

the caravan builder who flew the flag for Scotland

This Scottish-based company was once the UK's second biggest caravan manufacturer. We take a nostalgic look back at its history



A Thomson from 1922, following the style of Eccles and several other early makers.

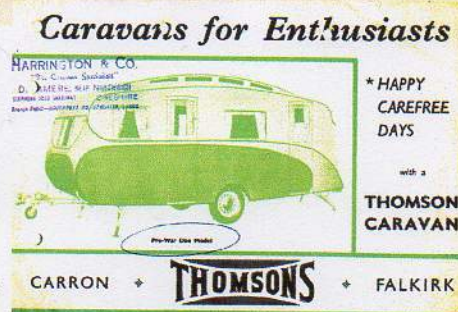


This big Thomson trailer, described below, can be towed by a 16-h.p. car

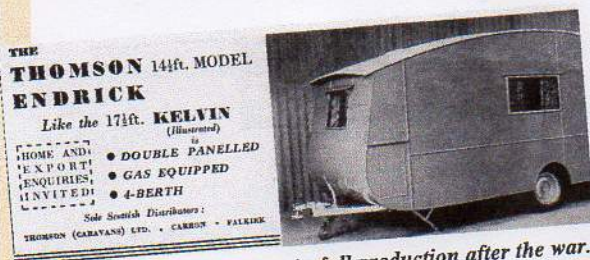
SCOTTISH-BUILT 4-WHEELER

A 3-Room 18-Footer

By the mid-1930s Thomson had a hire fleet and built caravans like this one to special order.



A brochure about the 1939 Thomson Don.

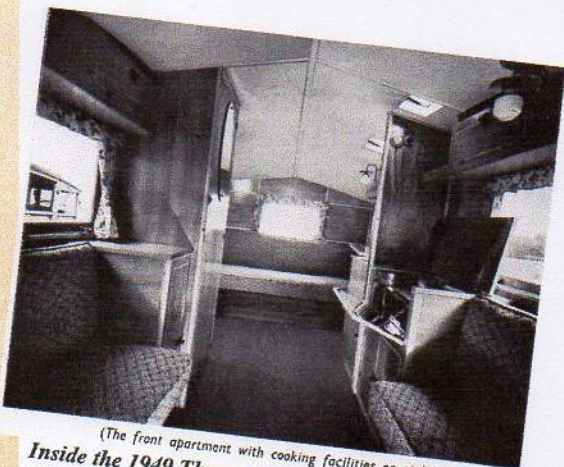


Thomson tourers in full production after the war.



THOMSON CARAVAN

A magazine advert from 1949.



(The front apartment with cooking facilities on right)
Inside the 1949 Thomson Avon,
a popular layout of the time.

Export brochure for the two berth Thomson Carron (1950).



L'AVANT de la CARÈRE montrant la 1^{re} en simple, stable



L'ARRIÈRE de la CARRON montre garde-robe, sachets, etc.

SCOTLAND'S only mass producer of touring caravans, Thomson was once a major force in the caravan industry. In its heyday, this was one of the most popular brands in the UK, and its tourers were exported to nine countries, including Canada.

In our special feature, we chart the rise and fall of this much-loved manufacturer, and take a look at some of its most iconic models.

From coffins to caravans

The history of Thomson Caravans goes back to 1908, when Daniel Thomson, a carpenter, built fairground rides and even coffins behind an old mill near Carron. This led to the founding of Thomson Caravans.

With a team of several men, Daniel began building showmen's caravans. They were very ornate and heavy, but craftsmanship and quality were key. After the First World War, Thomson began building caravan bodies on a motorised chassis. These were early coach-built motorhomes, but few were made. Delivery vans were also being built to order.

Daniel's son, David, joined the business in 1924 at the age of 14, and over the years he slowly developed the Thomson caravan. It was obvious that the horse-drawn caravan had seen its day, and the new car-pulled caravan looked to be the next big thing.

In the early days, Daniel was building caravans using a wooden chassis, but eventually he designed and built his own steel chassis. Until 1932, a pin coupling was used for hooking up to the car.

These 1920s caravans were known simply as Thomson's Caravans. Built in the same way as other brands, Eccles and Hutchings, they were rectangular and followed the design format of the time. Thomson was also hiring a fleet of six caravans, which were slowly gaining momentum in sales.

In the 1930s, the workshop was re-located to Carronshore. Backed by a group of businessmen, the company was now called Thomson Caravans Limited. An early 1930s model cost around £110 - more than an Austin car!

Wind tunnel testing

David Thomson was looking at ways of producing stylish caravans while achieving streamlined profiles. He looked at wind tunnel testing, an idea well ahead of its time, and began to experiment with new shapes. Some egg-shaped designs emerged, but then came some more commercially acceptable profiles which were more aerodynamic for towing behind cars of that period.

Some interesting profiles were the result, and in 1936 the Almond, a four-metre family model, was produced.

This was the start of Thomson's real story of caravan manufacture. Specials were built including four-wheel models, which cost £345 and were five metres in length. By the late 1930s Thomson was producing models

such as the 4.5-metre Carron and the Don. However, the Second World War brought caravan production to a temporary halt in 1939.

World War II and the aftermath

During the war, Thomson did war ministry work such as building trailers, while their hire fleet of 42 Almond models were called for active service. By the time the war had ended, lessons had been learned about production. The first post-war models were the Kelvin and Endrick - but only six caravans were being built a month, due to shortage of materials. This rate would need to be increased.

In the late 1940s production was stepped up, with a new 2.5-metre teardrop-style tourer named the Swift (later re-named the Dart), which cost £175. By the early 1950s more new models were helping to meet the increasing demand for Thomson caravans. 10 caravans were being built per week, and sales were increasing accordingly. Model names such as the Carron and long-running Almond would become familiar to caravanners, and in 1957 the 'Glen' prefix was used for the model line-ups.

Thomson expanded to South Africa in 1956, with the establishment of 'Africaravans' near Natal. Personnel were sent from the UK factory to help set up production and dealerships.

Large static caravans were built for the UK market, among them the Braemar, with a separate bedroom and a bath. This cost £750 in 1951.

The 1950s saw Thomson become a national brand, with names like Glenrosa, Gleneagles and Glendale. In 1956 Thomson went into retail, with a new dealership in Glasgow. This outlet also sold other makes, and was there until the late 70s. A further branch was opened in Edinburgh.

The swinging 60s - and an ever-growing market share

Demand for caravans turned into a boom time for manufacturers, and Thomson's reputation for quality at the right price began to pay dividends. The Sprite Company was now the UK's biggest, having merged with Bluebird Caravans, but Thomson had come right up to 6th place by the mid-60s.

1963 saw the launch of one of Thomson's top sellers, the Glenelg. A four-berth model, 4.5 metres long, it proved an instant success. This same year, the T-Line symbol accompanied the new body profile. Combining the latest machines with traditional skills, the Thomson caravan was built on a production line - while still using tongue-and-groove floors and mineral wool for insulation!

Exports were also increasing, and Thomson chartered several ships to export its 'vans to Denmark. In all, the company was exporting to six countries and had seen production rise from 1,115 tourers to over 3,475 by 1965. With regular factory extensions being built, the Thomson family were enjoying huge sales.

Sadly, founder Daniel Thomson died in 1963, aged 80. His son, David, was now fully at the helm.



This 1952 Thomson Clan shows the developing profile.



A Thomson Forth from 1956.

The 1956 Thomson range.



THOMSON OPEN NEW SHOWROOMS

The newly-opened Thomson showroom and retail outlet in Glasgow.



The Leven, a lightweight family model, in 1956.



A Thomson Glenalmond MK2 cost £360 in 1958.



Thomson tourers at Grangemouth, being loaded on a chartered ship heading for Denmark in 1963.



Thomson's newly extended factory unit in 1964. That year, 2,200 Thomsons left the factory.



The Thomson Owners' Club was founded in 1964. They even had a 'Miss Thomson' competition! This was the swinging 60s!



The 2,000th Thomson was made in 1966. By the end of the season, over 3,000 had been built.

Thomson brochure showing the four-model range.





T-LINE



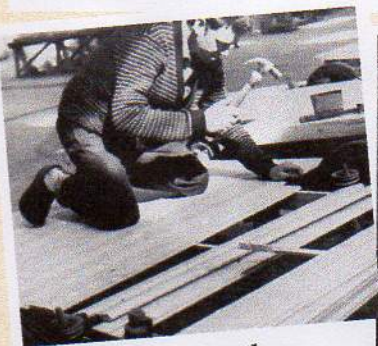
Thomson's paint and finishing shop. In the 1960s the factory was a hive of activity.



The 1966 Thomson Glen and Glendale were top sellers for the company.



1969 Thomson Glenelg (£455) and Glenalmond (£495). Thomson was the UK's second biggest caravan manufacturer.



In 1968, a worker lays the floorboards on a B&B chassis.



The Kingraig/Shell Bay caravan park development. Thomson was investing £2 million in 1969!



The Falkirk factory in 1970. The light grey buildings were erected in the mid and late 1960s. The area at top left is marked out for the 1970 holiday home factory.



Maurice Quick and Colin Saunders towed a 1969 Glennevis on a world record trip. It was badly damaged, but could still be towed!

The Uncanny Scot



An advert from 1970.



A 1970 Glennevis, one of Thomson's most popular later family models.

In 1967 the company changed its name to Thomson T-Line Caravans. With production at 3,215 tourers, for a time Thomson was second only to CI Group, manufacturer of the famous Sprite brand.

At home in the Glens

In the same year, Thomson launched the Mini-Glen. Designed for small cars, this was a 2.5-metre two-berth model, and came complete with a washroom! 47 years later, this little tourer would become an iconic classic tourer. Other Glen names followed - the Glen 2/4, Glendale, Glennevis, Glenmore and Glenalmond, with the big Gleneagles at the top of the line-up.

These traditional Thomson models had real wood veneers and were placed in the mid-market sector. They were equipped with the standard specification of hob and grill, foot-pumped cold water and gas lights. Another section of the company, the special builds division, designed and produced trailers for the police, hospitals and other authorities.

A time of expansion

Robin Traill, Thomson's sales director, was always looking for new markets, and by the late 1960s the company's exports were reaching nine countries including Finland and Morocco. In 1969 Canada was added, and it was hoped that the US would be next.

Thomson had also taken over other companies, including suppliers of bedding and timber importers.

The next phase of Thomson's expansion plans involved the caravan park business. The company purchased 202 acres of land at Kinraig and Shell Bay in Fife at a cost of £60,000. Shell Bay Park had 75 touring pitches, and a second phase involved the building of a holiday village on the foreshore, with 400 holiday homes and tourers. At Kinraig, plans were drawn up that included 1,400 equipped chalets along with shops, restaurants, bars and games rooms. A massive undertaking, which cost over £2 million pounds 45 years ago!

Keen to prove how solid their caravans were, Thomson set off on a round-the-world trip with a Glennevis, towed by a Vauxhall Cresta. Their route took them from London, across Europe and Asia to Sydney in Australia. The outfit was badly damaged near Belgrade on the return trip, but they carried on, reaching London 12 days later! This daring expedition proved that Thomson caravans were well built and practical in design.

The 1960s had seen Thomson on a roll, and it had certainly put Scottish caravan manufacture firmly on the map. It seemed as if everybody owned a Thomson. The company predicted more good times to come - but it wasn't to be.

The pace-setting 70s - and sales begin to falter

With the move into parks, Thomson started manufacturing static units. Sales were steady, but their static homes never captured the imagination of the public. Tourers were still in demand, however, and Thomson produced over 5,000 in 1970.

The new range was sharper in looks, incorporating photo-finish furniture and more modern soft furnishings. Unusually, Thomson was still spraying its own caravans, while most manufacturers had started buying in pre-painted aluminium. Thomson's finish was neither as good nor as durable. Competition was increasing, especially from the newly-formed Ace Belmont International (ABI), based in Hull. Tourers made by ABI and Cosalt (Abbey) were lighter and looked more modern.

After the downturn in 1972, several companies ventured into new markets. Ace released a rival to Sprite with its Monza, while Cosalt produced the Piper, and Bailey brought out the Prima. Thomson's sales had slowed down, but the company decided to go into the luxury market, and released the Clansman. Based on a Glendale, it boasted a fridge and heater. Thomson now had three ranges: the Clan, the River and the Glen.

Enjoying moderate success, the Clan survived till 1978, but the River lasted only one season. Thomson's brand was suffering, not helped by a profile that hadn't changed much since 1963. While other manufacturers were using sandwich-design floors, Thomson still relied on the old floorboard construction. The company had been left behind.

By the late 1970s the factory had shrunk in size and output was dropping. Profits turned to loss, and in the coming recession only modern lightweight models would survive.

The final years

In 1979 Thomson was back as a single range, but with the option of an upgrade - the GL. Acrylic windows and a more modern interior were introduced for 1981. But sales dropped further, export markets dried up and the confidence of dealers was waning.

In 1982 the new range offered a more modern appearance while still keeping the Thomson look. Although the models were better specified, sales were hard to find, and it was clear that production would suffer. Finally, in April 1982, it was decided that production of tourers and static holiday homes would be halted.

Thomson had become a victim of the downturn, and although the gradual fall in quality was rectified during the final few years, it was too late. The factory closed and the land was sold off - a sad farewell to a once-thriving manufacturer.

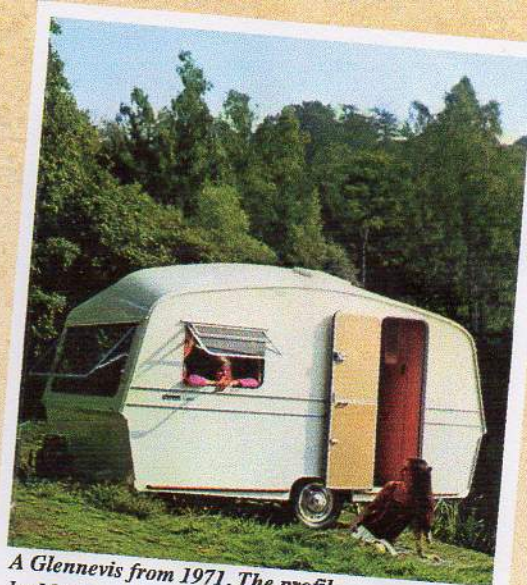
A few ex-employees rented a workshop and named themselves Futura Touring. Although it was only small, the company lasted until 1985 and built a few Futura tourers while offering sales and repair of Thomson caravans.

A new lease of life

Recently, Thomson models have become a firm favourite with classic caravan enthusiasts, with many being sold, even in very poor condition. Apart from the UK, Thomsons turn up in Canada, Finland, Holland and Sweden, and some are still being used - a true testament to the Scottish craftsmanship and design of all those years ago, when the company was almost global.



A local competition winner is handed the keys of a new Glenelg by Thomson's sales director Robin Traill (left) at the Glasgow sales centre in 1971.



A Glennevis from 1971. The profile had become sharper and more modern.



The 1978 Clan models had been improved, but were dropped after two years.



Caravan enthusiast Sally Prosser loves her 1969 Mini-Glen, taking it around shows for her business.

Thomson T-LINE Holiday Homes



Thomson holiday homes had been around since 1972, but they were never a big success. This is the range for 1980.



Thomson quality T-LINE — right to a T.

For 1981/82, interiors were given a more modern design - but it wasn't enough to kick-start sales.

The Thomson Owners' Club

Founded in 1964, the Thomson Owners' Club attracted over 700 members and offered a programme of rallies and social events including an annual dinner.

Graham Thompson (whose name is spelt differently!) still helps to keep the Thomson name alive with his website, and growing numbers of Thomson tourers are being registered. Graham and his wife have a 1981 Glennevis which they use regularly. Thanks to Graham, and all the restorers of this brand, the Thomson name lives on.

Have you ever owned a Thomson caravan or worked for the company? We'd love to hear from you! We'd also like to see photos of your Thomson tourers!

Our thanks to Graham Thomson of the Thomson Owners' Club for further information and pictures. Check out www.thomson-caravans.co.uk



Graham Thompson's 1981 Glennevis. The Thomson name has been kept alive by Graham and by Thomson restorers.