

MY ADVANCED DRIVING TEST

My Examiner kindly phoned to say that my test drive would start from my home in Polhill Avenue. Rather accommodating, I thought. Upon arrival he turned out to be a tall, very upright and rather large man. Somewhat severe and forbidding some may have thought. He was a retired traffic policeman. My opening quip was to suggest that he had more driving experience above 100mph than he had below. This did not quite get the reaction I had hoped but I am sure that it must have broken the ice between us. In any event I was optimistic and keen to get in the car and get going.

However, before I could open the door he said, "Mr McGrorey, are the tyres inflated to the manufacturer's recommended levels?". How the hell should I know? I gave the tyres a look over and advised the Examiner that they looked alright to me. "Look alright, Mr McGrorey?" he said in a tone that I felt somewhat admonishing, "Look alright? We don't assess car tyre pressures, Mr McGrorey, by whether or not they *look* alright." I pointed out, accurately I felt, that they didn't look flat or anything. He responded by observing that we 'assess the level of tyre inflation by a measuring device designed for the purpose'!

I was on strong ground here. I had just such a device in the boot of the car. It was a Christmas present some years ago. Apparently you stick one end in the cigarette lighter and the other end in the floppy bit that sticks out of the tyre. I checked every single tyre in front of him. I felt somewhat vindicated in my earlier position since no tyre was over/under the recommended pressure by more than a mere 10lbs.

Having pumped up/ deflated the tyres and got my hands covered in mud as a result I was, once again, ready for the off. "Mr McGrorey," he said "when did you last check the adequacy of the water and engine oil levels?" What an amazing question! "Never" I said. "Never?" he replied. "Never" I repeated in an authoritative tone. "How long have you owned the car?" he asked. "Ten years" I replied. "And you have *never* checked the adequacy of the water and engine oil levels?" he said in what I felt was a very doubting tone. "Never" I confirmed, "that's what I employ a garage for". "Then we shall check them forthwith" he announced. "Open the bonnet please, Mr McGrorey".

Things were taking a tricky turn. "I don't know how to" I said. "*Don't know how to open the bonnet?*" he was going a bit puce in colour by now. "Then I shall show you". He opened the driver's door and pointed to a little red lever I had never seen before. "Pull that!" he demanded in very much a policeman's tone. I did as I was bid and there was a terrible clunk from under the car. "Something has dropped off" I said, perhaps crossly. "Mr McGrorey," he said "that is the sound of the bonnet release catch. Nothing has 'dropped off'".

It took me a few moments to actually get the bonnet open during which time the profuse bird droppings on the bonnet lid transferred themselves to my pullover. Underneath was a big lump of metal with bits sticking out of it. It didn't take me a moment to conclude that this lump of metal must be the engine. He pointed to a sort of round thing sticking out among the other sticking-out bits. "Pull that out" he instructed. I did so. He could, I felt, have warned me that it was nothing more than a bendy stick. As it finally emerged from the engine lump it flicked straight, covering my face and shirt in oil.

Time was pushing on a bit by the time I had washed myself and changed both shirt and pullover. My Examiner and I had been enjoying one another's company for nearly an hour and I hadn't even switched on the car radio yet! Anyway, we got in the car and he said "Mr McGrorey, please reverse the vehicle down the driveway and onto the highway". It was important, in my own interests, to point out that going backwards was not my strong point. I urged that any minor mishap that may occur did not unduly influence his overall assessment of my driving abilities. He didn't reply.

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I freely admit that I did back out a bit quicker than perhaps I should. Solely on account of that, the front wheels did not follow the back wheels as intended. Rather, they crossed the grass verge as I turned and dropped, with a bit of a thud, from the kerb into the road. I think my Examiner may have momentarily left his seat.

By now I confess that I was in a bit of a flap. I shot off down the road towards the traffic lights at the end. "Mr McGrorey," he said "do you not wish to comply with the law by fastening your seat belt?" This was unfair. I *always* fasten my seat belt before I start the engine it's just that, on this occasion, I was flapping a bit and had forgotten. I am not, as a result, accustomed to steering with my right hand while fastening a seat belt with my left, certainly not at the speed we were by then travelling. If I had such independent hands I would, no doubt, have become a concert pianist! Anyway, I momentarily lost control and we mounted the pavement. I soon had a grip on the situation, however, and had the car back on the road well before we risked hitting the lamp-post that appeared to so worry my Examiner. Owing to our speed I do believe that my Examiner again left his seat as we fell back to the road.

"Mr McGrorey" he asked "do you observe any hazards ahead?". "Yes" I said as quick as a flash "there are traffic lights rushing towards us" . "And how, Mr McGrorey, will you respond to them?" he asked. "If they are red I shall stop and if they are green I shall bang on through". "No, Mr McGrorey, you will not 'bang on through' if they are green. You will proceed with caution observing to right and left in the event that an emergency vehicle wishes to progress against the lights"

So that's what I did. So cautiously, in fact, that all the cars behind us (who had by now caught up) honked their horns and flashed their lights. If he calls that road safety I am afraid I must demur. As we went down the Goldington Road he asked "Mr McGrorey, what is the meaning of the broken white line that is approximately one metre from the kerb?". I knew the answer to that one! "That" I said "is yet another example of the stupidity of the Highways Department. It denotes the space for maniac cyclists on the assumption that an experienced and competent motorist, such as I, won't see them!" "Perhaps that explains, Mr McGrorey" he said "why you are driving in the cycle lane". I wasn't having that. "I am not driving in the cycle lane" I said "the wheels on the left hand side may be in the cycle lane, but the wheels on the right hand side together with most of the car and its driver are, in fact, on the main highway" Up yours, I thought!

Although I did not consider the relationship with my Examiner as being competitive in any way, I did feel that I had scored a minor success here. This, I believe, accounts for our silent and uneventful progress towards the town centre. As we travelled down St Peter's Street toward the junction with St Cuthberts three factors colluded to create a bit of an incident. The first was that I needed to speed up to just over 40 mph in order to get through the lights before they changed to red. The second was that, from the side of my eye, I caught sight of a friend of mine (a devout churchgoer!) slyly emerging from the Thai Massage Parlour that lurks over the computer peripherals shop in St Peter's. It was necessary to give him a cheery and prolonged wave to be certain that he knew he had been spotted. The third was that, owing to the first two, I did not hear my Examiner tell me to turn left into St Cuthberts. I did, however, hear his second and more urgent request.

It is at times like this that one's driving experience kicks in. I immediately slammed on the brakes and swung the car across to the right hand side of the road before sharply turning left into St Cuthberts. My intention was to provide as comfortable a passenger experience as I could in the circumstances. It is, I concede, true that there was some tyre noise as we negotiated the turn. However, I put this down as much to the condition of the road surfaces in Bedford as I do to the speed of my turn. Inevitably, the turn was quite wide but I consider it an exaggeration to say that I narrowly missed the No 1 bus hoping to make an

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uneventful trip to Woodside. Uneventful trips and Bedford buses are not, in my view, to be mentioned in the same breath.

We carried on down St Cuthberts in silence. I did ask my Examiner, by way of being conversational, if he was happy so far. He didn't reply, just stared out of the windscreen as though lost in his own thoughts. We reached the bottom, facing the Polish church, where I urgently needed some route directions from him. There was nothing forthcoming so I did a lap of the church. Still nothing, so I did a second lap. Then a third lap. On the fourth lap pedestrians started to give me friendly waves of recognition. I waved back, of course. Then my Examiner returned to life and said "Please drive back to Polhill Avenue, Mr McGrorey. By the most direct route available". So I did.

Our return journey was uneventful apart from a slight mishap in Castle Road that delayed our return by twenty minutes. Once back I privately thought that my Examiner looked a bit peaky, as though he were sickening for something. It may be for this reason that he declined to provide an oral report telling me he would 'put something in writing'. I secretly believed that he wanted exactly the right superlatives to describe the way that I avoided the lamp-post and the bus. Anyway, I was absolutely distraught when the report came and it was "SUGGESTED" I had failed and that I should have another test so I will have to brush up on my lamp post and bus avoidance

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