our founders at the Majestic Hotel in Harrogate.

Bill commuted from the south each Monday and stayed in a hotel near to our home; accordingly he would

invite Irene and I to dinner in the evenings. One night Irene queried why he invariably wore odd socks.

The answer was quite simple: he had to set out from home at four in the morning when it was still dark.

BMW's **Raymond Playfoot** was not only a fine PR man, having been a journalist earlier in his life, but also an inveterate prankster.

During a launch in France he had actors playing the role of French gendarmes stopping us and asking us to step into buckets of water because of a supposed outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

And on our arrival at the hotel we were welcomed by a wine waiter serving us glasses of what he described as the local vintage and asked our opinion of it.

Courtesy of Raymond it was, of course, vinegar – but I think only Lord David Strathcarron had the nerve to spit it out and call it p**s.

The arrival of Mitsubishi on the motoring scene in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s rewrote the book of hospitality.

Jack Morris Marsham took us to some fabulous restaurants and invariably we had to join him afterwards drinking Calvados, aka the Normandy firewater, the legendary drink of my ancestors.

ALAN DOMVILLE recalls some of the motor industry's great characters who just couldn't resist a prank



Trickster: Raymond Playfoot

To the uninitiated it tastes like petrol – but Jack could distinguish between brands; on one occasion he sent the bottle back saying it was inferior.

His boss, **Michael Orr**, (below) had a fiery temper and a wicked sense of humour.

On one memorable event he led a group of us into the basement night club of the Villa d'Este hotel on Lake Como – then rated as Europe's finest watering hole – wearing jackets and ties but no shirts. It was his response to a jobsworth doorman refusing to let us in without jackets!

Another Mitsubishi man was the



highly-bred **Chris Tennant** and on one occasion on our arrival in Nice he greeted us sitting on a powerful motor cycle.

He was offering to give each of us an opportunity to ride pillion with him along the Promenade des Anglais and, terrifyingly, he gave his machine full throttle.

Soon afterwards Chris died following a road accident while riding his bike.

Another fellow with an aristocratic background was **Billy Hamilton**, PR for Datsun, now Nissan, and a member of Princess Margaret's upper set.

A cousin of mine was a press officer with the man who is now our king and Billy delighted in sharing with me the latest Palace gossip.

Billy was also PR for the Orient Express but, sadly, he never offered me a facility trip.

Fire? What fire?



Continued from Page11

I have to confess that when **Alan Fawcett** died, at only 50, my first thought was that at least on a launch I and others would be able to get to bed before 4am. He was just bursting with ideas for our group. I chaired the sub-committee that raised funds for his gravestone.

George Exley (left) joined us as editor and motoring correspondent of the Scarborough evening paper. He was secretary of the local RNLI and always had with him a pager that

would beep when the Scarborough lifeboat was calling for all hands on deck, although I never remember him actually responding to it.

George had served his apprenticeship in the same Warrington Guardian office as myself.

I never dared to remind him of the time he nipped home for lunch and on returning to the office the boss asked him what he had on the fire at a tar distillery.

"What fire?" asked George. To get back to the office he had to ride his bike across the hoses being used to put it out.

During a driving event based in the

Trough of Bowland Fiat's Peter Newton asked me to drive with the then 80-plus **Lord Strathcarron** – and "to look after him."

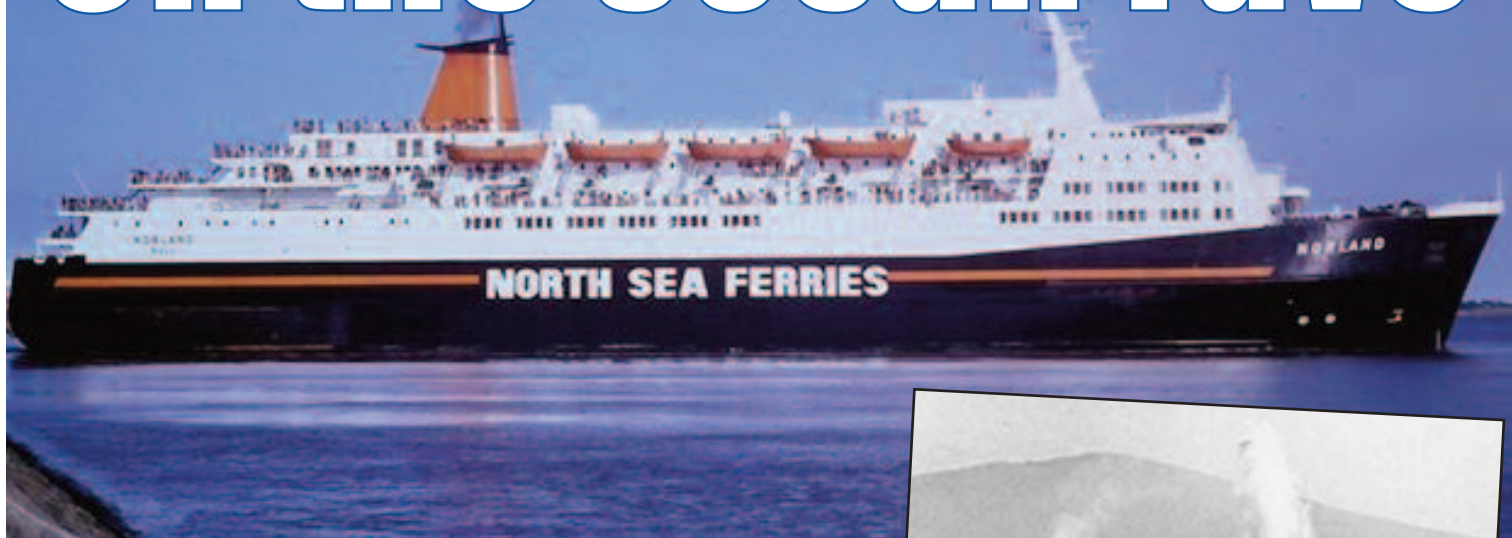
David took the wheel and we entered the M6 – and in no time we were travelling at well in excess of 100 mph.

Soon afterwards I was walking behind him at Heathrow and enquired why he was limping.

"Came off the bike at Brands yesterday – I'll be OK in a day or two."



On the ocean rave



THERE are times when any scribe can feel all at sea - but for many Northern Group members, it was a regular event.

In PR-speak, the weekend trips with North Sea Ferries were known as 'educational visits' during which we could sample the cultures and culinary delights of our European neighbours.

It usually turned out to be more of an education for the neighbours, on both ship and land, as they were forced to endure the mischievous - and often boisterous - antics of group members.

The annual events were organised by North Sea Ferries' PR and marketing chief Bernard Curzon and his successor Jim Pybus in conjunction with local tourist boards.

Sailing overnight from Hull to Rotterdam or Zeebrugge we were dined and wined lavishly on the overnight crossings. Dancing in the ship's disco was a must to round the night off. Sort of a life on the ocean rave.



When group members sailed away on a North Sea Ferries trip it was always an event to relish says **DAVID WHINYATES**

Group member Jonathan Smith recalls: "At the start of the voyage, each one of us - usually 12 to 15 - was given a brown envelope which contained a press pack on North Sea Ferries, an itinerary and - most important of all - a little white printed slip of paper which proclaimed 'The bearer of this slip is entitled to complimentary drinks throughout the voyage'.

Needless to say, we became very popular among the other travellers!"

On dry land, we were taken to various tourist haunts, cultural sites, and even the impressive engineering projects that keep the Netherlands dry. In between, we got soaked in bars, pubs and restaurants - all useful copy for the holiday features that followed.

We were introduced to erwtensoep - Dutch pea soup - on the island of Texel and feasted on rijsttafel - a multi-course, Dutch-Indonesian speciality - in Den Haag.

From Amsterdam to Arnhem, Valkenburg to Volendam, there wasn't much of the Netherlands we didn't see over the years. Occasionally we popped over the borders into Belgium and Germany for beer and currywurst.

In the early days, it was members only - and, significantly, on a car ferry without cars! Instead, we were transported in an ageing Bedford bus piloted by a driver named Stan.

On one memorable trip which took in the seaside resort of Zandvoort and its Formula One race track, the ever-willing Stan was persuaded and allowed to drive the Bedford around the track.

His record for the slowest-ever lap around Zandvoort probably still stands to this day!



□ Pride of the North Sea Ferries fleet was the MV Norland on which group members regularly travelled to Rotterdam. The ship was famously deployed to the Falklands where she survived heavy bombardment in San Carlos Bay. On her return, the Northern Group presented skipper Don Ellerby with commemorative plaques which were mounted on the Norland's main deck along with numerous battle honours. Norland was eventually replaced by a bigger cruise ferry and was sold to an Italian ferry company in 2002. She was eventually broken up in India in 2010 - a sad end for a ship which had a proud and glorious history.



□ David Whinyates presents the plaques to Norland's captain Don Ellerby, left, and North Sea Ferries PR man Bernard Curzon.

Stan, and the bus, were eventually pensioned-off and the arrival of bigger ships on the North Sea Ferries fleet meant we were able to drive our own cars with partners invited to join the fun.

And great fun it was too - a chance to unwind and put all thoughts of motoring page deadlines to one side if only for a long weekend!



In praise of print



BACK in 1973, when the Northern Group was formed, we used typewriters to write our copy and 'hot metal' to put our words onto newsprint.

Digital media hadn't been dreamt up; computerisation was years down the road and we still used old fashioned telephones.

The printed word was king and our original members all represented major northern newspapers with total circulations in the millions.

And that was reflected in our use of printed publications to promote the group's aims and achievements and keep the motoring PR industry aware of our needs and abreast of what our members were up to.

Our very first newsletter was produced shortly after the group's formative meeting and led with the news that we were to stage our own test driving day with support from Mintex, the Yorkshire-based brake lining manufacturer.

Over the years, our highly-acclaimed newsletter has evolved from black and white to colour and has gone through several redesigns and

typographical changes - the latest in 2013 when a magazine-style, graphic front page was adopted.

There have been only nine editors in the past 50 years, several of whom are, sadly, no longer with us.

The roll of honour includes Geoff Rumney, Bradley Roberts, Val Jessop, Alan Fawcett and Bernard Gent.

“ Grum's Grovel column pulled no punches... ”

But Liverpool-based Mike Grumett, editor in the group's first two years and again in the 90s, was arguably the most controversial.

Mike's notorious Grum's Grovel column pulled no punches as the group pursued its quest to grab the attention of PR departments, poking fun and aiming criticism at the motor industry's door.

Over the years, the newsletter has shone the spotlight on the group's many achievements including its successful campaigning for change on a wide variety of issues including

levels of insurance cover for journalists testing cars and attending launches, air travel safety and car launch disclaimers.

The high cost of printing and distribution saw the decision to switch to a digital format in 2009 when the newsletter was rebranded as NGMW News.

Each edition is sent electronically to around 250 key motor industry PR contacts and long-time friends of the group. At today's postal rates that represents a cost saving of at least £262 per edition and with three or four editions each year that's an enormous saving for an organisation with limited sources of income.

The Northern Group has embraced the digital age with its website and various social media feeds through which members - many of them now working in digital media - can keep the industry in touch with their activities.

We will continue to evolve but, for the time being at least, the printed word reigns supreme when it comes to getting our message across to the motor industry - even if those words are read on screen!

And now the latest nudes...



❑ Keeping abreast of the (politically incorrect) news: Angelina, the only page 3 girl ever to appear in the group's newsletter, featured as Eve in the February 1988 edition after Barnsley member Don Booker covered a story about the launch of an adult education service in his home town, while a back page ad in the November 1983 edition featured a topless shot from the Mintex calendar.



Done by the book

“A good contacts book is essential to journalists and PRs alike”

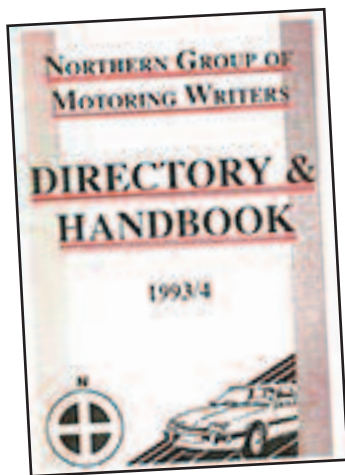
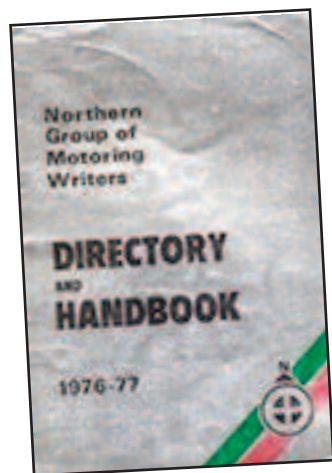
So wrote group chairman Keith Ward in our 1976 Directory and Handbook - and it's fair to say that, over the years, ours has been a very good contacts book indeed.

Back in 1973, our first effort was little more than a list of members printed on folded pink card, but it quickly became apparent that we needed something much more professional and comprehensive.

The result was a paperback publication which not only provided our PR contacts with extensive details of our members but also provided our members with a who's who of motor industry public relations with all the necessary contact details.

There were features and photos - including some risqué images from the Pirelli and Mintex calendars in the 1976 edition - motor industry stats and, on a more serious note, for many years from 1978 onwards the handbook included the Northern Group's insurance survey. This gave vital company-by-company information on the insurance cover provided by manufacturers for journalists driving their cars on test and launches.

Supported by generous advertising from the industry, the Northern Group handbook evolved over the years and, in the early 2000s, was presented in a leather-bound, gold engraved, Filofax-style ring binder with loose-leaf pages which, in addition to contacts, included a diary and road test planner - it was possibly the ultimate desktop reference book for motoring writers.



IN THE same way as the handbook, the group's badge has seen several design changes over the past 50 years, reflecting the red and green 'corporate' livery which was adopted at the outset in 1973.

The original design, above, was envisaged as an alloy wheel and tyre. The type on the tyre contained words from an actual road test.

Differing special versions of the logo were designed to mark the 10th, 25th and 40th anniversaries and our 50th-anniversary logo is a variation of the current design which was first used in 2013.



We've been everywhere

Well almost...Members of the Northern Group have travelled to the four corners of the earth in their quest to test the latest new cars over the last 50 years.

It's impossible to put a number on the total distance our members will have travelled over the last half century but, to put it in context, the four group members who travelled to Japan courtesy of Mitsubishi back in the day will have notched up 60,000 air miles between them ... that's quarter of the way to the moon in just one trip!

❑ Moscow calling: in the early days of the group, Lada took members on a daring factory visit to its' Togliatti plant. Risking a confrontation with the KGB in the Russian capital are Lada's PR man Roger Mercer, left, with Keith Ward, Ron Newell-Evans and David Whinyates.



From Hiroshima to Honolulu, Moscow to Marrakesh, Rome to Rio and from Barcelona to Buenos Aires our members have been privileged to travel the world - often in first class luxury - to attend new model launches and our thanks go to all the manufacturers who provided those opportunities whether near or far.

Many events provided incredible and indelible memories and over the next few pages our members look back on some of the most memorable.



The full Monte

Launches in Monaco, Florida and Brazil bring back memories for JONATHAN SMITH



IT was guaranteed to brighten up a dead day at the office.

Among the endless flow of press handouts that landed on my desk with the early morning post was a small white envelope, personally addressed, marked Private and Confidential.

They always arrived in posh envelopes and clearly stood out from the abundant literature churned out by PR machines in the car industry, usually addressed impersonally to the 'Motoring Correspondent'.

Launch invitations – long before the arrival of email – were fairly prolific but to the fledgling muttering rotter like myself, aged just 26, they offered an unrivalled thrill.

The date was January 1977, the year I joined the Northern Group. And the invitation was from Ford to drive their all-new baby car, the Fiesta. An exciting prospect in itself. But the venue was Monte Carlo for a couple of days, and the transport was a private jet from Manchester, my then local airport, 30 or so miles from my office at the Evening Post and Chronicle at Wigan.

The icing on the cake was that my wife was also invited. We'd only been married a short time and she'd never flown before...hard to imagine these days.

Much of the group gathered in the departure lounge were Northern Group members. I knew a few from covering news stories in the region before being appointed motoring editor. It was work of sorts, but what fun we had.

My wife, Lynn, was teased remorselessly when others discovered she'd never been in a plane before. I was anxious when a group of us had some drinks at the Hotel de Paris bar, that I would be expected to pay for the next round. I needn't have worried!

The weather was perfect with a weak January sun and smell of pine trees as we drove high into the mountains. The



❑ The Hotel de Paris was the venue for the launch of the Ford Fiesta in 1977 while, below, a visit to Cape Canaveral was a highlight of the week-long Fiat Uno launch in Florida.



evening was taken up with a lavish official dinner, followed by a trip across the square to the casino. All in a day's work, I was reminded by seasoned Northern Group hacks.

The only problem was when Lynn took a bath and pulled on what she thought was a cord for the light. Within seconds two waiters appeared in our spacious suite to answer the emergency alarm!

The launches came thick and fast, as the merry band of Northern Groupers travelled the world ... Morocco, Finland, Brazil, Greece, Italy, America and countless trips to Spain and France. But one still stands out today – almost a week in Florida with Fiat to review the new Fiat Uno.

“ In Orlando three or four Belgian journalists crashed their Fiat Unos at the first set of traffic lights...”

The global launch was done on a grand scale back in 1983. Two 747 jumbo jets were involved in transporting journalists from all over Europe to Orlando where a melting pot of motoring writers from many nations arrived to put the little car through its paces.

Amazingly only one half-day of driving was allocated during the otherwise hectic schedule. For some of the Belgian contingent, even that was short-lived. Three or four of them crashed into each other at the first set of traffic lights as they headed out on the test route.

The rest of our stay was spent visiting Cape Canaveral Space Centre, Daytona race

track and going on as many of the rides at Disney World as we could manage.

For one group member, the stay was even longer. Harold Hodgson, member for Peterborough, woke one night with a start to find his pyjama jacket covered in what he presumed was blood and called hotel reception for help.

Within a few minutes a team of paramedics burst into his room with resuscitation equipment, then whizzed him to a medical centre.

By then, Harold had realised the cause for concern was, in fact, the melted chocolate bar he'd put in his pyjama pocket before turning in to ward off night starvation... so not blood, after all!

Unfortunately, they insisted on carrying out detailed medical tests and Harold made his way home solo several days later. Fortunately, Fiat was well insured.

We were told that the reason for such a lavish and lengthy launch was that Fiat was shutting down its US operation and unable to extract its funds.

Perhaps the strangest first drive I covered was a four-dayer to Brazil with a manufacturer which will remain nameless.

On the private jet making its way across the Atlantic, I discovered there were no plans to sell the car in UK or even Europe. Oh dear, a rather pointless though pleasant trip, then.

Fortunately, I was able to provide the Daily Express, my then employer, with a couple of City stories to help justify my days away from the office!



Time flies when you go supersonic

SIX DECADES of motoring and automotive journalism have taken me well beyond the test locations we used to frequent across Europe and the US.

Thanks to the power of the printed word, I've been fortunate enough to work in countries including Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Russia, South Africa, Singapore and Thailand as well as being involved in a spectacular test drive across the Sahara.

But even setting foot on the awe-inspiring Great Wall and seeing the breathtakingly beautiful Taj Mahal have to come second to what I rate as the most memorable product launch ever attended by Northern Group members - and it was staged much closer to home territory.

Back in 1983, VW UK's marketing department was working on how to get dozens of motoring writers to the international debut of the second-generation Golf in Munich when staffer Tony Hill came up with the inspired idea of using Concorde.

To his amazement, British Airways agreed to the request and on August 17, the supersonic superstar was rolled out at Heathrow for what proved to be the first and only flight it would ever make to Germany.



Life member MAURICE GLOVER travelled the world in 60 years as a motoring writer but, he says, none of his globe-trotting could ever compare with flying at twice the speed of sound aboard Concorde on a VW launch - and he has the certificate to prove it!



Along with many of my colleagues, I was more excited about the journey than the subject of the trip and Concorde didn't disappoint.

From the thrilling ripple of power generated by its Rolls-Royce engines on take-off to the gentle

nudge that was felt in our backs as we achieved the speed of a bullet, the graceful masterpiece of Anglo-French aero engineering exceeded all the hype that came with the introduction of super-fast transatlantic passenger travel.

Space might have been limited in the slender fuselage that allowed only two seats on either side of the aisle but luxury abounded in a cabin designed for first-class passengers.

And the champagne flowed as Captain Roger Dixon took a considerable detour to allow us to see the magic Mach 2 display flash up on the speed monitor and then marvel at witnessing the curvature of the earth as blue skies gave way to eerie darkness at altitudes over 60,000 ft.

More surprises were waiting on the ground too. Traffic had stopped

on motorways and crowds formed to give the pride of Britain and France an enthusiastic welcome as it swept into Munich to make German national news.

And we were equally delighted to find a special beer festival waiting for us on the tarmac before we even reached border control.

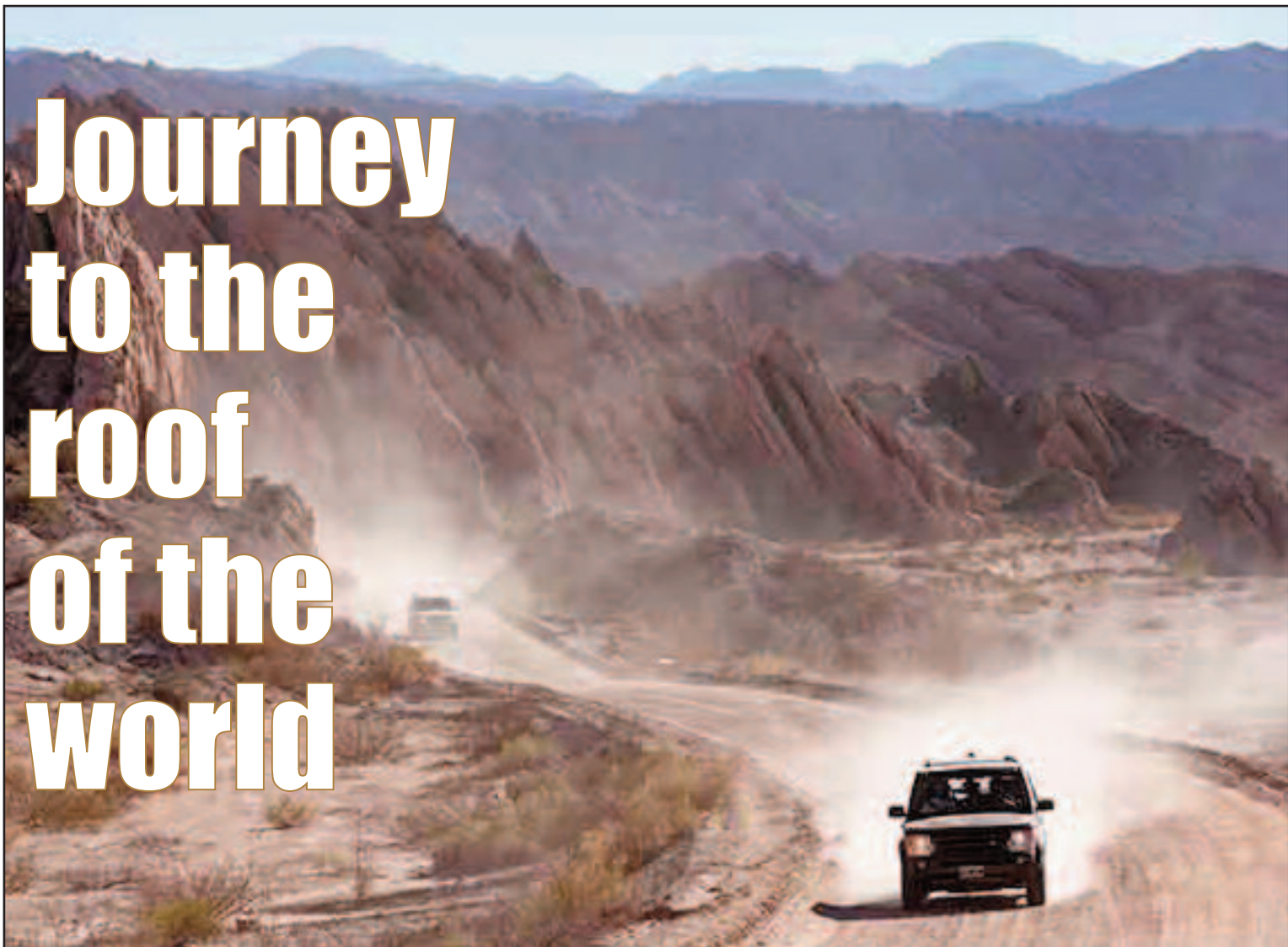
As if all that were not enough, the dinner that followed the Golf press conference took place on the top floor of a hotel that had been transformed into a restaurant serving up cuisine for every nation attending the event.

All of which was in stark contrast to the modest UK introduction arranged for Golf Mk 1 nine years earlier. We had been invited to picturesque Broadway, near Evesham, to be impressed by the cute hatchback that was to turn struggling VW into one of the motor industry's biggest global players.

How time flies when you're having fun!



Journey to the roof of the world



THEY don't call the route over the Paso Abra del Acay the road to the clouds for nothing.

At an altitude of 15,000ft, this is the highest pass in the Americas accessible by motor vehicle. Up here the views defy belief as a rich palette of mountain colours stretches out to the snow-capped peaks of the Andes across the Chilean border. 'Scuse me while I touch the sky'... you better believe it.

Driving through this intoxicating part of north-west Argentina, the country's least travelled region, is an adventure in itself - and perfect territory for testing the toughest of vehicles.

The landscapes are among the most spectacular in South America, the predominantly gravel and dirt roads winding through river valleys, deep gorges and terracotta canyons to the high altitude grasslands.

A three-hour flight from Buenos Aires took us to Cafayete which, over the past decade, has become a base camp for explorers seeking archaeological ruins and unrivalled scenery.

MIKE TORPEY was on cloud nine when he was invited to drive the Land Rover Discovery in Argentina. He literally ended up driving to new heights

Some 30 miles from Cafayete lies one of the most important historic sites in Argentina, the remains of the city of Quilmes.

Conquered first by the Incas and later by the Spanish, the only remnant of this extraordinary settlement is the patchwork of stone walls stretching from the valley floor up the mountainside.

Our route from here followed the path of the Calchaqui river along the famous Ruta 40, which runs from the Patagonia desert in the south to the Bolivian border.

This may be one of the country's longest highways, but traffic is



sparse save a few locals and some mining lorries.

A relaxing coffee at the typically Argentinian village of Angastaco set up the party for some of the most testing sections of the route.

The Land Rovers, all Discovery V6 diesels, featured state-of-the-art technologies including terrain response so where the gravel road makes way for dirt and the last vestiges of a track were replaced by angled stones and boulders, the dial was spun to rock crawl mode.

Some of the ascents and near vertical drops looked impossible to negotiate in a vehicle without

caterpillar tracks, yet the Disco picked its way through with mountain goat precision.

It was the dry season in Argentina and the parched bed of the Pucarylla river was reduced to powder sand which was hellishly difficult to drive on but the Discovery took it in its stride, reaching our end-of-day destination where tents were pitched for the night.

At above 2,000 metres, we are approaching the altitude sickness threshold, so a medical briefing around the campfire as an icy dawn broke prepared us for the next stage - a nine-hour passage to the roof of the world.

At the pretty town of Cachi, we prepared for the ascent by sipping a local Puna tea, made from coca leaves and pupusa - yellow flowers of a mountain shrub - the properties of which are said to counteract the effects of altitude.

Now the climb started in earnest.

Continued
on Page
20



Memories of that Moss magic

WHEN the Northern Group was founded I was still but a young lad - hardly out of nappies all those years ago in fact.

So I am a fairly recent member, but in those years I seem to have done a lot and had plenty of experiences. I had a quick count up and have been to around 45 countries, many of them numerous times, and it's impossible to add up all the flights I've taken, the number of cars and vans I've driven or how many miles I've covered.

People ask what were my favourites; which stand out; which have lasting memories.

I doubt if any stand-out moments will ever compare with the day when I was lucky enough to be driven by Stirling Moss in the famous and iconic Mille Miglia 722 winning Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR.

It was on a Mercedes SL press launch near Bristol and Stirling drove the car like he used to drive it. Time hadn't got in the way of his skills, but we were on normal roads, so he had to watch his speed.

What a gentleman he was, and what an honour for me to have been in the same car as him - a memory I'll never forget.

The Jeep Cherokee launch in Morocco back in 2007, when we were let loose to drive across the desert, was also pretty unforgettable.



We started in convoy, but very quickly lost sight of the others; everyone on their own, aiming for the next stopover point. No sat-nav in the desert, just a basic guidance system.



A drive in a legendary Merc racer with the late Sir Stirling Moss was an unforgettable moment for MARTIN WARD

There was nothing but sand for as far as you could see, and occasionally a high dune to go over - very scary for novice sand drivers.

We got to the lunch stop, in the middle of nowhere, our oasis for a bite to eat. But Jeep had turned this part of the desert into a five-star eatery and even the mobile toilets had gold-plated fittings. It was quite extraordinary.

We made it to the overnight stay over, a first-class, walled hotel, miles from anywhere, but fully stocked with food and drink. Goodness knows how they got everything there. That trip firmly remains in my memory, it really was the ultimate man and machine versus the elements.

It's fair to say that the last 50 years have probably been the best times in the motor industry. I have been so lucky to have met so many great people, many of whom are no longer with us. So lucky too to have been to so many destinations and so lucky to have been paid to see the world at somebody else's expense.

Thanks to all the manufacturers for giving so many of us such a fantastic working life. Without the car and van designers, engineers, assembly plant teams, marketing, finance and PR people, there would be no new cars, no car launches and, perhaps, no motoring writers' groups.

Thanks to all the journalists who have been such great company, we've all learned so much from each other and thanks to everyone for such kindness and friendship.

They have been wonderful times and long may they continue. I hope the youngsters joining this crazy world of motoring journalism have as good a time as us 'oldies' have and that they make as many friends as I have.

A true voyage of Discovery

Continued from Page 19

The gravel road with its crumbling edges, in parts little more than one and a half cars wide and devoid of danger warnings, snaked endlessly around the mountains until the sign came into view - Abra El Acay, 4,895 metres.

The 5,000-metre mark was our target though, and it was a simple case of turning off the road and heading over an area resembling the face of the moon to an altitude of 5,020m.

To put this into perspective, it's near enough Ben Nevis times three with Snowdon

plonked on top - no wonder breathing becomes quick-fire.

Some of the rocks up here were razor sharp and one Discovery suffered a puncture. Ten minutes to the second was all it took to replace the tyre in what was officially designated the highest Land Rover wheel change ever performed.

It was time to make our descent amid the most magical colours of the setting sun to a hostel in the austere-looking mining town of San Antonio de los Cobres, still worryingly high at 3,800m.

As we left on gravel roads for

our final destination, the charismatic city of Salta with its palm-filled plazas and Hispanic charm, a glimpse in the rear-view mirror triggered a spectrum of emotions.

Predominant was a feeling of privilege to ride this route in such a spectacular and unspoilt part of the world - a true voyage of Discovery.

My trip, in 2007, was part of a reconnaissance drive to prepare the way for Land Rover Experience holidays which were scheduled to commence the following year. Now that's what I call a vacation!



The day Mazda drove me loopy

Tom Sharpe looks back on a memorable event on which he experienced 5G without ever touching his mobile phone...



IT was more a case of chunks away than chocks away when Mazda took to the skies to launch the RX-8 coupe back in 2008.

Even though my mum took to the skies and gained her pilot's licence after watching Top Gun back in 1985, I'm afraid I don't have her head for heights, so it was with more than a little trepidation that I accepted Graeme Fudge's invitation to learn how to fly a stunt plane.

It was one of those many launches that you simply could not say no to because it sounded like such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but my body didn't thank me.

It was overcast on the day of the event, and I ended up having to pack a day's training into about an hour in the sky.

Loop-the-loops, stall turns, half Cubans, we did them all and the session only came to an impromptu end when – having nearly had the lights go out on me during a 5G loop – I relented and made a lunge for my sick bag.

I wasn't going to let it beat me and in true NGMW spirit I returned for the second day's flying – competition day – around 15 hours later.

For my all-or-nothing bid for glory, Graeme and the team from PFPR

Call sign Chuck - aka Tom Sharpe - ready for lift off, above and bottom of page. Passenger rides in the Mazda Furai prototype, below, helped Tom get his feet back on the ground.



gave me my own call sign; not Maverick or Ice Man... 'Chuck', for reasons that need not be explained. Needless to say, I did not win the event's aerobatic competition.

But, once I'd recovered, there was plenty of four-wheeled fun to enjoy at this very event. A 600cc grass buggy provided entertainment with timed runs at the aerodrome, while

Owen Mildenhall – in the days before his move to PR – was giving passenger rides in the rotary-engined Mazda Furai prototype which was destroyed by fire during testing by Top Gear some years later.

The RX-8, launched at the heart of the event, was not bad either and, thankfully, I wasn't too queasy to enjoy testing it.

It was a great car, made even better in the Prodrive version which came later.

Driving Mazda's coupe reassured me that I'll always enjoy being at the wheel of something fast and fun...

Just as long as it stays firmly on the ground.



Africa on the Horizon



ME AND the group. How to begin. Africa, where motorised invaders have included Vauxhall, Alfa Romeo, Range Rover, Kia, and Renault, exploring, variously, Morocco, Tanzania and Egypt – sometimes crossing into Jordan and Israel.

Peugeot was the dominant name, from hundred-mile straights with one bend in Egypt to a night crossing of the Red Sea, food and chefs brought in from France.



❑ Star turn in Taroudant: Messrs Ward and Whinyates lead the after-dinner entertainment.

Its post-war cars had a tough reputation on the harsh African roads; you might say it was the lion of Africa. Peugeot won the East African Safari Rally several times with the 404 and 504.

It was late afternoon when we landed at Taroudant, along with linen-suited Englishmen, familiar from

Africa is familiar launch territory for FREDERIC MANBY but it was a real eye-opener when he attended his first-ever car launch in Morocco and also met the Northern Group contingent for the first time...



the novels of Graham Greene and Paul Bowles and a film called Casablanca. It was March 1978 and the first time I'd been introduced to the group and its characters.

Taroudant was a new magic. I'd never been out of Europe. I was standing in for the Yorkshire Post's Sydney Burton, a senior writer with a distinguished military career as a despatch rider. He was sidelined with a chest infection. I was entering a new area of writing. When Sydney retired I joined the elite features department as the motoring correspondent, plus a pay rise. Phew.

I don't know what Taroudant is like today. Then, it seemed to this beginner, it was off the tourist track which later took us to Fez and Marrakesh and Essaouira and Agadir and Casablanca and sandy dunes and the Atlas Mountains, often arid above the rivers where the women washed clothes and the men sat under a tree and watched their goats.

The car was the Chrysler Horizon, a pleasant

family hatchback which was voted Europe's Car of the Year – the industry's premier accolade.

That night in the dimly lit alleys of Taroudant we wandered penniless in the djellabas we'd worn dancing at the, literally, palatial hotel, full of pigeon pie and a simple delight in being there, being somewhere we didn't understand.

That Moroccan night, young men with names like Whinyates and Ward and Newell Evans could only gaze at the shabby men drinking tea in the half-lit cafes.

In those days we were all time-served, qualified journalists. Today we have numerous self-publicising award gongs. We have mobile phones and credit cards and fripperies called influencers and can get the local currency at ATMs in the middle of nowhere.

Few of us carried a camera at the start. Today we'd be checking our phone screens and sharing images with the world.

In later years Africa would continue to enthrall and sometimes frighten. There was the occasion when a safari wagon loaded with Fleet Street's finest failed to start as the elephants we had been watching set off at a gallop to have a look at us.

Mostly it was fun while we drove, from Lagunas in Tanzania to Jaguar XKs in the Cape, and so many Peugeots.

My last Moroccan adventure was in November 2018, driving a Citroën C5 Aircross. Maybe the last.

Thank you all. It's been, err, cool. Play it, Sam.



Mountains, music and the mother road

A challenging mega-drive through the mountains and deserts of backwoods America will live long in the memory of newsletter editor

DAVID WHINYATES



AFTER more than half a century of testing cars at home and abroad, how do you pick out that stand-out drive; that car you'll never forget?

When you've travelled to Russia, the Far and Middle East, North and South America, Africa, India and all over Europe; when you've driven Lambos, Porsches, Ferraris and the best of the exotic rest - it's an almost impossible task.

So how about the Vauxhall Vectra SRi V6 and how could it possibly fit into this scenario as the most memorable car I have ever driven?

Truth be told, it wasn't so much the car - although it honestly wasn't at all bad in its day - as the way Vauxhall chose to launch it with what must rank as a motor industry PR triumph, the likes of which will probably never be repeated.

Vectra Trek 96 was an ambitious and spectacular coast-to-coast journey across the USA, starting from Washington DC and finishing in Los Angeles - a total of 4,770 miles, crossing 13 states in 17 days.



The route was split into five legs with an eclectic selection of national and regional motor-noters given the option to choose which section they wanted to drive.

Only four Northern Group members were on the final team sheet - Bradley Roberts, Ken Yeadon, Frederic Manby and myself. Fred and I both opted for the longest leg - a four-day, 1,144-mile blast from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Phoenix Arizona.

And what a drive it was. The scenery was jaw-dropping, the roads challenging and sometimes pretty scary.

From Santa Fe, we drove past Los Alamos, where the US secretly developed the nuclear bomb and crossed the continental divide along isolated dirt roads before climbing into the Colorado Rockies to a breathtaking - literally - 11,000 feet.

On night one we reached the ski resort of Telluride where hot-air balloons were waiting to take us to even greater heights and a real Rocky Mountain high.

After an overnight stop, it was on to Utah with its spectacular buttes and mesas. Eventually, we reached the vast, shimmering, blue-water expanse of Lake Powell for our second overnight. We feasted on barbecued jumbo prawns and veal chops at an isolated lakeside beach before boarding a boat for a late-night cruise on the lake.

With no light or noise pollution, the trip under a spectacular star-lit sky was almost transcendental - or maybe that was the beer!

The next day it was back to the mountains and down a challenging 1,100-foot descent into the aptly named Valley of the Gods and on to the familiar, towering red rock formations of Monument Valley.

On a beautiful, blue-sky day, you could picture John Wayne astride his horse looking out over the buttes and mesas for signs of the Apaches.

We were, in fact, in the land of the Hopi and Navajo and, driving down long stretches of dirt and gravel tracks through the Navajo Nation, we were told it might not be wise to stop.

What road signs we saw were peppered with bullet holes. Stopping, however, was unavoidable for a couple of our number who suffered punctures on the rock-strewn dirt roads.

We hit a section of old Route 66, driving through Arizona's petrified forest to the town of Holbrook where our accommodation for the night was in concrete tepees at the Wigwam Motel.

But before bed, we headed downtown to Young's Corral for ribs and Indian fry-bread. The saloon was packed with boisterous good ol' boys, native Americans and a couple of Daisy Duke lookalikes. A hill-billy band - plus copious buckets of beer - kept things moving until well after midnight. This was the wild west at its best.

The final day dawned and it was an easy drive through the Painted Desert to Phoenix and the luxurious Biltmore hotel. It was the end of a journey which would live long in the memories of those lucky enough to have been invited to share the experience.

For Vauxhall, it was a logistical triumph. Shipping cars, journalists, PR staff, support teams, techies and even senior management halfway around the world was no mean feat.

And the Vectra? It did the job and did it well. 'Nuff said.



□ Young's Corral in Holbrook, Arizona - good 'ol boys and a hill-billy band.



Twice as ice in the Alps

HOW'S this for a feat of engineering wizardry?

A Volvo sports coupe perched on a solid ice plinth in the middle of an igloo 8,000 feet up a mountain that can only be accessed by ski gondola.

Think I'm joking? Far from it, the C30 five-door takes pride of place in the main igloo at the Volvo Ice Camp high on Kitzsteinhorn Mountain, which towers above the resort of Kaprun in Austria.



The car was loaded into a special cage which was then attached to a cable car, lifted to the second station and dragged the rest of the way by a piste

basher before being reversed into the ice lounge.

Extreme is something the Swedish manufacturer does rather well and Volvo relished putting both man and machine to the test in, not to put too fine a point on it, less than hospitable conditions.

Two cable cars followed by a skidoo ride for the final push

took us to the ice camp and a traditional 'tartar hat' meal where raw meat is grilled on a small brazier.

Then it was a broken night's sleep at freezing point in one of seven small igloos as temperatures plummeted to minus 25C outside - not too pleasant if you needed to visit the nearby shed that served as a WC in the middle of the night.

The overnight stop at the Volvo Ice Camp in Kaprun, Austria, took place in January 2010 and was part of a triple launch for the new C30, C70 and XC60 models.

A lasting memory was the expression on the faces of skiers at the summit of the lift system as they watched journos, some wearing shirts and ties and carrying suitcases, descending from an even higher level on skidoos.

- Mike Torpey



It's just the bear necessities in Colorado

WE'RE very fortunate to be able to attend some stunning places as guests of the motor manufacturers.

In October of last year, I was with Mercedes in Colorado for the launch of the EQS SUV.

It was a long journey...Newcastle to Heathrow, to Chicago, to Aspen. It took 23 hours but it was well worth it.

On the second evening, some of the more adventurous among us decided to go for a walk. Granted, there was a pub at the end of the road.

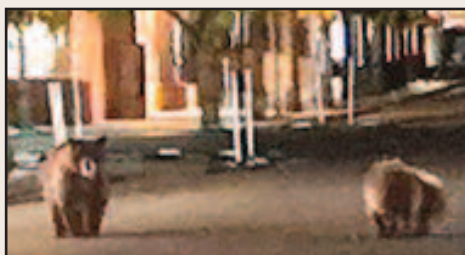
Our return journey turned out to be rather more adventurous than we'd anticipated. We turned a corner and were confronted by two rather large bears.

We'd only had a couple of pints because we

were driving to Denver the next day, but it was certainly a good way to sober up.

Animals also featured in one of the very early launches I attended - a Toyota launch in Spain for the MR2.

I hopped into the car at the airport intending to head to the Sotogrande golf resort for an overnight stay.



Bearing in mind that satellite navigation wasn't even heard of, the route guidance comprised numerous sheets of directions, mini diagrams and some useful hints.

One of the hints didn't offer a lot of help. "Turn left at a field with donkeys."

It was dark. I can remember arriving at the hotel some two hours later than Toyota had anticipated, only to discover that I was one of the first to get there.

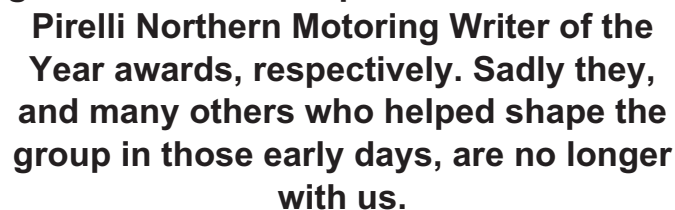
Loads of fellow journos got lost and one poor soul ran out of petrol. They found their way to the hotel by hitching a lift in a lorry and rolled up at 3am.

- Graham Courtney





In our formative years, PR experts like Terry Norris (left) and Bob Newman (right), were influential in supporting the Northern Group with the Mintex Press Driving Day and the



Fancy meeting you here!



☐ Rothesay harbour
on the Isle of Bute

“AYUP, it’s Tom Malcolm!” Quite the last words I expected to hear that day.

I was on holiday with my wife Dorothy and friends Alison and Ron from Southport, visiting the town of Rothesay on the Isle of Bute which sits in the firth of the River Clyde.

It was in the 1990s, probably mid to late spring and our visit coincided with the Bute Jazz Festival.

The sun was shining out of a clear blue sky and the town was buzzing. As we wandered along the town’s main shopping street, temporarily pedestrianised, I heard my name being called out.

That sounds like Don Booker, I thought to myself. But it can’t be. Not up here.

But it was Don. And not just him. Before I knew what was happening, and much to the amusement of my wife and friends, I was surrounded by Don and other members of the Northern Group each one eager to shake my hand, slap me on the back and generally let it be known they were pleased to see me! And I them!

It turns out they were on a facility trip organised by CalMac, the publicly-owned company responsible for the ferry services to the islands off Scotland’s west coast.

Of all the years I spent in the motor industry it still ranks as one of the most memorable encounters that I ever had with the Northern Group of Motoring Writers.

When and how we knew each other is a story which begins just after the formation of the group...

The year was most probably 1974 and I was en route to my first ever

Ford PR man TOM MALCOLM was shocked to hear a familiar Yorkshire voice while on a trip to a picturesque Scottish island. Turned out he just couldn’t get away from the Northern Group!



Northern Group of Motoring Writers’ test day at the Mintex company’s proving grounds in Sherburn-in-Elmet in Yorkshire.

Back then I was assistant editor of Scotland’s very own motoring magazine, Top Gear, published by a family-run publishing house in Glasgow. And absolutely nothing to do with the BBC.

As a member of the Association of Scottish Motoring Writers myself back then, I applauded the principles behind the formation of the

Northern Group in furthering the cause of motoring journalists and journalism in northern England.

A year or so later I made the switch from journalism to the world of automotive public relations.

It was when I went to work with Bill Morris at the Chrysler factory in Linwood that I first had direct responsibility for helping motoring journalists in the north of England.

Among my customers in

those days were Bill Duckworth in Carlisle and the trinity of Steve Hughes, Richard Gibbon and David Williams in Newcastle. They would receive test cars from the Linwood press fleet and I would try to be the one delivering them.

Those early dealings were to stand me in good stead when, in 1981, Ford sent me north from Essex to Halewood on Merseyside to run media operations for the company in the north of the country.

Being located right in the heart of Northern Group territory gave me a terrific opportunity to really get to know the group and its members. With my colleagues at Halewood, Jack Wales, Roy Knight, Frank Trousdale and Jim Casey, organised by our remarkable secretary and administrator, Phyl Baird, we worked hard to service the needs of our motoring press customers.

We must have been doing something right as we won the ‘Best PR Department’ award given by the group four years running. Visitors to our office could be forgiven for thinking they had entered a colliery safety office, given the number of miners’ lamps we had proudly on display!

And when the time came for me to return to Essex, what better person to hand over the reins to than Don Hume, a former Northern Group member when he worked for the Liverpool Echo?

When I took early retirement some 14 years ago, I was delighted to be added to the mailing list for the group’s newsletter. It has been fascinating to keep up with the NGMW’s news and all the comings and goings in the world of motor industry public relations.

Happy birthday Northern Group of Motoring Writers. Thank you for giving me so many happy memories and congratulations on achieving so much for your members. The motor industry and regional journalism would not be the same without you.

Here’s to your next 50 years!



☐ Tom and Dorothy Malcolm at the 1999 Northern Group annual dinner in Liverpool.



Pride and passion

That's what the Northern Group is all about, believes bus and train-loving former Vauxhall PR supremo DENIS CHICK who recalls some great times at work and play with our members...

MY FIRST en masse encounter with the Northern Group was at the Montego launch in 1985. For a wet behind-the-ears press officer, it was quite a moment.

I had already met the main 'Fleet Street' group - serious, scary and straight-laced and seen in their posh London environment. I almost felt the need to bow to these icons of the media world.

Then off the plane at Nice airport comes this monster group of chaps and chaperones - a word of the times, now, no doubt, forbidden.

Almost every town and city 'up north' was represented by its local paper or magazine.

I remember thinking, do all these folks get to go abroad at least once a week, eat, drink and be merry and get free cars for test? What a life!

Then I quickly learned that they talk to thousands of car buyers, informing them of what's good and bad and selling our cars for us. I'd better be nice to them.

My memories of the Northern Group are happy. We had great times at every event, be it at home or somewhere exotic abroad, both before and after the press conference and driving.

That part was taken seriously, the rest less so. Banter and booze livened up the evenings - how can someone who drives for a living consume so much alcohol, eat bacon sandwiches in the early hours, then go to bed and yet be bright and breezy at key handout time?

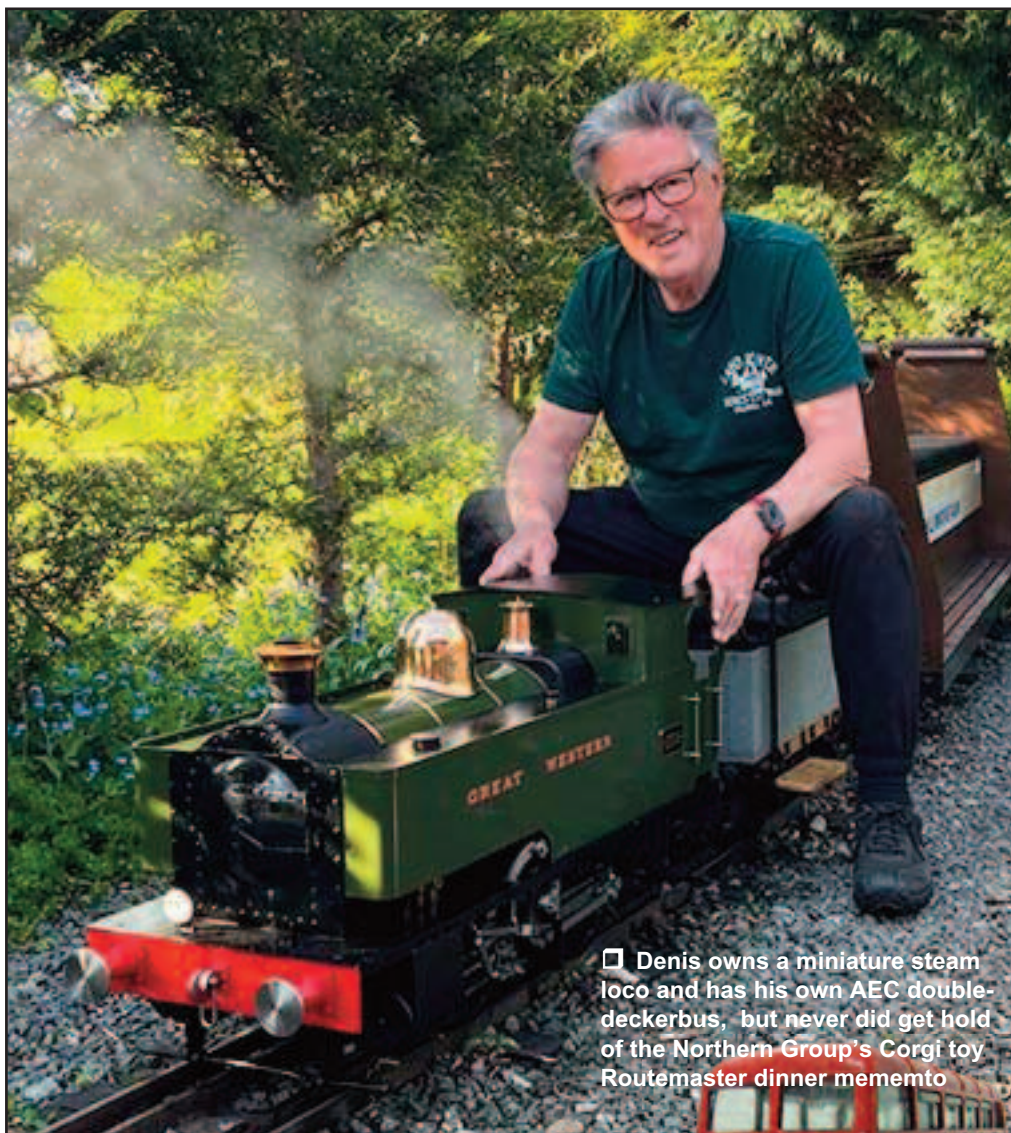
The group was blessed with some real comedians, a laugh a minute.

There were the wonderful Geoff Rumney sing-alongs. I recall him standing on the piano singing with Pam Wearing.

Then there was the time I got a call from the night



☐ Denis and Zoe Chick dress up for the Group's 2003 annual dinner in Liverpool



☐ Denis owns a miniature steam loco and has his own AEC double-deckerbus, but never did get hold of the Northern Group's Corgi toy Routemaster dinner memento

porter asking me to come and identify the body in the bushes at Lucknam Park at 3am. A certain broadsheet motoring editor hadn't quite made it back to his room. I could go on.

The reciprocal hospitality of the group at the annual dinner was always a highlight. The Northern Group must have been the largest regional group in the UK by far and they did it like no other.

“... they talk to thousands of car buyers and they're basically selling our cars for us. I'd better be nice to them.”

Great comedians, great music and great gifts. I never did get hold of the Routemaster bus adorned with the menu to complete my collection of Corgi promotionals!

These were great days. I firmly believe that we worked in the best years of the British motor

industry in the 80s and 90s. Lots of new cars, plenty of budget and some great trips - and, yes, the cars weren't bad either.

And finally, we can't forget Mintex test day. We got to drive each other's cars, how good was that! I'm sure the SMMT test day was derived from that activity but, unlike SMMT, we had a damned good night at the end of it.

The Northern Group has provided my wife Zoe and me with great memories of a wonderful group of passionate journalists with inspiring ideas and a dedication to their cause. Memories to savour of a time never to be repeated and the reason that I cherish my miners' lamp.

Thanks for the memories, those really were the days!



Letter from America



McLaren man: Roger Ormisher with his company car in deepest Utah

RUMNEY, Fawcett, Manby, Whinyates, Domville, Grocock, Gregory, Duckworth, Booker, Ward, Orme, Smith...and the list goes on – all names and personalities that I can vividly remember – and it's not my favourite football team, this is the legendary line up of the NGMW.

More than 20 years after vacating the UK in search of PR adventures in sunnier climes, the thing I remember most - and cherish with the greatest affection - are those times with the 'boys up north' as I started to lose my PR training wheels and headed out into the big wide world. From day one they fully embraced me and made me feel welcome. Maybe it was because my parents were northerners, but I think they were just hospitable to everybody.

“...my sincerest wish would be to spend one last evening with the NGMW first team in a bar with a blank cheque!”

One of my first motoring memories was of my aunt sending me Geoff Rumney's weekly column with his road tests from the Lancashire Evening Telegraph. I pored over them with relish, hoping one day to emulate his career, travelling the globe to sample the latest motoring delights.

Little did I imagine that not that many years later, I'd be in a hotel conference room after another

It's more than 20 years since one-time Renault and Volvo PR man ROGER ORMISHER left the UK. Now, as McLaren's vice president of communications and PR for the Americas, he still has fond memories of times spent with the Northern Group and proudly displays the miners' lamp, which was won by Renault in the group's PR awards back in 1990, in his Utah home.



spirited Northern Group dinner with most of the first team named above, engaged in a particularly rambunctious rendition of 'My Way' led by the indomitable Mr Rumney on piano.

And of course, why spoil a good evening by turning down the noise – much better in real Northern Group tradition to barricade the doors and not let the hotel staff in until we'd fully completed the symphony.

Most of the stories, sadly, can't be shared but all left a smile on my face and memories that last a lifetime – ask Mr Whinyates about his entertainment at his first motoring awards evening – a showstopper if there ever was one.

I was lucky enough that my first-ever boss was a former NGMW member – the now sadly departed Tim Jackson – who made sure I learned the ropes and pushed me off green and unsuspecting to my first NGMW annual dinner. I came back a changed man.

So many characters and stories – sitting at dinners and hearing tales of Don Booker 'schooling' Michael Parkinson and learning that Ken Gregory was Stirling Moss' manager. I feel lucky to have caught the tales and advice first-hand from a previous era that is now consigned to the history books.

Being on the PR side, we were always ready for a

visit from our friends from the north.

That wave on any launch was a 'steel yourself and get ready event' – making sure the bar was well stocked, anything moveable was nailed down, the champagne and caviar from the minibar sequestered away, any potential stumbling hazards removed, and a good night's sleep had before arrival.

I never came back either from an annual dinner without tales to be told and memories to be cherished. My Northern Group miners' lamp sits proudly on the shelf in Utah and I relish every issue of Mr Whinyates' newsletter.

Sadly now, there are too many obituaries, but all are read with thoughts of good times spent and real friends encountered.

So, 50 years is a remarkable milestone and I want to congratulate the group – sadly no free McLaren – but if I was asked what my sincerest wish would be, it would be to spend one last evening with that NGMW 'first team' in a bar with a blank cheque!

Congratulations all – a history and memories to be proud of.



Keep on having fun!



WHETHER it was a Calmac trip to the Western Isles, a legendary Raymond Playfoot BMW excursion and practical joke somewhere in France, a Mintex Test Day or the annual knees-up in a northern hotel, the lingering memory of NGMW gatherings has always been underscored by a deep sense of fun!

I wasn't in at the founding of the Northern Group, or even involved in its earliest activities. But very soon after becoming the motoring editor at the Bradford Telegraph & Argus, the friendship and hearty welcome of group members added a sense of fun to the serious business of being a motoring scribe in the north - sometimes seen as a tumbleweed-strewn wasteland by certain

STEVE KITSON is one of several former Northern Group members to have successfully made the transition from motoring journalism to public relations. The retired Kia Press and PR director recalls how his grounding with the group helped pave the way on his career path...



segments of the London-centric motor industry PR brethren.

Nonetheless, I relished not just the business of helping change that erroneous image but of being part of a dynamic, energetic and utterly chummy bunch of individuals all working together to do a good professional job while also enjoying themselves and each other.

Looking back now, those years were part of a golden age for motoring journalists - no 24-hour rolling news agendas, no mobile phones or laptops demanding to be fed by the minute and sufficient time to drive a new car before having to submit the copy!

Now, 50 years on from the establishment of

the NGMW, the motoring world is very different and it has been a source of great pleasure and pride to have been on that journey and to have navigated the twists and turns both as a scribbler and as poacher turned gamekeeper PR.

Membership of the group fixed firmly in my mind that while the big London-based titles are vital to any brand's success in the industry, staying in touch with regional roots plays a central part in keeping dealers happy and ensuring potential customers know not just the brand name but, importantly, where they can buy the product in their neck of the woods.

But of course, the journey has been such fun and, for me, involving Northern Group members in my strategies and activities was part of the joy of the job.

Driving Kia Sorentos through the Atlas mountains and Moroccan desert, hammering Stingers up Newquay Airport's main runway, re-branding the Zilina Airport, dealing

with a variety of wonderful individuals from tennis' Rafa Nadal to Kia's design maestro Peter Schreyer and exposing wide-eyed journalists (yes, they can still be surprised!) to the delights of South Korea, especially the famous LP Bar, have been milestones and highlights during a lifetime alongside the NGMW.

But at the end of the day it is the people who matter the most - my former colleagues and friends in the group and the wonderful individuals I have had the pleasure to work alongside in the industry at Renault, Hyundai and Kia.

They're far too numerous to list and sadly some have departed but they will always be the people I think of most fondly.

Congratulations on reaching 50 - work hard, be professional and respectful - but remember, have FUN!



❑ Anyone for tennis? Steve meets Rafa Nadal



Paul and the great ferret legging debate

MY FIRST contact with Northern Group members was around 45 years ago when assisting the Citroen press department on a product event at Selsdon Park near Croydon.

It was late one evening when a contingent arrived in black-tie, from a Ford dinner I seem to remember, causing me to think, what a posh lot these guys and gals must be.

The late Harold Hodgson seemed to radiate importance with a bearing not dissimilar to that of James Robertson Justice. I also imagined that Harold's aristocratic partner, Biddy Watlington, could have stepped out of the same film set.

Over the years Josy and I came to know Northern Group members and their partners well through events such as the annual dinner weekend and the Mintex test day at Sherburn in Elmet.

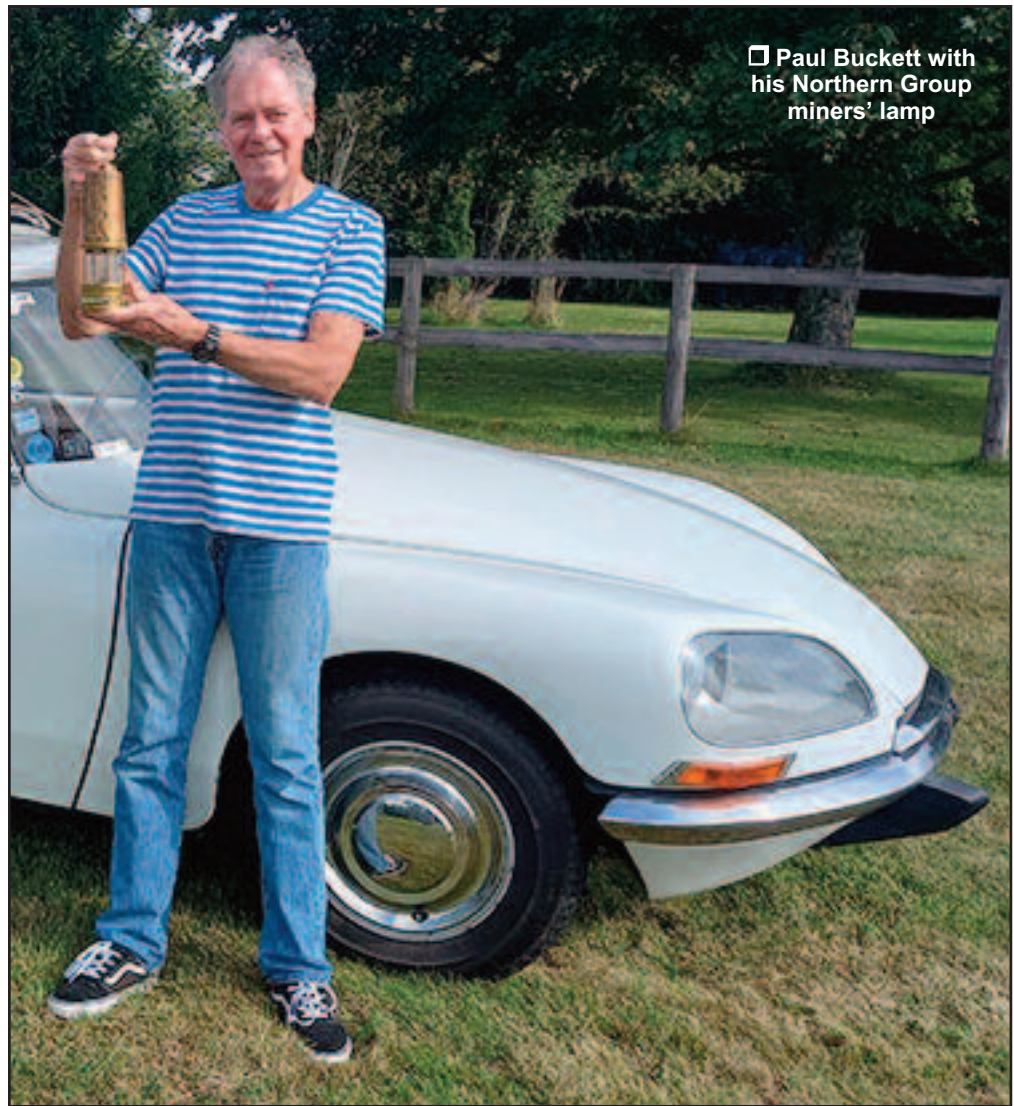
I will always be grateful to group members and their partners for the efforts they made to introduce industry members and our spouses to northern culture and all those wonderful places that were their stamping ground.

The Mintex test day deserves mention for its unique format, spread over a weekend with national motoring media also invited.

One such weekend made a big impression on a young and enthusiastic Paul Buckett learning his trade in the art of press relations. This was in the mid-1980s when the Northern Group organisers challenged industry PR departments to invite their heads of design and partners.

The weekend typically began with an informal Friday night dinner with driving of the latest cars on Saturday culminating in a gala dinner in the evening. A media v industry cricket match took place on Sunday.

The innovation this time was that heads of design would be invited to participate in a pre-dinner, Friday evening panel discussion chaired by



□ Paul Buckett with his Northern Group miners' lamp

Former Volkswagen PR supremo PAUL BUCKETT remembers an innovative Northern Group event which is unlikely to be repeated in the modern age of motoring public relations



Northern Group member Steve Kitson, who was beginning to exhibit some flare in the art of communication.

I was then at Citroen and Carl Olsen, design director for the company, agreed to come over from Paris with his English wife Sonia. The panel was completed with representatives from Ogle, Ford and Fiat, a real coup for the Northern Group, but no one was quite sure how things would go.

The panel discussion began with a slow release of the clutch in first gear and the engine at idle. Steve seemed a little tense.

There was no tyre smoke until Anne Hope stamped on the throttle and shot her hand up to ask, "Which car would members of the panel most like to have designed?" and we were on our way to a fascinating and lively debate. It became obvious the designers all knew each other and suddenly seemed to be having a good time.

On Saturday Carl and Sonia were saying what a great weekend they were having, how they wished

they could have joined in the test driving and were asking when the next event was coming up.

I was fired up by the prospect of future, similar events with industry chairmen, heads of research and development and designers queuing up for weekends to chat, socialise, experience Northern Group hospitality and perhaps indulge in a bit of ferret legging after a drop of northern brew on Saturday night.

I even imagined them all returning to France, Germany and Italy spreading the word resulting in queues of industry experts wanting to come to the Mintex weekend.

As the years passed, however, I learned a few more lessons, one being the viewpoint of senior media relations colleagues at parent companies. To them, the thought of letting loose their board members, uncontrolled and mixing with unknown media would have been a nightmare.

More seriously, one's own head could have been sized up for the chopping block. Ah well, a fantastic idea and one, I feel, that might still work with the right formula and safeguards in place. For one thing, the ferret legging should remain a spectator sport rather than be opened up for guest participation!

My later life caution has also caused me to postpone other stories for the centenary but, for now, thank you Northern Group members for your friendship and all you've given to us over the years.





The purple patch in Wayne's world

MY GOODNESS, is it really 50 years? Proud to say I've known you all for, erm, at least half that.

And haven't they been some great years? I gather Mr Buckett is also contributing to the memories of fun times past. This is useful, as my recollection of the 90s when I was at Volkswagen with dear Paul is certainly fading in my dotage.

Not helped by the more one might have imbibed in those days. Well, didn't we all?

I do vaguely recall being encouraged to wear a purple sequin crop top for one of your group dinners, though. Which is not something I do for just anyone y'know. The 'naughties' were indeed.

Best partner weekend memory is of line-dancing with the dear and sadly departed Lionel Blair - an idea I had to create a distraction from the bar after dinner, thinking certainly it would get the women up and moving. The Northern Group men were rather up for it, too. Of course.

My career then took me off to Geneva and next to Woking, such is the scenic route our lives can take.

Bentley director of communications WAYNE BRUCE reflects on Northern Group nineties naughtiness, a purple sequined top and line-dancing with Lionel Blair



And sadly little contact with you lovely people.

Until just a few weeks ago when it was an absolute pleasure to welcome the group to Bentley.

Although some members saw more of Crewe than they might have wished, once you finally all reached us it was lovely to see so many familiar faces again. Plus some new ones. All of you sharing the same Northern Groupness of affability, warmth and passion for what moves us all ... the car.

Here's to your past 50 years. And many, many more to come.



❑ Lionel Blair led Wayne Bruce and group members' wives a merry dance!

As friends you're the business



I FIRST met numerous members of the Northern Group exactly 30 years ago when I joined the BMW press office having just moved from the technical area.

We had a great time on that multi-model launch in the South of France and at countless other European and UK events too.

Since then, and across two other car brands, I always enjoy meeting up with everyone and have been very pleased to support the Northern Group's pre-SMMT North dinner for the last three years.

At Suzuki I consider all members to be our 'Business Friends' and am always keen to support the group - long may it continue.

It's also very pleasing for us that at least six group members have purchased their own Suzukis!

Many congratulations on your 50th Anniversary and see you all again soon.

- Alun Parry
Head of Press
and PR
Suzuki



Never forgotten

SADLY, we have lost many good friends and colleagues over the past half century - some of them influential in group affairs, others providing invaluable support. The members listed below served us and the motor industry well and we will never forget their contributions and friendship...



☐ Bernard Gent



☐ Bryan Longworth



☐ Malcolm Robertshaw

Jack Allwood
Malcolm Baylis
Don Booker
Syd Burton
Maurice Cable
Terry Davies
John Edwards
Alan Fawcett
Bernard Gent
Richard Gibbon
Ken Gregory
Howard Hill
Harold Hodgson
George Hughes
Tim Jackson
Les Jones
Frank Kay

Brian Longworth

Don Ludlow

Peter Myerscough

Steve Orme
David Pauline
Barry Plumb
Eric Purnell
Malcolm Robertshaw
Walter Roche

Geoff Rumney

Bernard Smith
Philip Stagg
David Williams

York Evening Press
York Evening Press
Barnsley Chronicle
Yorkshire Post
Newark Advertiser
North Wales Newspapers
Flintshire Leader
Fleet North
Northern Echo
Sunday Sun, Newcastle
Newcastle Journal
Derbyshire Times
Newark Advertiser
Hartlepool Daily Mail
Worksop Guardian
Liverpool Daily Post
Lancashire Evening Telegraph
South Yorkshire Newspapers
Evening Despatch, Darlington
Blackpool Evening Gazette
Ormskirk Advertiser
What Diesel Car
Yorkshire Evening Post
Radio Manchester
Huddersfield Examiner
West Cheshire Newspapers
Lancashire Evening Telegraph
The Star, Sheffield
Wigan Post and Chronicle
Newcastle Journal



☐ Don Booker



☐ Geoff Rumney



☐ Tim Jackson

