
My first few ventures into motoring

Learning to drive in Luton

By the time I was in Upper Sixth, a number of my fellow sixth formers had already taken the driving test and had graduated from ancient motorbikes; mopeds, or pushbikes equipped with a Cyclemaster engine in the rear wheel, to a car of some sort. I was envious and determined to join them. I paid for seven one hour driving lessons at the Luton School of Motoring, and after being held up by severe winter weather for two months (Do you remember when it actually snowed, and we had icicles and things?) – I signed up to take the test. My instructor then told me that I needed to pay for three further hours – one by a different instructor to see how well I was driving; one by my instructor to finally prep me, an hour before the test, and one hour for driving with the tester himself. The assessing instructor said I was driving with too much confidence and would probably fail. Very worrying. Once the test started I was a bag of nerves. Whilst executing a multi-point turn I found that I was holding up traffic, so I appealed to the instructor, to ask what I should do. Without even looking at me, he stared stonily ahead, and said “You are the driver, Mr Wells, please don’t ask me!”.

At the end of the test, he took out a pad of pink dockets and my spirits rose – it was a pad of PASS slips. He started writing, but then hesitated, as if thinking he was minded to fail me after all. After a few seconds of pausing he said “Well, Mr Wells, I am going to pass you, but you really must exercise a bit more confidence!”

My very first car – Hillman Minx NYL183

I knew nothing about buying cars or maintaining them in 1961, and I had passed my driving test some months back. Several of my best friends already had cars of one sort or another.

My mother took pity on me and said that she would buy an old car for me, which I knew she could scarcely afford, living on a Widow’s pension. Not only that, but a friend of a friend knew a local jeweller who had a 1953 Hillman Minx for sale. And only £180.

The car concerned was brought to our house and I went out for a test drive with the owner. He told me that it was a sound vehicle and had even had a brand new rear nearside wing fitted to replace one that had rusted badly, as well as a replacement engine. Oh! The naivety of youth. I loved the leather bench seat (think of the girls!), and the column gearchange. I didn’t even bother to take note of the fact that it seemed to be sitting down lower on the near side.

The deal was done, and I became the proud owner of what rapidly proved to be a dreadfully rusty old rot box. I kept it for a year, driving it down to Southampton University for the first two terms. But then they introduced the ten-year MOT test. I took the car for the test and the tester took me beneath the car when up on a ramp – showing me the moth-eaten chassis and lumps missing from the inner wings. So much for quality manufacture in the UK. The car was an MOT failure and a complete write-off. I drove it home – parked it in our garage and walked away from it. Eventually it was towed away for scrap.

A jointly owned car at university – Morris Series E - EOX530

Six of us became firm friends in our first term, where we were quartered in a Queen Anne mansion hall of residence in two rooms on the first floor. The hall was a mile from the University, so thoughts naturally

turned to getting a set of wheels. Three of us had driving licences and three did not. We shopped around and found a 1939 vintage Morris Series E – for sale at £30. The deal was done, and somehow we managed to get it comprehensively insured for the six of us. Thereafter life became interesting.

A crash course in motor maintenance – and sweet talking the police

We soon learned that you had to be able to maintain a car as well as to run it. We had that car for two years, having in that period to patch up the silencer with Gun Gum multiple times; learning how to double declutch, and how (inadvertently) to make a magnificent roar behind a policeman on points duty when double declutching just when the silencer had failed – yet again. That cost a visit from the police – but he couldn't decide who was driving the car, and no-one owned up to be the driver. By this time we were in two adjacent rooms in a tower block. We bugged the interview room, and as the police interview proceeded, we chose the right moment to knock on the next-door room and offered the helmeted policeman tea or coffee and biscuits.

Learning to be a motor mechanic

We had to replace a sheared half shaft, which meant we had to get the car right off the ground and remove the Banjo, containing the rear axle differential gears. We had to take the gearbox apart on one occasion when the car proved only to have second and fourth gear - and no reverse. We cast lots to determine who would take the car home at the end of the year. The winner was a keen mechanical engineer, who took the engine apart to replace the main and big end bearings - on a street in Wood Green! He also repainted the car with a BRUSH in its original black and green colours, but he used Valspar lacquer – an OIL-BASED paint.

The steering was always a bit dodgy, and the floorboards were thin three-ply sheets. On one occasion I was taking two DJ-clad violinists to a concert as a favour. It had rained heavily and a severe dip on our way was somewhat flooded. I warned them that I needed to get up speed to ensure we got up the other side before the engine could conk out.

It worked out well, except that the thin floorboards were forced upwards by water pressure and the rear seat passengers has a bit of a soaking!

A replacement car of my own – JBH871

Managing to stay in hall for a third year – when my room-mate – currently a student engineer but subsequently becoming a Hollywood film director - introduced me to Judith – on a blind date! The rest is history, and we are still married 58 years later.

In my very last term, an old headmaster acquaintance, who had had to give up driving, sold me my next car for £10 – the 1947 manufactured but 1939 designed Austin 8. It had lethal rod brakes, and we had the brake shoes changed before a lengthy journey to Cornwall. The garage warned me to take care, as rod brakes took a long time to settle in. He wasn't kidding. The braking power was nearly non-existent, and in the next four hundred miles we had to stop the car, jack up each wheel sequentially and separately adjust the brakes on each wheel – about every 50 miles or so.

In that last term I had had many successful interviews – if you were qualified in Electronics you were offered a job, no matter what. I eventually selected GEC Hirst Research Centre, with my first salary cheque to be paid at the end of September. Horror! Judith said it was quite simple: the grant had been spent and I needed to negotiate a bank loan from Barclays. In a somewhat fearful state I was interviewed by the bank manager, who asked me what I was offering as collateral. All I could show him was the job offer from GEC, He finally agreed to lend me £50, but wagged his finger and said that I

shouldn't go and spend it on a car or anything! Happily, he was sitting with his back to the window – outside which the Austin 8 was very much parked evidence!

A Morris Mini – 429JMJ

I ran that old Austin for many months up and down the M1. Eventually the big ends started to fail, so I did a deal with a scrapyards (in North Essex!) to acquire a replacement engine from a scrapped Austin 8. I was going to remove the existing engine (done) and get it rebuilt with new bearings and a reground crankshaft, temporarily putting the scrap engine into the car for immediate emergency use.

It didn't quite work out like that. The scrap engine was duly installed in Mum's garage, and I took the original engine apart ready for rebuilding. But fate had other ideas. It was now May 1966. Judith and I were to be married in a few months' time, and my mother again lent me the money to buy a proper modern car – a three year old Mini. On the very Saturday that we were driving to the garage to purchase the Mini I started to feel dreadfully unwell. I wanted to pay by cheque, but the garage wouldn't accept that. I had to start an HP agreement but cancel it on the Monday.

But I needed another witness – my dear old Mother – who happened to be the cashier at Luton Hoo, some six miles away. The garage supplied a car, which clearly needed replacement shock absorbers and a driver. I was driven to Luton Hoo, feeling more and more ill as the journey passed, and needed a glass of water on arrival.

We returned with the signed HP agreement and to my amazement, unexpectedly met my sister and brother-in-law on the garage forecourt. My sister had quite strangely known that I was feeling unwell. I looked at her and asked if they could drive me to Luton and Dunstable Hospital emergency – as I felt like death. They duly did so and on entering the emergency department, the ward sister asked what was wrong with me – and I passed out on the floor! I was duly admitted and the next day they removed my appendix. In truth I don't think that was the real problem – long afterwards I learnt to recognise the symptoms – I had just had a panic attack. Meanwhile we had left the unfortunate salesman with an unsold Mini and an ancient Austin 8 on his forecourt. The deal for the Mini was eventually done some ten days later when I emerged from hospital.

Driving – the end game?

Since those early days I have probably owned (or driven) a further 20 cars. I probably gave up car maintenance in around 1975 – primarily because I managed to climb onto the company car band wagon at about that time – finally losing my last company car – a much-loved BMW 318, in 2000. Since then I have owned a SAAB 95; three Fords; a Mazda MX5 sports car, and currently a Honda Civic hybrid.

Is this my last car I wonder? Will I eventually succumb to purchasing a fully electric car? I am 82 and feel fit enough to drive, but doubtless my reactions will be slowing down, and my eyesight may well prove a problem in due course. Perhaps an electric bike would be a good idea for short journeys.

The two best cars? The BMW 318, which felt like slipping on a comfy glove from the very first test drive, and my current Honda, which provides the most comfortable drive to date. But I still miss the competitive cut and thrust of driving on busy roads in a slightly souped-up petrol-engined car, with manual gearchange! Never mind the environment. So Judith's run-around, a Ford Fiesta, is still a wonderful car to drive around town in when I get the chance!

John Wells

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