

Anniversary Special

Swift's Challenger celebrates a quarter century



In 1985 Swift launched the Challenger - a striking-looking tourer that was to become one of the UK's best-selling caravans. Andy Jenkinson tells us more.



Integral front locker allowed spare wheel storage - the lid came off for easy access. The rear end of the Challenger was seen as modern, smart and practical.



The Cottingham was the first Swift to break away from the traditional profile, paving the way for the Challenger. Rear roof spoilers were a first for a mainstream producer.

BACK in 1981, caravans were still fairly conservative in design. True, there had been several exercises in innovative styling, but no new trends had emerged.

Swift, the Hull-based manufacturer, had become known for producing middle-of-the-road caravans which offered quality, light weights and affordability. Then, in the early 1980s, Swift began its expansion into new markets, grabbing a bigger share of new caravan sales. Aware that traditional profiles would need to change, Director Peter Smith started to explore the aerodynamics of caravan design. After extensive wind-tunnel testing and research into caravan stability, he took a crucial step that would break the Swift mould.

Swift named their new model the Cottingham, after the village where their factory was situated. It was launched to the trade late in 1980, and to the buying public early in 1981. The Cottingham featured a raked front panel, a flat roof with a rear GRP-moulded roof spoiler, and a lower GRP-moulded panel. Well specified, and with a more modern interior, it included full heating, oven and fridge.

There were only a couple of different models in the line-up, which included a venture into twin-axled tourers. But the Cottingham took the Swift brand to a new level.

Swift could have sat back and watched the sales of the Cottingham continue to grow. But now, bitten by the aerodynamic bug, designers were busy developing another



After extensive testing through 1984 the Challengers were launched. The ground-breaking design, using GRP-moulded front and rear panels and lightweight alloy chassis, instantly proved a sales success both here and in exports.



2004 models were better than ever, with updated spec and style.

to new front panels and a more modern profile, while interiors were given a Clubman-like appeal. The SE spec now included mains lights, four-burner hob and electric flush loo.

The 1992 season saw the first Challenger to have a separate shower cubicle in the rear of the van. Stucco exterior sides had been a feature for seven seasons, but the 1993 Challengers received smooth sides and a new front-end GRP-moulded panel. The SE pack was now standard, and all Challengers became known as SEs. Nine models featured in the line-up, with the small 360SE being a popular model for two. The 490 and 510 were favoured by many families.

By 1995, the Challenger range had received a new rear-end full GRP back panel featuring a wind spoiler. A new gas/electric Carver heater was added, along with Stoves branded ovens. Interiors were furnished with full sprung upholstery, and the fridges had full-width freezers. The Challengers were now extremely well-specified caravans for the money.

More styling changes came in 1996, with a new aerodynamic front panel. An electric flush loo, a 77-litre fridge, better quality upholstery and re-styled furniture enhanced the 1997 models. An L-shaped front lounge was offered in the list of options.

Though generally reliable and well-built, some Challengers did suffer with damp, especially in the early days. Having said that, we still come across 1985 versions that are dry and have lots of life left in them!



Interiors were more modern and better built. Quality and comfort of soft furnishings improved.



2010: Challenger 570 end-washroom fixed-bed single-axle model. Up-to-the-minute shape, quality GRP front and rear end panels and one-piece aluminum sides kept the Challenger's appeal to customers wanting quality and value for money.

1998 brought some layout changes and new L-shaped kitchen designs, but 1999 was the year when the Challenger really evolved again, with the introduction of new front and rear GRP-moulded panels, a more stylish profile, and end washrooms with circular shower cubicles. The 500 was the first fixed-bed model that Swift produced, and the new fixed-bed 500/4 was an overnight success.

The millennium year was celebrated with the addition of a special 2000 badge. Specification improvements included a new wet locker, mains exterior socket, dual-fuel Carver 5500 Fanmaster heating, a Thetford swivel loo and a brand new aircraft-style design for the roof lockers. Three years later, the Challenger became even more desirable with new, green exterior graphics and 14" alloy wheels; other features included AKS hitch, barbecue point, Omni-vent and cantilever hinged bed tops.

In 2004 new front and rear end panels were introduced, widths were increased to 2.23 metres, the fridge capacity was upgraded to 86 litres and loose-fit carpets were installed. A year later, all the interior furniture was re-designed to update the Challenger range.

By 2007, the Challengers had been given another re-vamp to the profile that's now in place on the 2010 models. The interiors are very up-market, yet retain a price tag that offers good value.

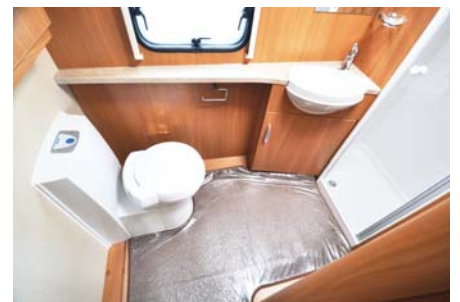
Swift's original design has undergone many interesting changes over the years, proving that a range can be evolved without drastic moves. The Challenger provides comfort, specification and image in a quality reliable caravan - and it's still one of the UK's best-loved tourers. Happy Anniversary!



Interior of the Challenger 570: microwave, full oven, dual-fuel hob, full blown-air heating and superb interior styling.



The granite sink unit is manufactured by Swift - the only caravan manufacturer to do this. Front and rear exterior panels are also manufactured by Swift.



End washrooms in the Challengers are well-appointed. The finish and design are well executed.



Interiors were given traditional looks but still kept up with modern trends.

new model - even more aerodynamic, more distinctive and better to tow while still offering Swift's quality and feel in a modern shell. This was the Challenger.

Testing on the Swift Challenger was carried out in 1984, and in that year Swift broke the record time for towing a caravan from Land's End to John o'Groats. Hitched to an Austin Montego two-litre petrol car - which weighed two hundredweight less than the caravan! - the aptly-named Challenger achieved a new record with an average speed of 49.6 mph.

By the summer of 1984, Peter Smith and several drivers at the MIRA test track had set themselves a new goal: smashing the 24-hour towing record. Three cars (two Rovers and a Jaguar) were chosen to tow the Challenger around the high-banked track at speeds approaching 100 mph. The twin-axled Challenger stayed completely stable, and by the end of the test it had covered 1,858 miles at average speeds of over 77 mph!

The new caravan was a winner, and after a small battle to get its name registered



By 1991 the Challenger's profile had evolved to a more angular shape.



In 1996 the Challenger received more facelifts. Models such as the 490 here proved popular with families, and the Challenger was now the UK's most popular range.

ahead of ABI - Swift's competitors at that time - the Challenger was firmly established as a Swift brand.

Both single-axled and twin-axled models featured in the Challenger range. The new vans had smart GRP one-piece front panels with integrated front locker, bonded sides and floor. The rear panel came as a one-piece GRP section with smart twin roof spoilers and moulded road light panel. The interiors were a blend of modern and traditional, with a good spec. The Challengers were a success, and in 1985 and 1986 sales went through the roof.

By 1987, eight layouts completed the line-up. The front end moulding was revised, as was the rear end, and the roof spoilers were dropped. Full mains electrics were added, plus a full shower. Twin-axled versions received the addition of full flyscreens and blinds, a glazed stable door and a burgundy 'waistband'.

By 1988 the Challenger twin-axles - now known as TAs - were taking on a more luxurious aspect than their single-axled counterparts. Refinements included Alde central heating, on-board water tank, the then-new Thetford cassette loo and a 76-litre fridge. For the single-axled Challengers, the SE badge was added if buyers wanted to enhance their new van's specification with flyscreens/blinds, oven and electronic ignition on the fridge.

The range now comprised eleven models in all, from the 390/2 end-kitchen two-berth to the 600/5TA, giving plenty of choices. Now firmly established, Swift had seen their Challengers develop from a ground-breaking design to a range that was continually evolving as caravanners dictated new needs.

Big changes were seen in 1990 when the Challenger TAs were re-named Conquerors and became a separate range. The same basic formula - a Challenger with more spec - is still in place today. Challengers were treated



1999 saw Swift launch the UK's first fixed-bed tourer. Naturally the Challenger brand was chosen, and the 500/4 became an overnight success.



2001: the Challenger was being exported to Holland and Denmark. The exteriors were basically the same as those on the UK market.



Interior of the export Challengers - bolder than the UK models.