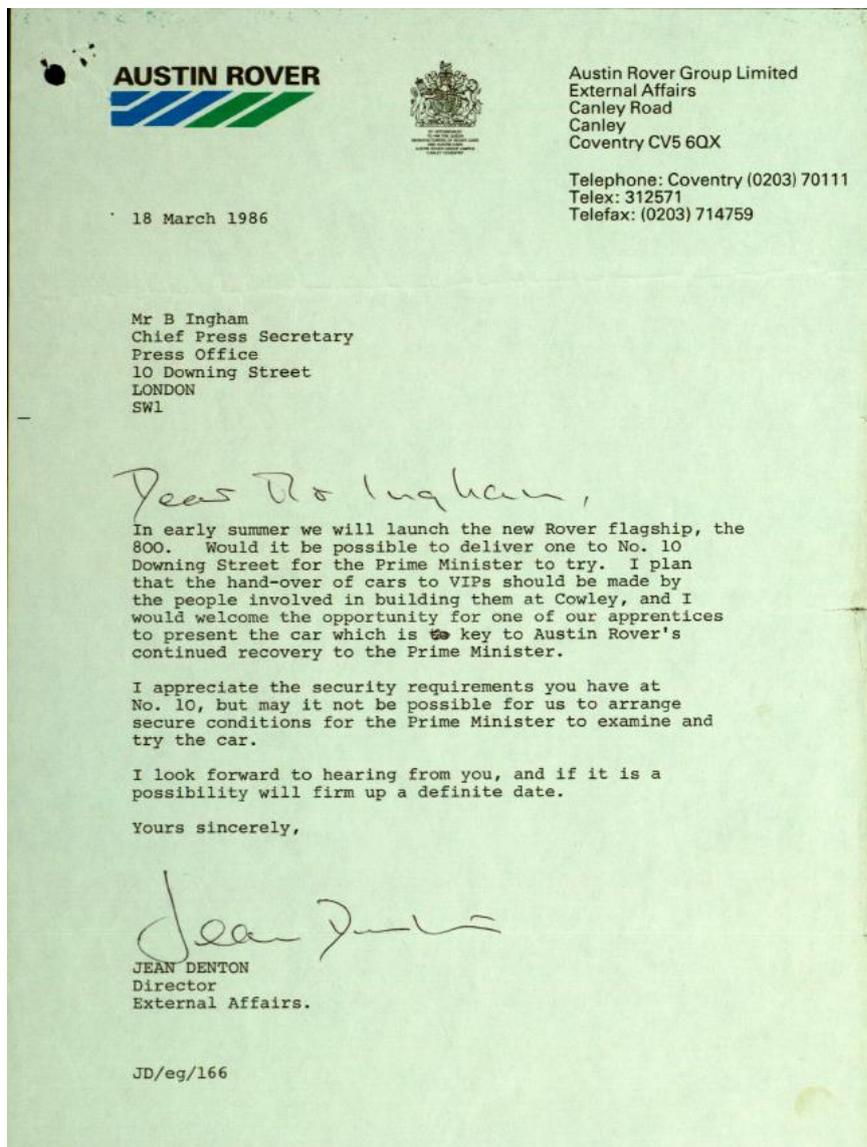


## Margaret Thatcher and the Rover 800

When Rover launched the Rover 800 in 1986, Rover were keen to gain as much publicity for the new car as they could. One idea was to have Margaret Thatcher drive an 800 with the media present to record the event, so promoting the car. The story behind this event has come to light with the release of Margaret Thatcher's personal papers from 1986 in January 2017 by the Churchill Archives Centre.



Margaret Thatcher apparently agreed to drive the 800 to "demonstrate we still love Leyland".

The PM's staff had a range of concerns about what seems a simple exercise. Firstly, there was the issue of the colour of the car to be driven. One previous car test drive hit a snag when the car presented to be driven was red – surely not a problem? Well, red is Labour's colour rather than the Conservative's blue....

The next issue was that Margaret Thatcher had not driven herself for some considerable time, perhaps as long as 10 years. The solution was for an 800 to be delivered to Chequers (the English PM's official country residence) for Margaret Thatcher to familiarise herself with the car.

The Evening Standard newspaper has also enquired as to whether Margaret Thatcher was being given the car – this was met with the response that she was only "demonstrating" the car. As an aside, at the time, Austin Rover had a Demonstration Fleet set up "the sole purpose of which is to keep Members of the House abreast of our latest models" according to John Baker, Manager of Austin Rover's Customer Liaison Department.

On 5 July 1986, an 800 arrived at Chequers under cover on a trailer towed by a Range Rover, accompanied by Roy Axe (the Design Director) and Derek Peck (the Engineering Director) of the Rover 800 project to give Margaret Thatcher instructions and details of the car.

The drive was to take place the following week at Downing Street in London.

More consternation for the advisors – what was the test drive to encompass? Downing Street is not large, and some reversing of the car would be required.

PRIME MINISTER

THE NEW ROVER 800

You are test driving the new Rover on Thursday.

The most straightforward way of arranging this would probably be for you to drive the car from the front door towards the bottom of Downing Street, reversing into the side road, and then driving back up the street to the front door. Graham Day might accompany you but not I think Mr. Musgrove.

If you would like to handle the test drive in this way, you would need to feel fully confident about manoeuvring the car into the side road and back out again. The alternative would be to walk down to the car at the bottom of Downing Street and drive it back to the front door.

Agree to go for the first option? Or prefer to keep it simple.

*Mark Addison*  
Mark Addison  
7 July 1986

*F. Whitman*  
*ms*

*Mick Tomes will be asking clear  
to Mr Denton that the car needs  
to arrive 1/2 hour early for  
checking. MBA 8/11*

The memo to the left outlines the options provided to drive the car – the first option was chosen.

The outcome of the test drive was a success, the drive took place without a hitch.

Graham Day, CEO of Austin Rover (with glasses and beard), can be seen in the background of the photo of Margaret Thatcher in the 800 below.

Margaret Thatcher subsequently wrote to Graham Day stating she had very much enjoyed driving such a splendid car.

