Daihatsu – Gone, but far from forgotten…

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Daihatsu Campagno.

Dave Moss tells the story of Daihatsu in the UK…

(All words © Dave Moss).

Some car brands seem like unshakeable fixtures on the British market… while others, in blink-and-you-missed-it existences – like UMM, Sao, and Lonsdale – have briefly been, and

quickly gone, and seem unlikely ever to return. Then there's Daihatsu, which began building trucks in 1919, placing it amongst Japan's oldest motor vehicle brands, and which, in 1965, became the first Japanese manufacturer to begin car sales in Britain. Daihatsu gave up an unequal struggle to continue sales in Britain – and Europe – well over ten years ago now, and yet something about this always-modest, always eclectic marque leaves lingering memories.

Its first UK offering was the two-door Compagno Berlina saloon (pictured above), pleasantly styled on themes apparently borrowed from certain contemporary Fiat models. The DN Campagno (seen below) is a much later variation on the Campagno theme, but not sold in the UK.



Daihatsu DN Compagno.

Until 1978 suspicions were high – and sales of this oriental marque with a peculiar name – correspondingly low, but the arrival of the diminutive yet genuinely off-road competent and remarkably nimble Fourtrak off-roader began to raise the stakes. It seriously undercut the price of the short wheelbase Land Rover, while being better equipped and more comfortable, though it couldn't match towing ability. Later versions developed into early SUV predecessors, becoming one of the most compact and in-demand 4×4 vehicles of the 1980s and 1990s.



Fourtrak.

Interestingly today, when electric vehicles are centre stage, in 1980 Daihatsu displayed the Fourtrak alongside an electric city car, and an electric version of their Charade hatchback, at the British International Motor Show. In 1982 they returned with a prototype Charmant

Electric Hybrid, featuring computer control of two electric motors plus a petrol engine.

Though none of these ever went on UK sale, the 1980s Charade range still had uncharacteristically wide extremities, ranging from a 3 cylinder diesel version which proved easily Britain's most economical car – to the GTti, with the world's then most powerful 3 cylinder 1.0 litre petrol engine, for drivers seeking something (very) much more sporting.



Charade.

Other notable models included the diminutive Copen sports car, the Terios and the Fourtrak's smaller brother, the Sportrak – ultimately replaced by the Terios in 1997, which is still sought after today, and the Grand Move – a very big hit with Motability customers, on which Daihatsu completely failed to capitalise by abruptly withdrawing the model – with no replacement.



Copen sports car.



Terios (2009).

2007 SMMT figures show just 5035 Daihatsu vehicles registered that year, 4841 in 2008, 2306 in 2009 – and none in 2010… suggesting the importers had inside knowledge that something was brewing… and they did, because in January 2011, European Daihatsu distributors were advised that car exports to the region would cease on 31st January, 2013. The official reason was continuing strength of the Japanese Yen against the Euro and the British Pound, making competitive pricing difficult, allied to the high cost of developing new models meeting toughening European emissions regulations. Yet given that on average, less than 5000 cars a year were being sold in Britain, the real question was whether that volume genuinely maintained buoyant profitability throughout the supply chain…

Following that announcement, the marque's UK importer confirmed it had no remaining new stock, and no further orders would be placed. Owners were advised that aftersales

support arrangements would be maintained, while anyone determined to stay close to Daihatsu's lineage could obtain an alternative version of the discontinued Sirion model. Built in Malaysia by Perodua – in which Daihatsu had a significant stake – their 2011 Myvi model, though different in detail, was fundamentally similar to what had been one of Daihatsu's more popular British offerings.

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Thus the marque quietly disappeared from Britain, leaving behind a 46 year legacy of sometimes nonconformist cars. The mainstream Domino, Charmant and Applause proved instantly forgettable, while some, like the Terios and Fourtrak are still sought after… A few, ranging from the stylishly diminutive Copen two seater, to the amazingly rapid Charade GTTi, were just too unusual to ever be forgettable. The Materia, last Daihatsu on UK sale, is also in this category, as one of the marque's most strikingly distinctive cars. Rooted in the era of the equally unusual Nissan Cube, it was actually a development of the Japan-only Toyota Bb, which dated from the pre-Cube 1990s.


DZ59 XHP


DZ59 XHP



Materia.

Britain only saw the second-generation Materia (shown above), a car which eschewed polite double takes, for instantly, on sight, you either loved it or hated it – deeply, passionately, forever. It was a car for which the phrase ‘in yer face’ was probably coined; a car whose presence in the metal transcended impressions gained from mere photographic images, which somehow never quite captured its, er, charisma. At about the size of today’s Vauxhall Mokka it wasn’t big, or a mini-SUV, but sitting squat on the road, with the preferred metallic blackcurrant-coloured paintwork of its brutish, no compromise, chisel-jawed bonnet glinting in the sun, its darkened rear glass and chunky, heavily retro-influenced style altogether evoked the expectation that Al Capone would shortly emerge wearing a dark, wide-lapelled, boldly pin-striped suit, violin case in hand.

Your correspondent road-tested a Materia in 2008, and it quickly proved to be a car you use to collect kids from school at your peril. Indeed, wherever you stopped, the darkly threatening Materia almost guaranteed the kind of jaw dropping stares usually reserved for cars ten times its quite modest price. Kids loved the looks, the space, the hidden stowage, the sliding rear seat, the illuminated armrests and loudspeakers – yes, really – and pretty well everything about it. Trouble was, they told their friends, word got round, and soon, half the neighbourhood was gawping at it siting on the drive – when you just wanted a quiet trip to the shops.

The drive was considerably less avant-garde than the looks, with that unforgettable bonnet hiding a willing 1.5 litre, 103 horsepower petrol engine, driving through a five-speed manual gearbox or four-speed automatic. Its was a solid enough performer, but Mr. Capone would surely have wondered about the short-ish gearing, which desperately needed a higher, cruising ratio to reduce fuss, improve refinement, and boost fuel economy. It was a generally tidy drive, with nicely direct steering, good grip and a comfortable flowing ride.

Equipment was on the mark against its 2008 contemporaries, though elements of rather plasticky interior trim looked slightly cheap – yet any criticism of interior space or versatility would surely have seen a frown darken Mr. Capone's countenance. Despite compact dimensions, the Materia was effectively a mini-MPV, and a proper five-seater, with the space and flexibility essential in a car built to accommodate a busy, rough and tumble lifestyle. Indeed, if Mr Capone exercised his trigger finger to raise the vast tailgate, a quick slide of the rear seat would have released sufficient space for a positive orchestra of violin cases, and no self-respecting gangster could ask for fairer than that.

Minimal registration figures suggest that the public hardly loved it and mostly hated it. www.howmanyleft.com reports that just 595 manual Materia models were UK registered, plus 283 automatics. Yet some passion remains: latest available figures, for quarter 2 of 2024, reveal that 805 cars were originally licensed, and 383 remain so – with another 48 on SORN. That's a 53% survival rate after 15 years, suggesting the Materia might yet turn into a desirable future classic.