

Tudor Webasto - A Company Is Born!

Enter Alan Garnett

In the early 1980s the majority of cars didn't come fitted with sunroofs, they were an after market add-on, pure and simple. The market for these post-purchase fittings was really dominated by just two companies Britax and Slideaway, who supplied fitting centres and garages throughout the UK with their all-purpose, one roof 'fits all' products - usually a folding, fabric roof, or at best a tilting metal panel.

What OEM (Original Equipment Manufactured) product there was (that is to say those cars that were actually sold with a sunroof, as fitted by the manufacturer in the production process) were very few and far between and usually it was only top of the range vehicles that offered a sunroof as a fitted optional extra, straight from the manufacturer. In this case the roof that most manufacturers fitted on their production line was supplied by Webasto of Germany.

There was a good reason why manufacturers did not supply many original, fitted sunroofs; they were costly and it could take up to 40 minutes to 'shunt' a car off the production line, fit a roof and send it back to the line. It simply wasn't cost effective to do this to many more than three in every 100 cars.

Even the very 'poshest' of 'posh' cars was more likely to be fitted with a sunroof after its purchase or as part of the purchase package by the dealer, rather than being built with a sunroof in the first place, and if that car was, say, a Rolls Royce or one of the new up-

market and expensive Range Rovers, then the roof that was fitted by the owner was more than likely to be the famous Webasto 'Coachbuilt.'

It was this roof that was fitted and hand-crafted in Fred Worms' fitting centre at Tudor Accessories in London. Here, there was an expert carpenter on hand who would shape blocks of raw beech wood into a frame that would drop into a hole cut into the car's roof by an expert craftsman and to which the elegant, folding Webasto Roof was then fitted. This was a beautiful fabric roof that, in its larger forms, could be opened either backwards from the front seats or forwards from the rear seats. It really was the Rolls Royce of roofs for the Rolls Royce owner. Even today classic car owners seek out the Webasto Coachbuilt in their old vehicles and have them painstakingly restored to their former glory by specialist companies.

So when CHI took over Tudor Accessories and Slideaway at the beginning of the new decade, it was to the after market business that their eyes turned in the first place. At first they saw little more than the opportunity to merge Slideaway and its share of the after-market fitting business with Tudor Accessories, who had the corner in the small but profitable business of fitting the Webasto Coachbuilt to luxury cars. But, on further investigation, someone in the organisation must have twigged that Tudor Accessories had a little more than just a fitting business for these roofs; the newly acquired company actually owned the rights to distribute Webasto products in the UK.

Realising that they stood to clean-up in the rapidly developing market for car fixtures and fittings that was then sweeping the country, CHI opened talks with Webasto HQ in Germany at some point in or about 1982, and

persuaded them that they were seriously wanting to develop an after market sunroof business.

Webasto looked at the proposition and they must have liked what they heard and it no doubt fitted in with Werner Baier's plans to create joint ventures worldwide. The result was a UK joint venture between the two companies in which both Webasto and CHI held 50% of the shares each in a new company formed from the merger of Slideaway and Tudor Accessories. Importantly, as the instigator of the idea and the 'home' part of the venture, CHI retained the right to appoint the Chairman of the new operation.

While all this was going on, an ambitious former Fleet Air Arm fast jet pilot was making a quiet impact on the business world from his position as managing director of International Disposables Ltd., based in Worcester.

Alan Garnett had been keen to fly since he was a schoolboy and indeed he had applied for a flying scholarship while still at school and he had a pilot's license by the time he was sixteen.

Offered commissions by both the RAF and The Fleet Air Arm, he chose to go to the latter on the basis that they could take him ten months earlier than the RAF. He trained on Vampires, but after only two years he became seriously ill and spent several months in hospital. Eventually, he found himself at the tender age of just twenty already retired from the Navy and seeking a job.

He ended up selling 'OK Sauce' to shop-keepers in Birmingham. It may have been a come-down for a young former jet pilot but like the first Lord Of The Admiralty in H M S Pinafore, he sold the sauce so well that Reckitt and Colman soon made him an area manager. From then on his career blossomed at alarming speed: he was recruited by the management consulting company Pirbic, and within

six years he became their MD and from there he moved to Worcester to run International Disposables who specialised in geriatric sanitary wear.

Having broken the mould for such products by getting his products advertised on television for the first time, despite such ads being previously banned by the overly sensitive IBA, he also managed to place his products in Marks and Spencer, a major retailing achievement.

Basking in his success at having built International Disposables from a small operation into a major player, he found himself one day meeting with a Director of CHI, who happened to be acquainted with one of the directors of International Disposables. Doubtless the meeting had been arranged without Alan's knowledge. An agenda had clearly been planned. To his astonishment he found that he was being asked to become Managing Director of a fledgling company in the midlands formed from the merger of two other companies, neither of which were familiar to him, in a sector about which he knew nothing at all - the manufacture and sale of car sunroofs.