

Paul Watt



From cleaning cars aged 12 in Kilmarnock to being brand director of Rolls-Royce in Saudi Arabia, Alan Gall has plenty of vehicle industry experience. And he is going to need it in his new role as head of Scotland's motor trade body →

KENNY KEMP

**A**lan Gall is in the driving seat of one of Scotland's most important industries: the motor trade.

It is a global industry mired in the traffic congestion of geopolitics, with President Trump's skirmishes on tariffs, his MAGA sidekick Elon Musk's association with Tesla, and a Chinese electric motor industry attempting to dump its subsidised vehicles in Europe.

Nearer home, there are issues about the future of car making in the UK too, with BMW, the owner of Rolls-Royce and Mini, predicting tariffs will cost the company €1bn, while urban planners are doing as much as they can to curb the use of the machine that has defined human activity in the last 125 years.

So, with apologies to Scotland's green warriors, the motor vehicle remains way more important than the bicycle.

Alan Gall is the chief executive of the Scottish Motor Trade Association, with its head office in South Queensferry, looking out towards the Forth Bridge. We should expect this business leader to make a considerable splash on Scotland's corporate life, because he is an impressive figure with global credentials.

The SMTA has 1,300 members across the country, and they represent everyone from the 'Freds in the Shed', the small garages doing MoTs and engine diagnostics, to the likes of Peoples Ford, Eastern Western, Douglas Park, and Arnold Clark, all with very different needs.

"My first task is to make sure we are a trade association representing all of our members," he says.

**The SMTA's hottest topic is training** – and what is an impending crisis of qualified people, including motor engineers, unless the Scottish Government wakes up to the unintended consequences of employment subsidies for the offshore wind sector. More of this later.

At 52, Alan Gall has already had an illustrious career that started when he was 12 armed with a bucket, sponge and wet rag cleaning cars in an Arnold Clark garage in Western Road,



Kilmarnock, and has encompassed being the head of Toyota distributors in the United Arab Emirates and then brand director of Rolls-Royce in Saudi Arabia.

"When I started out, it was a different time altogether. I was in the valeting department and I would be driving cars in and out, parking and manoeuvring from my early teens in the private yard," he says.

Something about Britain's car industry stuck in the mind of this Ayrshire boy.

"When I was in Western Road, the cars we were selling were Austin and British Leyland motors. One extra that you could order from the parts department was an oil drip pan because, in the showroom, you often had to put this tray under a brand new car. This was accepted as being reasonable. But clearly, that's just wrong. The solution to that is not to have a tray, but to fix the oil leak in the car's design."

Many years later, Alan Gall, by then a motor company executive, was in Japan having dinner with Dr Toyoda, grandson of the founder of the Toyota car company. They chatted about the demise of Britain's car marques, and how Japanese engineers would search for the root cause of the oil leaks

**The arrival of Nissan cars like this 1970 Skyline 2000GT C10 met with cultural resistance in the UK**  
Viggo Hansson / Shutterstock

**“The Japanese cars were better built, better quality, and had more features. They didn't quite have the rust capability for British weather, but they had brought in a product that was far and away superior**

Alan Gall

that were so prevalent in British-made cars, and then set about fixing it.

"Rather than a solution to a problem, they would have fixed the problem. This was one of those light-bulb moments about the global motor industry, and why Britain lost its lead," he says.

The arrival of Nissan motors met with massive cultural resistance in the UK, yet its cars and other Japanese models were soon far superior to British models, and at a lower price.

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**British buyers bought out of** sentimental attachment and post-war anti-Japanese attitudes, rather than rationality.

UK-made Rover had a Rover 2 series with a 216 and 213 version. "Generally speaking, the 216 would be the better car. But at that stage, Rover had a manufacturing agreement with Honda, and the 213 had a Honda engine. When I was working, used cars were a major part of what we did at Arnold Clark. Everyone wanted →





a Rover 213, even although it was not necessarily the best. But it had the Honda engine.”

It was these incremental steps which gave Gall a deeper understanding of how the motor industry was evolving.

“When you aggregate all these small points, you understand these were long-term trends in manufacturing. The reality was there were many people thinking about this. There were conscious decisions by manufacturers to design and invest and to improve,” he says.

**Alan Gall points out the Scottish Motor Trade Association, founded in 1903, was set up by motoring entrepreneurs who wanted to make the most of the new-fangled combustion engine. “Without exception, and by far and away, this is the job that I want to succeed in. I’m genuinely honoured to be given this role. Ironically, I started this job the day that we buried my father, on November 1, 2024,” he says.**

His father Glen, who was 90, was a doyen of the Scottish motor industry, and retired as the managing director of Arnold Clark, before becoming president of the SMTA’s non-executive board. Glen Gall, who was Sir Arnold

**Electric cars will become the vehicle of choice, Alan Gall believes**

Aliaksei Kaponia / Shutterstock

**“ He envisions a new era where electric vehicles will become the preferred choice but says much needs to be done to encourage the consumer to switch, including fairer and transparent electric charging tariffs**

Clark’s right-hand man for many years, was a hard parental act to follow.

“The day that I told him I had got the job here, was genuinely as happy as I had ever seen him.”

**In his introduction to the SMTA team, he said that the gentlemen who founded their organisation in 1903 – and it was a group of gentlemen – were the innovators.**

“They were the people who were going to change the world. Their objective was not looking at what was successful in the 1885s, before the arrival of the car. They were visionaries.

“Like many people I have worked with and encountered in the automotive industry, they realised that to be successful, they would have to change things.”

The motor car and its petrol and diesel emissions have taken the brunt of the complaints about the damage to the global environment. He is keen to re-set the thinking about the significance of the motor vehicle in our society.

“We’re going to change things positively for the Scottish motor industry.

“Our job is not to protect what’s happened in the past because that was a good time for us. Our job is to make sure we press

on in the future, as strong as we possibly can.”

The SMTA leader believes he has a good ten or 15 years to make his mark. He envisions a new era where electric vehicles will become the preferred choice but says much needs to be done to encourage the consumer to switch, including fairer and transparent electric charging tariffs.

Alan Gall was also at the forefront of the car sales transformation in Scotland, as car dealers reconfigured their showrooms to make them more elegant showcases for the motor brands. Today buying a new car is a special experience.

“It was particularly chosen that I would go to the East End of Glasgow. I was a middle-class lad from rural Ayrshire, so going to the East End you get to meet every type of person. It was an important part of my father’s and the Arnold Clark organisation that we meet everyone who wants to own or hire a car.”

**Later in his career, as a young showroom manager in Ayr, he was involved in changing the nature of the sales experience. “We had a Honda franchise. I was involved with knocking down the old garage and rebuilding it, which involved working with architects and town planners to set up the kind of facility that would work for the guys in the garage area, those selling the cars, and for the customers venturing through the door,” he says. It was an activity that changed his thinking about how motor vehicles should be sold or rented.**

Being the boss’s son, he made a conscious decision to forge a career under his own steam. He set off for South America, travelled to Argentina, learned Spanish, and met Jessica de Mattei, whom he married. He stayed for two years in Buenos Aires, “I loved every second of it, still to this day. It’s one of the world’s most vibrant cities.” This kicked off an international career that took him around the globe.

In 2005, he was offered a job in Dubai, moving to the manufacturing and distribution side with Al-Futtaim Motors, the sole distributors of Toyota and Lexus in the UAE. The company sold more cars than Toyota in Europe.

In 2011, he returned to Scotland, but top-level executive jobs were mainly overseas, and he was →





Alan Gall is not a self-confessed 'petrol-head' like Jeremy Clarkson; he is more of a pragmatist about the joys of being able to take to the open road.

"I've always liked the car for the benefits that it gives me as an individual. I was brought up in the small village of Stewarton in Ayrshire and having a car was critical to enable you to do kind of anything," he says.

He passed his driving test first time at 17 in Kilmarnock,

purely for the "functionality of what it could give me, rather than the car itself".

He was able to pick a girlfriend up in Irvine, or drive up to Glasgow for music events. He did a spell at Glasgow Caledonian University doing business and engineering, but decided it wasn't his forte, and he returned to the Arnold Clark showrooms, this time in Hamilton Road, in the East End of Glasgow.

His first car was a metallic

gold Ford Fiesta. He began as a trainee salesperson in 1993 at Arnold Clark Peugeot, reaching the position of manager in his early twenties. The weekly sales figures were transmitted to head office, with the acronym, NUT, standing for 'new, used, and total'. The business was expanding massively.

He and his Argentinian wife, Jessica de Mattei, and children live on the Ayrshire coast.

automotive industry in Scotland, is higher than any other sector. Everyone uses a vehicle, whether personally, to get medicines delivered, travel to work, or take children to football practice. It is hard to disagree that every aspect of our life is impacted by the motor vehicle.

"We are in a cataclysmic situation, not just today but in five or six years. It is genuinely and potentially going to cripple the economics of the country. We lose a huge number of our technicians because they are very well trained and have excellent computing skills. They are not the people with oily rags of old, they are highly trained with electrical and electronic skills."

He points out these technicians are being lured to other industries, such as the renewables and telecoms sector.

"We are losing them to other industries who are subsidised by the government. They are being picked up and offered work on offshore wind farms, aviation and new technologies on higher wage levels that are being subsidised. I'm just looking for a level-playing field that is fair."

He warns that Scotland will hit genuine problems, because there will simply not be enough trained people to service the next generation of electric cars and work with advanced battery technologies.

**It is quite an issue. Furthermore,** paying higher salaries for technicians to compensate will only force the cost of motor vehicles higher and make them less accessible.

"Everything that is delivered, from the likes of Deliveroo, to that package to be delivered by Amazon, will become massively more expensive," he says.

"We know how many people we need, we know the attrition rate, we know how many need to be trained, and there is much our members can and will be doing on this, but we need the Scottish Government to provide an equitable solution that it fair to the motor industry."

His parting point is that the Scottish Government gives around £7,400 to train a motor apprentice, but in England and Wales this is over £20,000. Surely, this should be something on the forecourt of the Scottish Government's business? Expect Mr Gall to be putting his foot on the gas. ●

→ offered a job as managing director of Infinity, Nissan's luxury auto brand, in Saudi Arabia.

"The Infinity product was spectacular. Nissan was on a real upturn in their growth plans. I loved everything to do with Infinity," he recalls.

Alan moved to Mitsubishi for a spell, but was headhunted to work for the Jaguar and Land-Rover distributor, and he became strategy director for Rolls-Royce in Saudi Arabia, rising to brand director for Rolls-Royce in Saudi Arabia, arguably the most important retail job within the global car company.

"My corporate experience of Dubai, where there has been massive societal changes, shows me that not only do you have to have a masterplan at the government level but it has to be tied in with the industry, the manufacturers and planning departments."

He recalls a meeting in 2009 with Dubai city planners and Toyota engineers about self-driving cars. One problem was the kerbs were too high. The city started to change all the pave-

ments so that self-driving cars can be introduced.

"Almost 20 years later, it is ready for self-drive cars when they come. It is always about the future," he says.

**There is little doubt that Alan** Gall will be spending his time talking with the Scottish Government, and legislative bodies, on the industry's most pressing issues. At the top of his list is training and the retention of staff.

Arnold Clark's mantra was about a working-class customer walking into his East End of Glasgow showroom. That customer was investing in the most expensive vehicle they could afford and should be treated like

**“The government does not respect the importance of the automotive industry”**

a king. If a customer buys a Rolls-Royce, it is only a part of their wealth. While both should be treated like a king, the working person must be given star treatment as much, if not more. This is something which has always reverberated with Alan Gall.

"Training is our number one issue across all of the motor trade. There is a massive problem with recruitment and training. We've had apprentice schemes cut and rural college courses in automotive training shut down," he says.

**Many rural parts of Scotland are** losing local motor technicians at an alarming rate, which is causing depopulation.

"In my opinion, as the CEO of SMTA, the government does not remotely either respect or potentially understand the importance of the automotive industry. I hear they are giving £400m to the steel industry, to support them, which is fine. We don't get anything like that."

Alan Gall believes the number of people involved, and directly and indirectly impacted, by the