

Exterior of Europa's Laburnum holiday home

Something old, something new

Who on earth would start a new caravan company in a recession? Graham and Don Oades, that's who! **Janet Lumb** went to Hull – where else – to meet them.

The name Oades may be familiar to you if you knew Graham's father, Keith, who sadly died just a year after he sold his then holiday home company. He was also Don's brother, which makes Don Graham's uncle...

So it's in the family blood to make caravan holiday homes. That's one reason, but I wanted to see whether there were others, or was this just a madcap idea?

I will gloss over the fact that I ended up at the old manufacturing unit, instead of the one Europa moved into in January! Except to say that although the company only started in March 2009, it has already moved to larger premises. Europa now employ around 30 people, a pretty good start. And all are fully occupied, year-round.

THE REASONS

So why did the Oades launch Europa? Well, Graham and family felt there was enough experience of caravan manufacture in the family to branch out on their own. I noted that they unashamedly call themselves 'caravan' manufacturers, rather than the more modern 'holiday or leisure' homes. Clearly this family were attached to their roots.

EUROPA CARAVANS

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Secondly, they feel that as holiday homes have gone more and more upmarket, there is a gap being left at the lower end, where there are people who still want an inexpensive basic model to start with, and parks wanting the lower end hire fleet.

Thirdly, there is the opportunity to train the workforce from the ground up. Some are school leavers receiving the



The new Europa factory unit

right training for the job in that particular manufacturing unit. Others come with varied years' experience, with other companies. Fourthly, it is a family affair. At least five Oades and in-laws work there. I met one or two as we went around the factory.

THE AIMS

Is there anything distinctive about this manufacturer and its wares? I tried to find out what the ethos of the young company is. The Oades team of directors are clear that they are aiming at the lower to middle end of the market, as things stand. So if you are looking for something fairly cheap, compare what they have to offer. They are looking to sell both for export and in the UK.

They have also thought out how they can achieve these low prices. They are concentrating on three models – the Poplar, Cypress and Laburnum. (Those are the names for the home market; the spec and names are a bit different for export, to meet expectations and regulations in other countries.) Making just three simplifies the assembly process considerably, of course. Which in turn helps keep the price down.

Graham and Don are also clear about the manufacturing standards they set, and acknowledge that some of those stem from the values Keith worked to. Reflecting on processes they are familiar with, they use plywood for ceilings, for example – on the face of it more

WHAT WILL IT COST?

TO get down to brass tacks, what will you pay for a Europa 'caravan'? The starter level Poplar, a 28ft by 10ft model, will set you back around £12,650 ex-works (which does not include siting costs and the like). The range moves up through the mid-range larger versions of the Cypress to the current most expensive Laburnum, around £21,000 for a 32ft by 12ft model.

At the entry level, what you get is a fairly standard traditional caravan-style holiday home in pleasant colours and fabrics. You have all you need for a summer holiday, including full-sized cooker, plenty of storage and carbon monoxide detector and smoke alarm fitted as standard.

To go up in the world you will have to pay, item by item. The basic model has, for instance, 30mm insulation in the walls, but you can improve on that for an extra charge (never skimp on insulation, sez I). You can have a metal action fold-out bed in the lounge, gas central heating, uPVC double glazed windows and door(s), most of what you would like for greater comfort. So you piece together your own model, or your park may have made those decisions already for you. This does add to the price but gives you a choice.



The Cypress lounge, and (below, left to right) its kitchen, shower room and master bedroom



expensive, but, they feel, a more reliable way of ensuring quality and minimising problems later. Another example of quality is that floors are hand screwed, contributing to a squeak-free future!

Both directors are committed to the 'right first time' philosophy, rightly reasoning that if someone has to visit a park many miles away to rectify a small problem, that is a lot more expensive than getting it right in the first place. Don (or a deputy if he is not available) checks every unit before it leaves the premises.

They also feel that, as a small company, the overheads tend to be lower, and these savings can be passed on. They may not achieve the heights of style of larger companies, but are keen on price.

In terms of the workforce, they aim to get good staff and keep them. So far they are very pleased with those who work with them, and pursue a policy of transparency,

aiming to communicate well what is going on for the company.

Both Graham and Don are hands on with the work. Don can watch progress on the production line from his first floor office overlooking the factory.

MEN AT WORK

I walked around the unit, seeing different aspects of the work. Each person has his own work area and makes his contribution to the whole. (They *are* all men, it must be said.)

Two were making furniture ready to put in the units when the shell is put together. Others were cutting wood, assembling roofs, installing insulation, and so on. No-one looked miserable – why would they when they have a steady job in a recession!

Each person takes responsibility for their own section of the work and, if extra time is needed, they come in to do the hours they decide are necessary.

Even though the company only moved there in January, and everyone has been busy ever since, there was a sense of order in the factory, and the necessary components were stored handy for each part of the process, from basins to cladding, from roofs to screws.

THE TRAD APPROACH

I couldn't help expressing my surprise that a brand new company should start at the trad end, even using aluminium cladding. Was there still a life for that fashion? Graham and Don are aware of trends, and in fact most of the export units have uPVC cladding. But while there is the demand for aluminium they will use it. They know that things are shifting, and can supply other cladding if required.

But are the Oades right? Is there still a market for the lower priced, even aluminium-clad units? There will be those who

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CYPRESS

EUROPA has its sights set not just on continental Europe, but also on the part of Europe that is the UK. They already have a toe in the market with, in particular, the Cypress model. This has been well received, and so is where they want to concentrate, with the Laburnum and Poplar also on offer if a variant is sought.

A dealership is in place in North Wales. The UK versions have, as you would perhaps guess, more carpet than their continental counterparts, and a full-sized cooker. It seems our continental cousins don't go on holiday to cook – but seemingly we do, on the other hand!

Cypress

The Cypress comes in no fewer than 11 sizes! So if you are looking for a particular size and can't find it elsewhere, the chances are you will find what you are looking for here. 10ft widths in 26ft to 35ft lengths, and 12ft wide versions 24ft to 35ft long. I think 24ft by 12ft is a rarity, and rather useful on a small pitch.

The construction is as described earlier, with plywood much in evidence and basic insulation. This range has a metal panted type roof, and the ceiling is vaulted throughout. The exterior aluminium cladding is the superior type, with planked wood grain effect.

The Cypress lounge has the traditional but shapely wraparound seating in pleasant beiges. The plus of this type of seating was always and still is that there is plenty of it, room to stretch out. On the other hand, if your pitch enjoys a sea view you will have to stand up to see it, for the most part. But you will know what will work on your particular spot...

In the Cypress, the metal action fold-out bed comes as standard. A gas fire with mirror over and corner TV unit plus coffee table completes the picture. Everything is neat and in its place. Fabric pelmets conceal the curtain fittings. This lounge arrangement looks spacious in both 10 and 12ft widths. Diagonally across from the seating is the shaped dining table and upholstered seating,

at two sides of the roughly triangular table. An option is the freestanding dining furniture.

The U-shaped kitchen is ample, in terms of storage and work surface. Wall cupboards are also on the three sides. The kitchen cupboard doors are in a seaside grooved white. The 600mm wide cooker does the job, and has a recirculating hood as standard. There are one or two spaces in the kitchen for you to put your own microwave and fridge, or to order one as an extra, a small fridge-freezer also being an option.

In all sizes, the kitchen is in two parts, usually with the fridge separate from the rest in a neat area with extra work surface. All the doors in the Cypress are domestic-style panelled ones, now the standard in most holiday homes. Kitchens and shower rooms are floored in vinyl, and carpet is in bedrooms and living space, as befits the Brits.

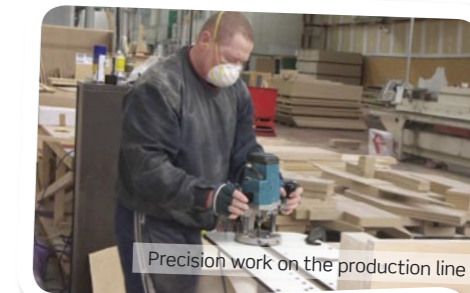
Comfortable bedrooms

Completing the picture is the bed-and-bath arrangement. Two-bedroomed models have a double and a twin, as is normal. The twins will inevitably be pinched, especially in the smaller models, but are fine for non-squabbling children! The double stretches right across the 10 or 12ft width models, pleasantly adorned in beiges, and with a good-sized window. Some will be pleased with the dressing table, and useful shelving and cupboard above.

Shower rooms these days are generally good in holiday homes. The basin is ceramic, there is a bathroom cabinet and venetian blind to the window. You could be in any of a number of manufacturers' shower rooms, they are similar and workable. Europa models have a thermostatic shower mixer as standard.

Options

Possible options at extra charge are uPVC double glazing and gas central heating. You can order a pre-galvanised chassis, and table and chairs in lieu of fixed dinette. The environmental green exterior is another option and there are others too.



Precision work on the production line



Don and Graham Oades