

PROJECT FIGARO PART ONE BACK TO THE FUTURE

Simon Goldsworthy waits nearly 30 years to get a car that was first shown under a banner that claimed it was 'Back to the Future.' And no it is not a DeLorean, but the quite remarkable Figaro from a most unlikely manufacturer – Nissan.



It is odd how some marques turn out model after model that is taken to heart by enthusiasts and rapidly gains cult and classic status, whereas others rarely seem to crack the emotive nut. I have to say that for many years Nissan fell into the latter category, but that has little to do with the quality of their products and plenty to do with the market in which they have traditionally operated. Youngsters today may think that cars like the Nissan Juke and Qashqai are cool, Skylines from the 1980s and '90s have a huge following and the 240Z is a legend, but I grew up in the days when anything wearing a Japanese badge meant lots of toys and total reliability, but little in the way of excitement either to

drive or to look at, not to mention having a body that rusted with the best of them. They were essentially cars that you bought with your head rather than your heart.

Like any sweeping statement, that description may seem appealing enough on the surface but it really does not bear up to close scrutiny. I've already mentioned the 240Z and Skylines, but the company also produced interesting cars that never made it to the UK such as the Datsun Fairlady and the superbly-named Nissan Cedric of the 1960s, (who could resist a car called Cedric?). And, of course, the Nissan Figaro you see pictured here, a car which very definitely tugs at the heart strings rather than engages the head!

However, before I get onto the main event, perhaps I should fill in a little of the background to Nissan and Datsun because we don't cover the marques too often, and any readers under the age of 30 may be wondering what the Datsun name has to do with them and their Nissan Juke. The thing is that Nissan can trace its automotive manufacturing roots to a car that was built in 1914 by the Kaishinsha Motorcar Works in Tokyo and marketed under the name of DAT. The company's main focus was on trucks though, until the start of the 1930s when the Japanese government created a class of cars with engines up to 500cc which could be driven without a license. When DAT developed a car for

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The Figaro's interior is as beautifully styled as the exterior. Initial issues are a cracked top to the dash, indicators that are temperamental, a non-functioning electric window and a handbrake lever that's been wrapped up in insulating tape.

this new market, they called it Datson (in other words, son of DAT), and in 1933 this was changed to Datsun when Nissan took control of the company.

Subsequently the Nissan name was used within Japan, while the Datsun badge was given to exports. The first Datsuns exported to the UK didn't arrive here until 1968, only in small numbers initially but climbing rapidly to make Datsun the biggest import brand in the country just a few years later. It achieved this success with cars such as the Cherry and Sunny which were unadventurous in their styling, but clean and coherent designs that were well made, reliable and extremely well-equipped when compared to the domestic opposition.

The company also, of course, produced the iconic 240Z family from 1968 which

swept through the US market and blew virtually all European sports car opposition into the weeds. It is fair to say that this sexy model was an exception to the Datsun rule though, with the main emphasis for the company being firmly on sensible and functional transport. That has, however, always been the way to succeed in car manufacturing, with a halo model that gains good publicity out of all proportion to its overall sales and draws people into showrooms to buy the more workaday models that carry the same name.

However, that name was about to change. At the start of the 1980s, the company decided it was time to operate under the single Nissan marque across the globe. To start with, cars in the UK had both Nissan and Datsun badges and

were, if my memory serves me correctly, marketed as 'Datsun, by Nissan.' The last to carry the Datsun name was the first of the Micras that had been introduced in 1983, but by the following year the Datsun name had disappeared from the UK market.

The Nissan Micra continued, and went from strength to strength. It started off as the K10, an angular hatchback supermini that was allegedly designed originally as a replacement for the Fiat 127 before the Italians opted for the Uno instead – if any readers can shed light on this and explain how Nissan inherited the design, we'd love to hear from you! The second generation Micra was the K11, and this model was built in the UK as well as in Japan and Taiwan. In 1993 it became the first Japanese car to be acclaimed as

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Be-1

Pao

S-cargo

« European Car of the Year. It was replaced in turn by the K12 from 2002, which is the version with the bug eyes. This actually represented a quite substantial redesign of the model, bigger in all directions and even more curvy. It lasted until 2010, at which point it was replaced by the K13 that ran from 2010-2017. There is currently a fifth generation K14 Nissan Micra in production.

These later versions need not concern us here, though it should be noted that the C+C version of the K12 did feature in our *Emerging Classic* slot a couple of issues back. However, it is to the original K10 that we need to return. I described that as an angular hatchback supermini, a description that clearly does not apply to the car you see pictured here! However, looks can be deceiving because it is indeed the K10 Micra that underpins this oh so pretty Figaro exterior.

To explain this part of the story, we need to go back to 1985 when Nissan displayed three concept vehicles at the Tokyo Motor Show. One of these was the Be-1 by designer Naoki Sakai, a special edition of the Micra designed as a cheap and cheerful city car. With its friendly face (and styling lines that foreshadowed the next generation K11 Micra), the Be-1 went down so well at the show that Nissan decided to put it into limited production for the Japanese market.

The task of building it was given to one of Nissan's subcontractors, the Aichi Machine Industry Plant, and 10,000 examples were produced from 1987. It proved so popular that Nissan also



developed a quirky delivery van based on the Nissan Sunny, allegedly inspired by Citroën's 2CV Fourgonnette van. That Citroën had been nicknamed the tin snail, so

Nissan called their van the S-Cargo. Cute! Another Japan-only product, the S-Cargo's interior fitments included a removable sushi tray.

Meanwhile, Sakai had been busy with the Micra. The even more radical and very retro Pao was unveiled at the Tokyo show in 1987 and sold from 1989, the same year that the Figaro finally enters the story. This 2+2 fixed profile convertible (think Morris Minor Tourer) was also built on the Micra's running gear and displayed at that year's

Tokyo Motor Show, finally going on sale in 1991. Although 'going on sale' is perhaps not doing the model justice, because demand was so great that Nissan had to increase the planned production from 8000 to 20,000 examples. All were built between February and September 1991, but even that was woefully insufficient, so Nissan had to organise a lottery with a reputed 100,000 tickets – only those people lucky enough to draw a winning number could place an order.

The Figaro was available in four colours, each one representing a different season. There was Emerald Green for spring, Pale Aqua for summer, Topaz Mist for autumn and Lapis Grey for winter. All were equipped with a three-speed automatic



The sides of the roof remain fixed, but the top itself and the rear window fold into what you would normally expect to be the boot. This storage area is meant to be a wet boot, but ours was damp and mouldy because the drains were blocked.



The engine seems to be sweet and the oil is fresh, but there is no service record to suggest when the timing belt was last changed. The drive belts squeal on start-up too, the radiator fins are shot and the hoses look like 1991 originals.

gearbox (the proper old-school type with a torque converter) and a 1-litre turbocharged engine (actually 987cc) delivering 76bhp and 78lb.ft of torque. It featured the Micra's MacPherson strut front suspension and four link coil-sprung rear allied to ventilated front discs and rear drums, but it looked like it came not just from another era, but from another planet entirely to the ubiquitous shopping trolley.

Most of the details seem to have been inspired by the 1950s, and there are beautiful little touches wherever you look on the Figaro. Perhaps that is why some people look down their nose at the model, regarding it as a copy of past greats without a forward-looking curve in its body, but I would argue that such people have totally missed the point. Sometimes you can detect the influence of an earlier car in this or that touch, but mostly the Figaro takes its inspiration from a multitude of sources, distilling the essential mood rather than the exact details and turning them into its own unique style. This car is not meant to point the way towards the future or to bring back the past; instead it is purely and simply about having fun, about letting the imagination run wild with a carefree abandon that has largely been squeezed out of people by the age of ten.

The Figaro was a Japan-only model, but because Japanese motorists drive on the correct side of the road, all were built with RHD. This, coupled with the model's irresistible appeal, has meant that a great many have been brought to the

UK in later life as used cars. Ours is no exception, having arrived on these shores in 2008. However, I do have to own up to prior experience of the model. I lived in Japan from 1992-1994, and so witnessed some of the aftermath from the hysteria surrounding its launch. And I have to say that while I never got to drive one over there, the model was duly entered onto my wish list of cars to experience.

Sometimes though, it takes a little while to realise your dreams. Nearly 30 years in this case, but when the publisher asked about possible replacements for the Ford Escort as a project car in *Classics*, I saw my chance and pounced. So yes, it is because of me that Kelsey have ended up with J746 YSC. Therefore I would appreciate a flood of letters to bolster my position, praising the choice and saying how much you are looking forward to the series. I shall set aside a couple of extra pages in next issue's *Postbag* to fit them all in...

I did not rush out and buy the first Figaro I saw. In fact, technically I didn't even see this one before buying it, but we will get to that in a moment. There are generally a number of examples for sale in the UK at any one time, both privately and through the trade, so there were plenty of options. I considered several cars ranging in price from £2000-£5000, but the Achilles' heel of the model is rust and I was hoping to avoid the time and the expense of a full body restoration. The best cars sell for more than our budget, especially from dealers who have to factor in pesky little

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Micra K10-K14



The first of the Micras, the K10, was unashamedly angular in style, yet still underpinned the curvy Figaro.



The K11 Micra smoothed off all the K10's sharp edges and was voted European Car of the Year in 1993.



Perhaps the most common of the Micras on our roads today is the bug-eyed K12 built from 2002-2010.



The K13 saw a mild restyle of what was still essentially the same car, but things were definitely changing.



The K14 is bang up to date, but it has swapped cuteness for aggressive angles and poor visibility.

« details like overheads and warranties, and besides it wouldn't make much of a feature car if we didn't have some jobs to do.

We did go to inspect one car advertised privately for a touch under £5000, but ultimately the scale of potential body repairs knocked that one on the head. Then I saw this Emerald Green example listed on Morris Leslie's auction up in Scotland. There were only a few days to go before the sale and I was unable to get away from my desk because of looming deadlines, so the best I could do was chat with Morris Leslie staff as they walked around the car. That, and blowing up the pictures as big as possible and inspecting every inch, persuaded me to register for telephone bidding on the Friday, then nervously await a call on the Saturday. The estimate was £2500-£3500, and in the event, after what seemed like only a few seconds on the phone, we won the auction for an all-in price (with commission and VAT) of £3021.

That looked like a good result, but I had to wait a few more days for the car to be shipped down to me at the bottom end of Lincolnshire before I could be sure that I should be smiling rather than crying. That was quite a long trek, so the £308 added to our total bill seemed reasonable enough, especially after totting up the time and the cost of catching a train to Perth and driving it home. And it was very definitely the correct decision because while the Figaro was in far better condition than I could have hoped for and came with an MoT that is valid until 29th May 2019, the tyres were ancient and cracked. Certainly I would



Paying to have the Figaro transported down from Scotland was a wise move, as the tyres were old and cracked, while the exhaust was blowing quite badly.

never have wanted to drive it the 366 miles home on those, not to mention the fact that the exhaust was blowing.

It also came with absolutely no service history, so there was no indication of when the timing belt had last been changed – and this is an interference engine, meaning that a snapped cambelt will mean huge repair bills. If all of this makes it sound like I was disappointed, then let me dispel that thought right away. I had checked out the car's MoT history (you can do this online at www.check-mot.service.gov.uk and it is an extremely useful buying tool), and while there were some MoT fails scattered through the listing from 2008, it was nearly all for regular maintenance issues and there was no mention of body corrosion. That was totally consistent with what Jamie unloaded from his transporter, and also with the MoT mileage trail that showed just

21,526 miles had been covered since 2008 (though how many of those were miles and how many were kilometres is not clear). Even if it had been converted to miles, that would still mean it had only done a modest 5096 miles since May 2011. Therefore, I was expecting some recommissioning at the least to be the order of the day.

We will make a start on getting it road-ready next issue, and also begin the task of compiling a worksheet of jobs to be done. For this, we will be taking advice from the kind folks at the Figaro Owners Club, and also enlisting the help of specialists who have set up to cater to the model. In the meantime, if anybody recognises the car and is able to put us in touch with the previous owner or their family, then please do ask them to get in contact. We'd love to know some of the car's history as it embarks on this new chapter in its life. **CM**

The actual boot space is tiny, accessed via the hatch on which the numberplate is mounted.

