

Bristol Fashion!

■ **Doug King** went to the West Country to profile one of the largest caravan manufacturers in the UK, a story that has a humble beginning in the late nineteen forties



1 948: London hosted the first Olympic Games after the end of the Second World War. In Newmarket a young Sam Alper was setting out on a journey that was to make him world famous as the man who brought caravanning to the masses. And in Bristol, having built and sold his first caravan the year previously, a Mr F G Bailey - always known as Martin - decided that building caravans was his future too, so he founded F. G. Bailey Ltd. Sam Alper's company, Caravans International ceased to exist in the mid eighties but the Bailey name has gone on to become one of the leading manufacturers in the UK, unquestionably due to the foresight of Patrick Howard, who with his brother Stephen and other members of their family bought the company in 1976. But we're getting slightly ahead of ourselves.



◆ An F. G. Bailey stand at Earls Court circa 1958. Note the fountain display.

Small beginnings

It had taken Martin Bailey six months to build his first caravan using the metalworking and joinery skills he had learnt whilst working at the Bristol Aircraft Company during the war, but the net result was that he was able to sell the caravan at auction at the 'City' Ground' for £200. From this small beginning the company gradually expanded until the mid 1950s when demand for its caravans meant that it needed to appoint its first dealers. The next important step came in 1960 when the company bought its first plot at what was to become its permanent home, South Liberty Lane. The reason why this site was chosen was because it was next to the A38 which at that time was the main trunk road to Devon and Cornwall and hence provided a great opportunity to advertise Bailey caravans to the passing holidaymakers. Staffing levels were around 20-30 with production around 100 caravans per year.

Martin continued to run the business throughout the 1960s but by the beginning of the '70s was thinking of retiring so he sold the company to engineering group Winn Industries in June 1972. The following year Patrick Howard joined it as assistant to the managing director with responsibility for introducing new management, financial and control systems. Patrick's background was as an economist specialising in

marketing and industry management, systems and finance.

Crucial time

Patrick joined the company at a crucial time for the industry because 1973 was the year that VAT was applied to caravans leading to a slump in the market. Patrick's work in introducing financial controls and disciplines on costs and management formed the basis of the culture and reserves which have enabled the company to thrive ever since. It is particularly worth noting that between 1972 and 1974 Bailey won, and still holds, the lap record at each major UK racing circuit in the Repco Caravan Racing Series. This led to the stability programme and unique towing geometry - wide axle/long A frame etc - for which the company became famous. Additionally, the use by the company of rounded corners on its caravans heralded the importance of caravan aerodynamics.

The next significant step in the life of the company came in September 1973 when Patrick was appointed managing director. Just over two years later, in November 1976 - the year in which Bailey became the first mid-market manufacturer to fit the Electrolux RM110 fridge as standard - Winn Industries made the decision to sell the company which gave Patrick the opportunity to lead an MBO. Patrick and his brother Stephen put up 25 per cent each with the

remainder coming from other members of the Howard family. Today, Patrick and Stephen are equal joint owners of the company.

At the time of the MBO Stephen was a civil engineer building bridges on the M3 but in April 1977 he joined Bailey as a director with a roving portfolio which included working in sales to gain cross-company experience. The company also introduced an aluminium chassis during 1977 - one innovation which didn't stand the test of time. However, having been the first company to offer a fridge as standard in its models, it again led the field in 1978 by being the first to fit a space heater as standard.

Rising production

Production was also rising steadily with the company producing upwards of 1,000 caravans per year by the end of the '70s so that by the beginning of the '80s there was a need for more production space. This resulted in it buying yet more land in South Liberty Lane, allowing production to increase by between 50 and 60 per cent during the next few years. The number employed at this time was around 150 and today it is still a very lean operation of about 350 employees.

1982 saw the Falklands War which resulted in the company launching the first Pageant models in recognition of

How the Bristol factory site has expanded...

the successful conclusion of the war. This was followed a year later by the company becoming the first one to fit the Carver Cascade water heater as standard; and from 1985 onwards fully bonded construction was adopted throughout all the ranges.

Early in 1992 a third tranche of land became available in South Liberty Lane and although it wasn't immediately needed, the company bought it. It was also around this time that Stephen visited a Japanese car manufacturer to study its production system with the result that piece-work was dropped in favour of a profit sharing scheme. One of the main reasons for the change was that the company wanted to get away from the culture of the individual to one where people worked together as teams to improve quality and efficiency. This is nowhere better seen than on the U-shaped production line where the man who builds the chassis sees the finished caravan leave the end of the line - a vast improvement on the straight production line where the chassis builder never sees the finished caravan!

Production zones

As part of the improved production set-up the employees are divided into zones and teams of six under a team leader. This has resulted in improved efficiency by shortening the chain of command between the shop floor and the production manager. It also means that each member of the team has an improved career path enabling him to progress up management chain.

A significant step forward came in the mid 1990s with the appointment of Nigel Mattfield as commercial manager to take charge of the stores. After re-organising the stores, he moved to purchasing where his expertise as a buyer resulted in the right parts, in the right quantity being delivered to the production line at the right time; Just In Time - JIT - production had arrived at Bailey so that the company was able to make what the customer wanted rather than building what the production department wanted and then trying to find customers. Today, Bailey works on a six week lead time and makes a different model - be it Unicorn, Pegasus, Olympus, or Orion - every day of the week, whereas in the 'bad old' days of the early 1990s it built only one model per week.

Improved flexibility

Whilst Nigel continued to look after the commercial side and materials handling, the production director, Ceri Davis, oversaw a continuing process of improved flexibility in production which allowed the company to respond quickly to the demands of the ever changing market. Importantly Bailey - through Stephen's good offices - also became closely allied with the Dept of Mechanical Engineering at Bath University. Two of the main areas which it has investigated for Bailey have been caravan stability, and the design of the Alu-Tech body which the company now uses throughout all its ranges.

The early to mid 1990s found the company



◆ The Bailey factory in 1960.



◆ The factory expansion in 1982.



◆ The factory expansion in 1998.



◆ The factory expansion in 2008.





experimenting with reduced dealer margins, level playing field trading and product packages which climaxed in the Lawns show in September 1996 where a competitor was offering a £200 cash back. Patrick immediately called his team together and announced Bailey would not be going down that road and they had six weeks to develop a range based on strict costs and throughputs. Additionally, dealer trading terms would be drastically reduced and be the same for everyone - north or south, big or small. The result was the launch to the dealers of the now famous Ranger range in December 1996, with the public launch in Bristol the following January. Originally planned for a production of 200 units in the first three months of 1997, the company actually built and sold 1,100 in the first six months - a rate of growth which had not been seen before and which still hasn't been surpassed.

Great value

Without doubt the success of the Rangers was because they were superbly equipped but at prices well below similar models from other manufacturers. It became a company hallmark and put it at the forefront of the industry. The Ranger 450/2 for example, was some £1,500 cheaper than an equivalent model from another manufacturer. The success of the Ranger formula led to it being applied to the rest of the company's portfolio and is still the mantra Bailey works to today.

Following university where he studied engineering, and work experience in a major component manufacturer to Honda, Stephen's son Nick joined the company in 1997 as technical manager. He was followed a year later by his brother Simon who had worked as a marketing manager for Fuji Film Photographic following his time at university. Both worked under Nigel Mattfield who by then had become the company's managing director. Increasingly, the three took over the day to day management from Patrick and Stephen, with Simon becoming marketing director in 2005 and Nick managing director when Nigel retired in 2007. Nigel however, remained as a consultant overseeing the introduction of the new computer system and the parts website, before finally departing earlier this year.

New innovations

Following Nick becoming managing director, the company made the decision to look at new ways of building caravans, the result of which was the launch of the Pegasus range featuring the Alu-Tech body shell in September 2009. This was a revolutionary step, comparable with Sam Alper's decision some 60 years earlier to build caravans selling for under £500. The process of producing the Alu-Tech body shell involved over two years work with

Four members of the Bailey dynasty...



◆ Simon Howard



◆ Patrick Howard



◆ Stephen Howard



◆ Nick Howard

road and cold chamber testing taking place at the Millbrook Testing Ground in Bedfordshire. As well as having 90 per cent less joints and fixing points in it, the Alu-Tech was the first body to be given Grade III classification of thermal Insulation to BS1645-1, and the first from any manufacturer to carry a 10 year bodyshell integrity guarantee.

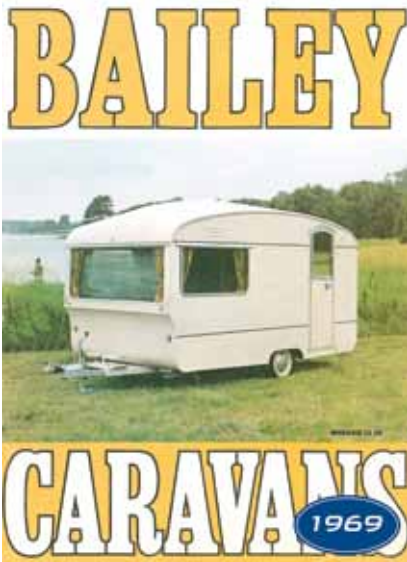
In anticipation of the need for more production space, the company bought more land at South Liberty Lane when it became available in 2008. It is here that the next major product - a range of Bailey motorhomes - will be built, their launch taking place at the NEC in October this year.

It is interesting to look back over the 60 years since Mr Bailey built his first caravan

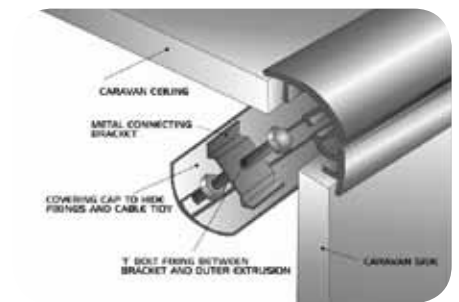
to see some of the model ranges it has produced. Amongst them have been: 1948 - Minor; 1957 - Maritza; 1958 - Maestro Minor; 1961 - Montane; 1965 - Maru; 1968 - Mikado; 1974 - Prima; 1979 - Clifton; 1983 - Caribou, Pageant; 1986 - Corsair and Chieftain; 1988 - Senator; 1996 - Ranger; 2009 - Pegasus; 2010 - Olympus and Unicorn; 2011 - Orion.

The future

So where does the company expect to be in 10 years time? Managing director Nick Howard says that by then he hopes it will have branched out into other types of vehicles (their new range of motorhomes was launched to the public at the NEC last month) because he believes that the



◆ Above: Bailey caravan used in the BBC Driver of the Year completion in the 1970s. Left: an early brochure from 1969.



◆ Alu-Tech drawing.



◆ Approach motorhome.

◆ The company stand at the NEC exhibition in 1996 when the Ranger series was introduced and took the industry by storm.



◆ The model which lifted Bailey into the top league of caravan manufacturers – the Ranger.

Alu-Tech body lends itself to other leisure and commercial types of vehicle. He is also interested in exporting, especially to the southern hemisphere. In this he believes that Bailey will be helped by the weak pound. And of course, he hopes that there will be an increased demand for Bailey motorhomes - although he doesn't expect their numbers to compare with the number of caravans the company produces. As far as the industry is concerned both Nick and Simon believe that with the ever increasing cost of fuel, plus other factors, the move will be towards lighter cars which in turn will mean lighter caravans and more people opting for seasonal pitches.

There is one other thing we think is certain: whatever the prevailing circumstances in the caravan industry will be, Bailey under the Howard family will continue to be a market leader both in the manufacture and pricing of caravans and motorhomes, as well as a leader in their sales and marketing. 🚐