

# 'Swindon's finished': UK town in shock over Honda plant closure

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Honda acquired the site of a former World War II aircraft factory on the outskirts of Swindon in 1985

"It is going to be a disaster," Mary Day warned, capturing the sense of doom that descended on the working class English town of Swindon

after Honda announced it was closing its local plant after more than 30 years.

"I didn't see it coming. None of us did," the 68-year-old pensioner told AFP as workers arrived for their first shift since the news broke.

The Japanese auto giant is the biggest employer in the town of 180,000 people which grew up in the 19th century thanks to a booming railway works industry.

Swindon, which lies 80 miles (130 kilometres) west of London, survives on manufacturing to this day.

The city is surrounded by warehouses, storage silos and factories straddling a series of gentle rolling hills.

The closure of the Honda factory in 2021 puts 3,500 jobs directly at risk but could affect thousands more.

Next to the Honda plant stands a smaller one making Mini sedans for BMW. Both rely on the same supply chains, and some locals think the Mini plant will be the next to go.

"It is devastating for Swindon. I think Swindon's finished without Honda, that's my opinion," said Sue Davis a 49-year-old financial worker whose husband works at the plant.

"I don't see how the Mini plant will survive on its own," said Andrew Hopkins, 46, a cement factory worker who was jogging by after work.

"Everything around here depends on Honda."



Honda is the biggest employer in the English town of Swindon

The Japanese giant entered a partnership with the now-defunct carmaker British Leyland in 1980 to build Honda designs.

It led a wave of Japanese carmakers that came to Britain in the 1980s, drawn by the business-friendly environment under then prime minister Margaret Thatcher and access to European markets.

In 1985, Honda acquired the site of a former World War II aircraft factory on the outskirts of Swindon.

The plant began production in 1989 and has since produced bestsellers

such as the Honda Accord and the Honda Civic.

Swindon's winding streets around the plant are lined with simple, two-storey homes and south Asian restaurants and stores.

Families of Bengali and Indian descent ride their bikes to work at the guarded plant as huge lorries wheel out the just-minted Civics and Accords, around half of which will be sold to EU member states.

"It will be devastating for people," said Jason Foster, a 46-year-old government employee.

"Awful," he exclaimed.

## **'Down to Brexit'**

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But residents in Swindon, which voted 55 percent in favour of leaving the European Union in the 2016 referendum, saw Brexit playing a much larger role.

"I think it's coming down to Brexit and they're not admitting it. I think it's the uncertainty of what's going to happen," Foster said.

"I think it just feeds back into the whole thing of why on earth are we leaving. Whose idea was this in the first place? It's a joke," he said.

Michael Barkley, a 32-year-old local store manager, also said the

decision was taken "presumably because of Brexit".

"But they are never going to write it down anywhere, are they? They are never going to say that the reason they are leaving is because of Brexit," he said.

Richard Abbott, who works in financial services, said Brexit would get blamed even though "car industries in general seem to be moving away from the country".

"I know we haven't left (the EU) as yet but companies are getting ready beforehand, so it's not just a case of waiting for a deal to be made, companies are already making their plans unfortunately," he said.

Sumit Agarwal, 39, an insurance industry worker, said he was more worried about the impact for people he knows who work at the plant.

"I think it's going to be difficult for them. So I think government should do something to save those jobs."

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