

THE GENERATION GAME



With the Southampton plant due to build its final UK Ford Transit on Friday 26 July, Robin Dickeson reviews this legendary vehicle's production history

late last October, Ford announced that all European Transit van assembly would move to its Kocaeli plant in Turkey, with the UK plant closing on 26 July 2013. This will end the van's long and successful association with the Swaythling, Southampton factory – the 'home of the Transit' – which has been making Transits since 1972. It will also end 100 years of Ford production in the UK, though the firm will still make engines here.

Local politicians, unions and business leaders described the decision as 'a tragedy', although industry observers had seen it as inevitable for years. More than 500 Southampton workers are among 1,400 in the UK to go, with pessimists suggesting a further 10,000 job losses among suppliers. That said, the move leaves Ford employing 10,000 in the UK, as it restructures European operations to cut its \$1.5 billion losses.

Ford bought the 21-hectare factory in 1953, later using it to make panels and Transit bodies before the van's production moved there from Slough. At its busiest, the plant employed 1,400 people and hit its top annual production rate (78,500) in 1989. Ford reached its millionth Transit in 1976, of which 580,000 had been built at Southampton – which achieved its million milestone in 1991. No wonder Ford tagged the Transit 'the backbone of Britain.'

By the time the plant closes, it will have built 2.2 million of the world's 6.5 million Transits. The 160-hectare Otosan Kocaeli, opened in 2001, should build their millionth Transit by March 2013.

Ford launched the Transit in the UK in 1965 as a new breed of light commercial vehicle. It replaced the 400E Thames van and quickly established itself as leader in a market by then 195,877 strong (having

risen from 90,000 in 1953). Transit has held that lead ever since, on the back of an ever-increasing demand for vans.

However, it was not the first Ford van to carry the Transit badge. In 1953, the year Ford bought the Southampton plant, Ford Germany launched the FK 1000 van (Ford Köln 1000kg), and called it Taunus Transit from 1961. The 1965 Transit was the first generation UK model, but the second generation in Germany. For Transit purists, Germany and the UK have remained one van generation out of step.

Quibbles over generations aside, the Transit still leads a UK market that has helped thousands of British businesses to grow. Even 20 years ago, a tradesman might find most of his work around his home town. More recently, bigger and better vans allowed that reach to extend to a county and latterly regional level. That trend has given customers more choice and businesses of all sizes a wider base.

The Ford Transit was designed and engineered in Ford's commercial vehicle centre of excellence in Dunton, Essex, and first built in Germany. Transit may move home, but its roots will stay in Britain.

Clearly, Ford's 'backbone of Britain' tag had a lot going for it. Last year, total van registrations climbed back to 239,641. The highest ever figure was 337,736, in 2007, before the recession bit. And the UK's van fleet hit its record of 3.5 million in 2011.

Southampton is losing its Transit, but Britain is not

about to lose its backbone. The latest Transit is going into North America, too, to replace the E Series van. And the manufacturer's OneFord plan will see global vehicles for even more markets, with the Transit now selling on six continents.

