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Mazda Motors UK celebrates its 20th Anniversary

* Mazda Motors UK was founded on the 1st August 2001 to bring key UK market closer to global HQ.
* In 2002 the first of a new generation of Mazda cars – the original Mazda6 was launched in the UK.
* Today, Mazda UK accounts for 16 per cent of European sales volume for Mazda Europe.

Founded on the 1st August 2001, this month sees Mazda Motors UK Ltd celebrate its 20th Anniversary. The company was conceived in the late 1990s as Mazda Motor Corporation took the decision to connect the European region more closely with the core business in Japan. At the time there were just two national sales companies in Europe, with all the other markets including the UK, served by independent importers.

The story of Mazda in Europe started with the first cars being imported in 1967 followed by in 1968 Mazda establishing Mazda Logistics Europe (MLE) in Willebroek, Belgium as a central hub for the distribution of cars and parts. In 1972 Mazda Motor Deutschland was started to directly control operations in the key German market. However, it was in the late 1980s that Mazda Corporation really ramped up investment in Europe with the founding of Mazda Motor Europe (MME) in 1989 and the creation of a European headquarters in Leverkusen, Germany. This was followed in 1990 with the opening of Mazda Research Europe (MRE) in Oberursel, Germany, which provided Mazda with a R&D and design centre for the crucial European market.

With this kind of investment in the European market it was hardly surprising that Mazda Corporation and MME were looking to connect more closely with key European markets via wholly owned national sales companies rather than independent distributors, and as the second biggest sales market in Europe, the UK was at the top of that list.

Mazda’s story in the UK started on a small scale in 1967 with Industria (London) Ltd officially launching the Mazda marque on the 30th September 1969 at the British Motorshow, then in 1972 Industria (London) Ltd was renamed Mazda Car Imports (GB) Ltd. In the early days the relatively limited recognition of the Mazda brand in the UK and import restrictions on Japanese made cars meant sales were small, but from a few hundred cars a year in the late 1960s, by the end of 1973 sales were at 7,000 per year. Mazda Car Imports (GB) became part of the large Tunbridge Wells based MCL Group Ltd who maintained distribution rights for Mazda in the UK until 2001.

The major project to create Mazda UK started in 2001 and on the 1st August 2001 Mazda Motors UK (MMUK) was founded. As part of the process 49 staff from MCL Group transferred to the new entity, which from October 2001 was based in Dartford, Kent. The location was chosen as it was roughly equidistant between Tunbridge Wells based MCL Group and Ford Motor Company in Essex, where thanks to the early 2000s Ford share-holding in Mazda Corporation, five directors were sent on assignment from Ford UK to the new Mazda Motors UK Ltd.

They were James Muir - Managing Director, Steve Robertson - Financial Director, Rob Lindley – Marketing Director, Jeremy Thomson - Fleet Director and Phil Waring – Sales Director. Today six members of the founding MMUK staff of 54 remain at Mazda UK, including now Managing Director, Jeremy Thomson. Commenting on the 20th Anniversary of Mazda UK, he said: “over the last 20 years MMUK has achieved great things by being an organisation that’s nimble and filled by people emboldened with entrepreneurial spirit who work within a culture of hard work, team spirit and passion for the Mazda brand.”

Looking back to 2001, Jeremy, said: “having come from a 12 year career with Ford, the early days at Mazda were very different and over the next few years we grew the team, strengthened the business, and with the help of a rejuvenated product line-up, built a strong dealer network and revitalised the relationship with media”. Adding, “perhaps one of the most refreshing experiences at this time was the nimble and super-efficient approach to decision making that we achieved; decisions agreed in the morning and then implemented that day with a speed and focus of a true start-up. With a very ambitious business plan, we quickly became MME’s second largest national sales company and one of the Top 10 markets globally for Mazda”.

In 2001 the Mazda range featured the Mazda 323, Mazda 626, Mazda Demio, Mazda Premacy, Mazda MPV, Mazda Tribute and the Mazda MX-5, plus the B-Series pick-up and E-Series van. During the 2001 transition year Mazda sold just 14,298 cars in the UK, but with the launch of the first-generation Mazda6 in 2002, Mazda Motors UK sold 27,820 cars in its first full year as a company – including 6,315 of the new Mazda6. With the early days of Mazda UK coinciding with a global revitalisation of the Mazda product line-up, the sales growth continued - by 2004 with the new Mazda3 and Mazda2 on sale, plus the rotary powered RX-8 joining the range as a halo sports car - annual sales had reached 47,739. By 2007, sales peaked at 50,947 and the launch of the Mazda CX-7 established Mazda in the developing SUV market, something cemented by the huge success of the subsequent CX-5, which went on sale in 2012.

Having served as both Marketing Director and Sales Director, Jeremy Thomson took the Managing Director role in 2008, which coincided with Ford selling the majority of its stake in Mazda Corporation. “In the early years of MMUK, Mazda was the fastest growing brand in the UK for five consecutive years, and in 2008 with the reduction of Ford’s input, the MMUK structure changed quickly with Ford employees either returning or resigning to stay with Mazda. We also transitioned from Ford Credit to Santander as our wholesale finance provider. Since then we’ve seen the business develop and evolve alongside the launch of key global elements like Skyactiv Technology, Kodo Design and ever more premium oriented products. With the increase in SUV sales at the start of the 2010s, cars like the Mazda CX-5 have been crucial in our success story, as has our latest generation of new products like the Mazda3 and Mazda CX-30.”

One of the 49 staff who transferred from MCL Group to the new Mazda Motors UK Ltd in 2001 and one of the six who still work for MMUK today, Mazda UK, Head of Retail Operations, Laura Brailey, said: “I had already been at MCL Group for six years in a variety of admin roles, but the switch to MMUK gave me the opportunity to take my first management role and seeing real ambition and investment going into the Mazda brand in the UK was brilliant, you couldn’t help but get excited and give it 100 per cent and I’m still very proud to have been part of the opening chapter of the MMUK story”.

Now a 34-year veteran of Mazda, MMUK Parts and Accessories Manager, David Elphick, said: “having started my career fresh out of college with Mazda in 1987 as a vehicle technician at Tunbridge Wells Mazda – the retail dealership owned by MCL Group, I was delighted to get the opportunity to be part of an exciting new future for Mazda in the UK with the new MMUK company. I can remember the early days of Mazda UK were great because of the drive for results, passion and can do attitude across the company – something that remains at MMUK today, which is what makes it such a great place to work”.

Moving into a new headquarters building in 2015, Mazda UK has in recent years faced the challenges of Brexit and Covid, plus the ever present task of working with exchange rate fluctuations. “But throughout all of this I have been convinced by the strength of the Mazda brand, our products, our great dealers and the team at Mazda UK”, commented Jeremy Thomson. Adding, “in the years to come, the focus will be on creating ‘One Mazda Europe’ to create an even more integrated and efficient organisation. We will embrace new ways of working, new technologies and use our precious resources more effectively”.

Today Mazda UK has 135 employees and a network of 122 dealers, while the 20th Anniversary of the business has also seen the launch of Mazda’s first battery electric production car – the MX-30 in the UK.

Commenting on 20 years of Mazda Motors UK, President and CEO of Mazda Europe, Martijn ten Brink, said: *“*UK car owners are amongst the most knowledgeable in the world, which makes the success of Mazda UK even more special. The whole range has fans and this is down to the many ways that the team in the UK make Mazda a special brand. From the MX-5 fan clubs, who run events throughout the year, to the fantastic Mazda UK heritage collection that has been built up, everything the team does presents Mazda as the unique challenger brand that we are. I would like to thank the team at Mazda UK and their dealers for their great achievements over the last 20 years and I am confident that the UK will recover from the pandemic stronger than before, and continue to be a leading market for Mazda in Europe.”

Since 2002 MMUK has sold a total of 778,924 passenger cars in the UK, but looking firmly towards an exciting future for Mazda in the UK, Jeremy Thomson, said “this is a great time to thank all our customers, dealer partners and staff for the success of MMUK over the last two decades, and for Mazda UK I’m sure the next 20 years will be even more exciting than the last.”

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