



Lunar has come a long way from the Venus Mark II (main) to our tourer of the year in 2007, the Clubman EK (below)



40 years of LUNAR



Two friends built a lightweight tourer to create a new frontier in the caravan universe. We follow their flight

FOR MANY PEOPLE, 1969 is remembered for the fascinating images of astronauts blasting into space and mankind's first step on the moon. But Neil Armstrong wasn't the only man to make a 'giant leap' that year.

As Armstrong was loading his suitcase into the Eagle spacecraft, Ken Wilcock and Brian Talbot were puzzling over their first caravan building project. The two men

worked full-time for Knowsley Caravans but harboured a dream of building their own tourer brand. Their spare time was spent pursuing this dream in a small workshop near Wigan.

Once Knowsley Caravans got wind of the rival in their midst, Ken and Brian were fired. They now had no choice but to make their project a success in order to pay the bills. With no heating in the barn, the

two men took their work home, building furniture and parts for the caravan in their kitchens.

By July 1969, the first caravan was finished but they were struggling for a name. Inspired by the big news of the day, the pair chose the name Lunar and sticking with the theme, their first model was called the Saturn.

The Saturn was a two-berth measuring 3.2m. It was equipped

with gas lighting, a two-burner hob and a grill in a height-adjustable kitchen. The five-inch thick mattress and satin-polished furniture were luxurious enough to put it on par with other mid-market tourers. Weighing 508kg and priced at £398, it was placed competitively in the market.

The first person to view the Saturn was Barney Campbell, who was selling caravans in the village >>

of Lostock Hall, just outside Preston. He bought it and paid up front for more, with Campbells Caravans selling the models. Lunar was in business.

A household name

By mid-1970, Ken and Brian were overseeing the manufacture of two vans a week. The barn was no longer big enough, so they moved to a mill at Earnshaw Bridge, which was larger and closer to Preston and the majority of their business.

There was now room to expand. Lunar manufactured 10 vans a week and added two more models



The Moonlight was one of two new vans built in Lunar's second factory

to the range – the 3.66m, four-berth Venus and the 4.27m, five-berth Moonlight. These came with a foot-operated water pump in the kitchen and a gas point for a heater.

Lunar was already a sought-after brand in 1972 with tourers stocked in 23 dealerships nationwide. The company was so firmly established it could afford to experiment. It did with a tiny 2.9m, three-berth called the Stardust. Ken and Brian hoped the model would appeal to the owners of small cars, but it did not sell well and was quickly dropped.

Overcoming adversity

Disaster struck in April 1973 when a fire destroyed most of the partly built caravans in the factory. The premises themselves were also damaged. But a few months later production started again.

The following year, the company was turning out 45 caravans per week. Standard equipment now included an oven, a fridge and hot water. During the same year the

high-end Clubman was launched at the Earls Court show. It sold well and went on to become a staple of the Lunar line-up.

The mid- to late-1970s was a difficult period for caravan manufacturers. The energy crisis made money tight for working families and the introduction of VAT on tourers knocked sales even further. Many companies reported

significant drops in sales. But Lunar focused on producing value-for-money, lightweight vans and its sales remained strong.

As caravan sales picked up again in 1980, the company introduced the Delta. It came equipped with a fridge, oven, grill, gas hob and shower. Space and water heaters were standard, as were the double-glazed windows.



The 1974 Lunar 14 was built after the manufacturer recovered from a fire

Lunar Calendar

LUNAR CARAVANS



Ken Wilcock and Brian Talbot build their first caravan in a barn near Wigan. Inspired by the recent moon landing, they named their company Lunar

The Clubman range is launched at the Caravan Show in Earls Court. Its luxury specification includes a shower as standard equipment for the first time in a Lunar caravan. The range becomes an instant hit

Lunar introduces bonded sides and an aluminium chassis, significantly reducing the weight of their vans



Lunar's first end-washroom model, the Clubman 460/2, is launched. The layout sells well and is quickly introduced into the marque's other ranges

1969 1970 1971 1972 1973 1974 1975 1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989

The Lunar range expands to include the Venus, Moonlight and Stardust. Lunar caravans are now available from 23 dealers



The Delta range is introduced. These family vans have all the luxury trimmings but are still lightweight
Lunar moves to its current home in Preston

The tiny Meteorite is launched. Weighing 580kg, it could be towed by the popular Austin Metro and is an instant success



BEST OF BRITISH



LUNAR HASN'T ALWAYS been a British company. Between 2001 and 2007, it was part of the pan-European Tirus Group, whose subsidiaries included Kabe, Chateau and Homecar. A dramatic downturn in the market for caravans and motorhomes on the Continent put the skids under Tirus and Lunar's future was uncertain.

In a bid to bring the brand back into British ownership, a management buyout was led by managing director Brian Mellor. Their effort succeeded just as Tirus went into administration. Mellor and the

Brian Mellor (foreground) led the management buyout of Lunar

other directors were confident they could help Lunar thrive as an independent manufacturer.

Two years on, that prediction has been proved right. Sales of Lunar caravans remain strong, despite the tough market conditions, and continued investment in quality and low-weight technologies point to a strong, stable future for the brand.

"We are all looking forward to at least another 40 years' manufacturing," says Mellor.

Demand for Lunar caravans continued to increase, and the company outgrew its home again. In 1980 it moved to its current premises in Preston.

The featherweight title

By the early-1980s, cars were getting lighter and people wanted caravans to match.

Lunar was in an ideal position. Its ranges were already known for being lightweight and now it focused on improving them further. Bonded side construction was the first breakthrough to cut caravan weights. New aluminium chassis shed even more kilos. The company introduced a lightweight budget range, the Dino, too, and produced it for a few years.

However, what secured the featherweight title for Lunar was the diminutive Meteorite, launched in 1982. Measuring 3.35m in length and weighing just 580kg, this little end-kitchen two-berth could be towed by the popular Austin Metro.



This 1995 Clubman was part of the 11th edition of this Lunar range

The Meteorite was an instant hit and a top-seller through the 80s.

Innovative design

Now firmly established, Lunar shifted its focus from construction methods to design. In 1984 the company's first end-washroom model, the Clubman 460/2, was unveiled. This sold well and the layout was introduced across the brand's ranges.

The Micron, a compact family caravan, was first produced in 1986. Although just 4.27m long, it could accommodate a family in a double bed and two bunks. Competitively >>

Long-standing favourite the Ariva makes its first appearance in the Lunar line-up. The narrow, lightweight two-berth is perfect for couples who own small towcars and it is still a staple of the range today.

The Lexon range also appears for the first time this year



The Quasar, with its narrower body and low weight, replaces the Solar Eclipse range to remain a staple of the Lunar line-up

1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 **1995** 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 **2001** 2002 2003 **2004** 2005 2006 **2007** 2008 2009



GRP front panels on Clubman and Delta ranges make the profile more aerodynamic to improve towing and the van's look

Lunar is sold to the Tirus Group. The Chateau range is imported and Stellar and Zenith ranges are launched. The next year, the Astar range joins the line-up



A management buyout, led by managing director Brian Mellor, is successfully negotiated before the Tirus Group enters administration. Lunar is returned to British hands



priced at £4000, its sales remained strong for several seasons.

In the late 1980s, the company introduced GRP front panels to the Clubman and Delta ranges. As well as improving stability when towing, the aerodynamic panels turned the vans into some of the best-looking on the market. Equipment inside improved as well. Mains electrics, electric lighting and blown-air heating were now standard kit.

In the mid-1990s caravan sales were on a high. In 1995, to make the most of the buoyant market, Lunar introduced dealer specials and new models, including the narrow, lightweight Ariva and the Lexon range, which was more spacious thanks to a wider body. The planet range was replaced by the LX2000 range and, in the late 1990s, the Solar Eclipse range was introduced.

The competitive market meant specification improved quickly. To mark its 25th anniversary, Lunar brought out a range where the standard kit included flyscreens, blinds, three mains sockets, a shower and a cassette toilet.

To Europe and back

Lunar employed 170 staff at the time, annual production peaked at 2900 units and exports travelled as far as Japan. The company was an attractive prospect for investors, and at the start of the millennium Ken and Brian sold Lunar to the Tirus Group, which owned caravan plants across Continental Europe.

The Tirus Group immediately started importing a budget range, the Chateau, and rebadged it as a Lunar. The company also launched another entry-level range, the Zenith, and a stand-alone model, the Stellar. This end-kitchen two-



The narrower bodies of Quasars helped keep their MTPLMs down

berth remains popular with couples because it is spacious and well-equipped, but is still light.

A year later, the Astara range was introduced. These vans were lightweight but well equipped and were considered excellent value for money. In 2004 the Solar Eclipse range was replaced by the Quasars. These mid-market models had narrower bodies than other Lunars, which helped keep weights low.

Over the next few years Lunar returned to UK ownership through a management buyout (see 'Best of British') and the ranges were consolidated. For 2010 the line-up is the Quasar, Lexon and Clubman/Delta ranges and the stand-alone Ariva and Stellar models.

A lasting advantage

From the beginning Lunar caravans were known for their low weights. The company turned this into a key selling point and worked consistently to keep its advantage.

There is no better example than the 2010 Clubman range. The new Clubman SE has more kit than many high-end, twin-axle vans can boast - including Alde wet central heating - yet it is a single-axle van with an MTPLM of 1490kg.

With products of this weight and quality, Lunar will be selling vans for another 40 years to come.



Lunar aims to remain on top of the competition with its new Clubman SE. It boasts as much kit as high-end twin-axes but has an MTPLM of 1490kg

ONE CAREFUL OWNER



ON 17 JULY 1972 a Lunar Venus Mark II was purchased from Basildon Caravan Centre.

George Garrad paid £501 for it after he, his wife Josephine and their sons, Matthew and Nicholas, decided it was just what they wanted.

"The caravan was everything we had hoped for," said George. "Its size, 12ft 6in [3.81m], was big enough to sleep the four of us without an awning. And it was self contained so we could use sites with limited facilities.

"Inside it had a front lounge, and two seats and a small table at the rear of the van for the boys' activities. These changed into bunk beds at night. The kitchen was on one side, instead of across the back, so we had a clear view out of the front and back. And the gold fabric and light oak woodwork made it feel sunny and cheerful. From the very start we all loved it."

The caravan's first holiday was to the Anglia Game Farm at Blythburgh in Suffolk. "That first experience of life in our little home on wheels was special," said George. "I can remember Josephine bustling about while we chaps busied ourselves with drinking in the heady mixture of countryside and our bacon and eggs cooking."

Over the next few decades the little Venus took the Garrad

George Garrad's classy outfit - the Lunar Venus Mark II and a Jaguar

family and their friends touring all over the UK.

"In school holidays the caravan came into its own," said George. "Because site fees were so modest, it gave us the chance to enjoy places that otherwise would have been beyond our means. For example, in the summer of 1974 we went to Cornwall and paid just 80 pence per night for the four of us."

Eventually the Garrad boys grew up, married and moved away. The little Venus was used less and less until George decided it was too tired to travel any more.

But its adventures weren't quite over. Last summer it was discovered by Lunar, which bought it and restored it to celebrate its 40th anniversary. The Venus will be on display at the International Caravan and Motorhome Show at the NEC in October.



Freshly restored, George's Venus is put on display for Lunar's 40th year