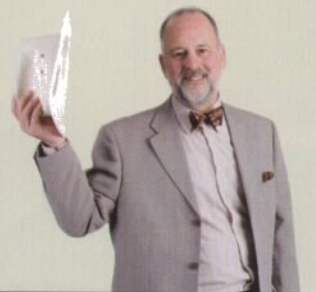


Memories are made of this...

Broadway babes Auto-Sleepers through the ages



€ £ **Gentleman Jack** tells the revealing story of the UK's longest-established motorcaravan manufacturer

Auto-Sleepers didn't land on the planet as a fully formed motorcaravan manufacturer. Its very first efforts were DIY builds on an Austin J2, carried out by former steel company director and designer Calverley Trevelyan to take his family on touring holidays in France. We must assume that Calverley decided to build his own, as

opposed to just buying (say) a Martin Walter Dormobile, simply because he could!

Included in that family foray to foreign fields were two young men, Anthony and Charles, who between them have had more to do with the esteem in which the Auto-Sleepers marque is held than any others.

Back in Blighty after the holiday, Calverley decided to sell the converted Austin J2 to Henlys of Bristol. They were so impressed with the level of ingenuity and build quality

Above, left The iconic 1971 model with parallelogram, solid-sided fixed roof on a Commer PB *Right* This 1977 CB22 coachbuilt is still in use



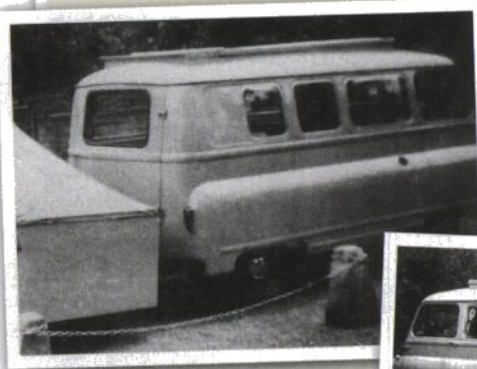
that they immediately ordered five more. As soon as the five had been completed, Henlys requested another 12. Such an order couldn't be fulfilled as a DIY exercise so Calverley joined forces with local Builder Bob Halling, bought an old building in Manchester for £99 and, in 1961, Auto-Sleepers began production.

freedoms. There had been a warp-factor increase in the public's leisure time and disposable income, and the stuffy attitudes of the austere '50s had been blown away by a new informality. This was coupled with a desire among ordinary folk to travel, both at home and, for the first time ever, abroad.

Groovy baby

Throughout the 1960s, Auto-Sleepers motorhomes captured the essence of newly found

The company went from strength to strength and quickly outgrew its small factory. It eventually settled in a small village near Broadway



The seminal, Trevelyan-built model was based on an Austin J2. Note foldaway tent annex



Auto-Sleepers time line
Jack highlights the key moments in the evolution of the marque

1959
Trevelyan builds a home-made Austin J2 conversion. Two years later Auto-Sleepers is officially formed

1969
The Bedford CF is unveiled at the London Motor Show

1977
The CB22, the first Auto-Sleeper coachbuilt, rolls off the production line

1980
The first of the monocoque coachbuilts, the SV100, is unveiled at the Motor Show

1989
Auto-Sleepers converts the Renault Trafic for the first time

1991
Auto-Sleepers becomes the first approved converter of the Volkswagen Transporter T4



Auto-Sleepers' first monocoque was the Bedford-based SV100. This one, pictured last year, seems to be resisting time's ravages well



in the Cotswolds and has been there ever since, which is why I frequently refer to the firm's products as 'Broadway Babes'!

Throughout the '60s, Auto-Sleepers' old loyalties kept the company wedded to the Commer PB as a base vehicle, and the firm's bosses didn't even consider the 'new-fangled' Ford Transit. Full order books appear to have vindicated their decision. Anyway, the Commer was held in high regard; in this sector it was the first panel van in which it was possible to sleep transversely. What's more, the mechanicals were reliable, the petrol engine was smooth (if rather thirsty) and a Laycock overdrive unit was available. But it was the diesel option that turned heads. Commer chose to use the Perkins 4-108 engine which was willing, economical and virtually bomb-proof.

Raising the roof

One of the advantages Auto-Sleeper owners enjoyed over buyers of other rising-roof motorcaravans was the design and construction of the roof itself. It consisted of solid, hinged sides with a lift that operated as a parallelogram.

The others made do with a bit of deckchair canvas. The Auto-Sleepers roof provided better thermal insulation and consequently there were no condensation problems. Also, many a romantically involved couple were no doubt grateful

for its superior properties of acoustic insulation...

Into the '70s

The complete domination of Commer in the '60s gave way to a more pluralistic approach towards base vehicles in the following decade. Commer

continued to sell in meaningful numbers, Leyland Sherpa-based models had their adherents and the Mark II Ford Transit started making inroads, beginning a close relationship with our longest-established motorhome converter which still continues to this day. All were in for a rude awakening, though, when Luton-based Bedford unveiled its CF rival to Ford's Transit. It demonstrated itself to be so totally superior to anything else on the market that it became the default choice for the majority of Auto-Sleeper purchasers.

While Ford was still slavishly fitting the unsophisticated and sometimes-troublesome V4 engine, Bedford came out with a range of petrol engines that, for the first time, gave a van the performance of a car. And then some.

Auto-Sleeper Bedford CFs started as a range of elevating-roof models, but these were quickly joined by an elegant GRP high-top offering full standing height and finally, in 1977, by the company's first coachbuilt, the CB22. That model was a response to the fact that A-S was haemorrhaging sales to



Above I used to own this 1988 Medallion Auto-Sleeper, which is based on a 2.5TD VW LT *Top insets* Nice cabinetwork and upholstery on this Renault Traffic-based example *Right* Classic Transit model from 1989



1995	1997	1998	2000	2001	2005	2008
The Peugeot Boxer replaces the Talbot Express, and goes on to be A-S's most popular ever base vehicle	The flagship Medallion is launched on Mercedes Sprinter and VW LT bases	Auto-Sleepers returns to non-monocoque coachbuilds with the Pollensa, Pescara, and Ravenna	The Marquis retail group and Auto-Sleepers merge to form the Auto-Sleepers Group	Auto-Sleepers Motorhome Service Centre is established by Charles Trevelyan and Adrian Stanford	Auto-Sleepers merges with the SeA Group of European Motorhome Producers	The new Mercedes-Benz-based 'County' range is launched



The Trooper, looking very modern for '09, has been Britain's best-selling VW camper for more than 20 years

go-ahead rivals Aut ohomes (previously CI Motorised and CI Autohomes) because the latter had pioneered the popular cab-over style with its Autohome/Motorhome/Travelhome ranges.

Mighty monocoques

After the encouraging success of its first coachbuilt, Auto-Sleepers decided to employ the services of automotive designer William Towns (of Aston Martin Lagonda fame) to come up with a new design for a new type of body. The body was to be of one-piece moulded fibreglass construction.

As a result of that collaboration, in one swoop Auto-Sleepers set the

standard with its Bedford CF-based SV100 and Clubman, which had no angular joins. In fact, it had no joins at all; just curvy, fluid lines and a strong, leak-proof construction. What a body!

It is a common misconception that Auto-Sleeper monocoques didn't change over the years; they did, but it happened by evolution not revolution. In the late 1990s rising development costs forced a change of thinking at Auto-Sleepers and slowly the monocoques were replaced by conventionally built, slab-sided efforts that used bonded sandwich panels. There is, however, one monocoque still being built today; the Transit-based Amethyst Gem.

Staying power

The company has survived floods and a disastrous fire, and in recent years, in my opinion, one or two design failures, variable build quality and a few odd management decisions. For example, it remains a mystery to many how Auto-Sleepers could fail to transfer its most popular coachbuilt ever, the Clubman/Gatcombe on the VW T4 onto the VW T5.

But, nearly 50 years on from its inception, Auto-Sleepers is still here, and although its market share has declined slightly the marque remains popular with British buyers – including me, who has owned plenty of them over the years!

The last word



Anthony Trevelyan ran Auto-Sleepers for 40 years before selling in 2001. Today, he is director of motorhome external affairs at the Swift Group.

"Auto-Sleepers gave a lot of people huge enjoyment, won awards and looked after customers. We made it through a number of recessions, too. The worst was the three-day week during the miner's strike in the 1980s.

"My creed was to make a first-class product that was fit for purpose and was what the customer wanted, and to look after the customer thereafter. It was tough, but I remember when I left the factory at the end of the day, I'd look around and think 'It would be such a dreadful waste if the recession gets us'. It was pride in what we did that saw us through tough times.

"I'm immensely proud of rebuilding the company after the big fire on 12 October 1992. I was woken to be told there were flames coming out of the top of the factory; 120 firemen battled it, but the fire took out the main factory and stores. I remember addressing our 200 employees the next morning, and outlining exactly what we had to do. We had a small factory unit on adjacent land and we were back in mini-production by the end of the week, and full production by the end of the year. It was a huge achievement.

"The most important change in our industry has been the public acceptance of motorcaravanning. In the 1960s, it was seen as a little bit unusual, but the industry has grown professionally and now it's widely accepted as a great way of holidaying."



Left Auto-Sleepers extended the short-wheelbase VW T4 to produce the Trophy Below The Luxor, a re-badged Mirage, has been the company's only A-class offering to date, and examples are suitably plush on the inside (inset)

