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BRITISH CARS ON THE SWISS MARKET

For anyone with an eye for this sort of thing, the number of British cars on Swiss roads seems to have diminished regularly over the past few years. It seems certain that there are fewer Jaguars and Minis on Swiss roads than, say, five years go. Figures obtained from the Swiss Touring Club and conversations with car owners have tended to bear out this impression. Although these columns ought not to be used to run down the quality of British products, it must be said that, on average, the Swiss have tended to look upon British cars with increasing mistrust.

Traditionally, there were many reasons why the Swiss should be attracted by British cars. It is well known that cars reflect the national characteristics of their country of manufacture. The American cars are boisterous, materialistic and ostentatious. The Italian cars are highly taut, excitable and break down easily. French cars are ingenious, elegant but shoddy. German cars are stolid, graceless but reliable. Who can't say that what is true of their cars is respectively true of the Americans, the Italians, the French and the Germans?

The British car was traditionally sturdy, conservative, idiosyncratic and unhurried. It was evocative of a country manor. The Swiss, who have no car industry of their own and constitute an ideally competitive market, found these characteristics akin to their temperament and have always favoured British cars.

However, the evolution of the world car industry has tended to obliterate these distinctive national automobile features. America has been producing European-style compact cars, Germans have been making American saloons and both the Italians and the French have been improving the durability of their production in order to satisfy foreign markets. The old labels are no longer valid. The only British cars with a really national hall-mark, such as leather upholstery and wooden panelling, are to be found on the luxury end of the range.

British cars can therefore no longer rely on their Anglo-Saxon peculiarity. The majority of models turned out by British manufacturers have almost identical pendants on the Continent. There is no stylistic difference, for example, between cars produced by Vauxhall and Opel, or by Ford of England and Ford of Germany.

With this general blurring of national character and world standardisation of the car industry, the basis on which to compete is quality. Without

having to recall the findings of the consumer magazine *Which* and many other enquiries, it must be recognised that there has been a decrease in the relative superiority of the quality of British cars.

This is doubtless why so many British motorists decide to buy foreign and perhaps why the British share of the Swiss market has decreased relentlessly from 1968. That year, Britain exported 28,443 cars to Switzerland, absorbing 17.0 per cent of the market. In 1970, she exported 31,071 cars, accounting for only 14.8 per cent of the Swiss market. During the same time, the French share of the market rose from 18.7 to 21.6 per cent, the Italian share fell from 15.2 to 13.9 per cent, and the German share fell from 39.7 to 37.00 per cent, whereas the Japanese made a remarkable climb from 1.4 per cent to 5.5 per cent. Another way of looking at the British performance is to note that British car exports to Switzerland have increased by 12.4 per cent during these three years, whereas the Swiss market has expanded by 26 per cent. It is obviously the Japanese who have carved themselves the biggest share of new car purchases.

These figures do not appear disparaging for British industry and the importers of British Leyland cars, *Emil Frey AG*, whose headquarters are at the Badenerstrasse in Zurich, are satisfied with the situation. They imported 17,000 cars last year, accounting for 55 per cent of British car exports to Switzerland. This volume of sales has not varied noticeably in the past few years. One reason may be that the agency for Triumph, MG, Morris and Rover cars have all been concentrated in the hands of *Emil Frey* as a result of the British Leyland conglomerate merger. This may have affected sales adversely.

Despite much talk that the Minis have no more future, *Emil Frey AG* were still content with the way they were selling (at 6,100 francs). The Jaguar 4.2 litre XJ6, selling at 28,000 francs, were still finding customers, although we learnt from different sources that the interminable delivery delays for this model had discouraged many potential buyers. The Triumph 2.5 litre was a good line, although an *Emil Frey* spokesman admitted that he wouldn't buy one himself.

The 1800 had never caught on. The Maxi, with a revamped engine of 1750 cc was selling well. But one of the most successful British Leyland innovations was the Range Rover, a vehicle combining the advantages of a limousine and a Jeep.

Emil Frey is one of the most suc-

cessful car wholesalers of Switzerland. He has done more than any other single Swiss to help the British balance of payment and was duly rewarded last year with a special distinction at Buckingham Palace. He was wise enough to take a stake in Japanese cars and his vast distribution centre at Saffenwil, on the Berne-Zurich motorway, is now being completed with a vast parking lot and distribution facilities for Toyota cars, for which he has the sole agency in Switzerland.

The sale of Toyotas doubled between the first quarter of last year and the first quarter of this year, beating the other Japanese makes, Datsun and Mazda. *Emil Frey* sold more Toyotas in six months than he expected to sell in a year.

Although the import figures show that British cars more or less hold their own, their reputation has undeniably fallen. Although the problems posed by the use of different standards no longer prevail, it is still more costly and more time-consuming to get hold of spare parts for British cars. Furthermore, they lag behind their European competitors in gadgetry. Fully reclinable seats and heated rear windows are standard in most Continental cars, for example.

Two out of three Swiss people have grievances against the workmanship of British cars. Countless owners of British cars complain of aggravating troubles such as faulty ignition in the cold, sogged distributors in the rain and impaired fuel supply in hot conditions. While these are minor troubles, they inevitably harm the reputation of British cars. An Austin owner who has failed to start his car in the rain two or three times will obviously not buy the same model again. Even the classy Jaguar has suffered from nagging faults and is losing in repute.

Another adverse factor is that British sales in Switzerland have relied to a great extent on the Mini and 1100 range. The Japanese and the Italians are now offering comparable models with upgraded performances at highly competitive prices. All motoring correspondents in the Press agree that it is time to find a successor to the Minis. Whether the Marina, on which *Emil Frey AG* are laying great hopes, will play an equivalent role is rather doubtful.

The plagued social climate within the British car industry is well publicised in Switzerland and this too tends to undermine confidence in British cars. It is symptomatic that apart from a few Escorts and an odd Cortina, all the European Fords to be seen in Switzerland are German Fords. The

best-selling Capri, which is the only model produced in common by Ford Germany and Ford Great Britain, are now all German. Ten years ago there were innumerable Consuls and Zephyrs on Swiss roads, whereas the bulky V-6 models in production today do not

even appear to be on sale in Switzerland.

Entering the Common Market will not make life easier for British car exporters to Switzerland. Despite advantageous EFTA tariffs, a British devaluation and a German revaluation, British

car sales to Switzerland have progressed more slowly than those of other countries. The entry of the Japanese in the fray will be an additional challenge to the British sales drive.

(PMB)



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