

Scots-built sports car is set to make its marque

William Tinning

SATURDAY 22 MAY 1999

THERE were no fanfares, glitzy models or sudden appearances from behind screens to mark Scotland's re-entry into the car-making business yesterday.

Over the years, several attempts at launching innovative sports cars have taken place in Scotland, only to crash soon after. They included Argyll at Lochgilphead, Glasgow's AC Cars at Hillington, and Haldane in East Kilbride, which produced Austin Healey 3000 replicas.

Mr Tommy McAvoy, Labour MP for Rutherglen, yesterday had the honour of unveiling the country's latest effort - the royal burgh-based race car builder Rotor Motive's JT7 sports two-seater, which has a top speed of 134mph and accelerates from 0-60mph in about four seconds.

The company will have to go head-to-head with the biggest car maker in the world, Vauxhall. The UK subsidiary of General Motors has just announced plans to build a two-seater Speedster with similar performance.

Rotor Motive, however, has a head start as its first car has already been sold. It is hoping to sell between 25 and 35 cars in its first year - a figure well within Government guidelines allowing a production run of as many as 50 vehicles a year.

The JT7 launch at the company's workshop, in an industrial estate on the outskirts Rutherglen, was the lifelong dream of its designer Graham Millar, a former firefighter, to produce a sports car in Scotland.

The initiative is backed by Glasgow businessmen and life-long motor racing enthusiasts John Kyle and Sandy McEwen.

Mr Millar, a father of four, revealed yesterday that much of the preparation in producing the sports car took place in the garage at his parents' home in Bishopbriggs, near Glasgow.

He said: "We worked there until last year, before moving to Rutherglen. We were becoming so intense that my late father imposed a curfew on me and four friends. He pulled the fuses and put the lights out every night at 11pm. I'm glad now that we replaced them after he had gone to sleep.

"All the hard work has been worth it. We have served a 16-year apprenticeship in racing car design and construction and now we are ready for the road."

The company, which has two full-time and 10 part-time employees, insists the new marque will fill a gap in the specialised car market, although conceding that the car is unlikely to restore to Scotland the lost era of thriving motor production.

Mr McEwen, a corporate lawyer who was Scottish saloon car champion in 1997, said: "The car will appeal to enthusiasts at all levels, whether for road or track use, and suit all pockets.

"We believe it will succeed where other ventures like AC, Argyll, and Haldane failed, because it is multi-functional and much more affordable.

"We have had about 50 serious expressions of interest in the car. We are also looking for the support of the financial community, the development agencies and venture capitalists to take the project to the next stage, which is the production run."

Mr Kyle, managing director of a food manufacturing company, who bought the first car and plans to use it for leisure and pleasure, said: "We should know within the next six months whether the car has a reasonable chance of success."

Seven times Scottish Formula 4 champion Tom Brown - who, in 1981, lined up against the late Formula 1 world champion Ayrton Senna in his first race in the UK - said of the JT7: "It has a very good chance of success. There is a definite gap in the market for a mid-engined sports car manufactured in Scotland."

Prices start at #5000 for a basic chassis/body kit for those who want to build their own, rising to #17,000 for a mid-engined car powered by a 155bhp Ford RS2000 engine and gearbox.

THE ONES THAT DID NOT MAKE IT

The Haldane: a replica of the classic Austin Healey 3000, it was Scotland's last vestige of car production when built at East Kilbride. Haldane Developments Limited's operation north of the Border closed in 1994, when the six-year-old project ran into cash problems. Plans were later put in place to build the roadsters at a plant near Brighton.

AC Cars Scotland: delivered its first Scots-built sports car, a white 125mph AC 3000ME, in 1984. A committed band of 25 people, under the direction of Worthing-born Anglo-Scot David Macdonald, established the low-volume high-performance sports car production operation at Hillington, near Glasgow. AC stood for Automotive Carriages.

aThe Argyll: a sports car produced in a former laundry in Lochgilphead. The kilted Bob Henderson, who was behind Argyll Cars of Lochgilphead, spent eight years designing and developing the mid-engined, fibre-glass machine.

The exotic 140mph turbo-charged sportscar was the only Scottish-built car at the Scottish Motor Show in 1983.