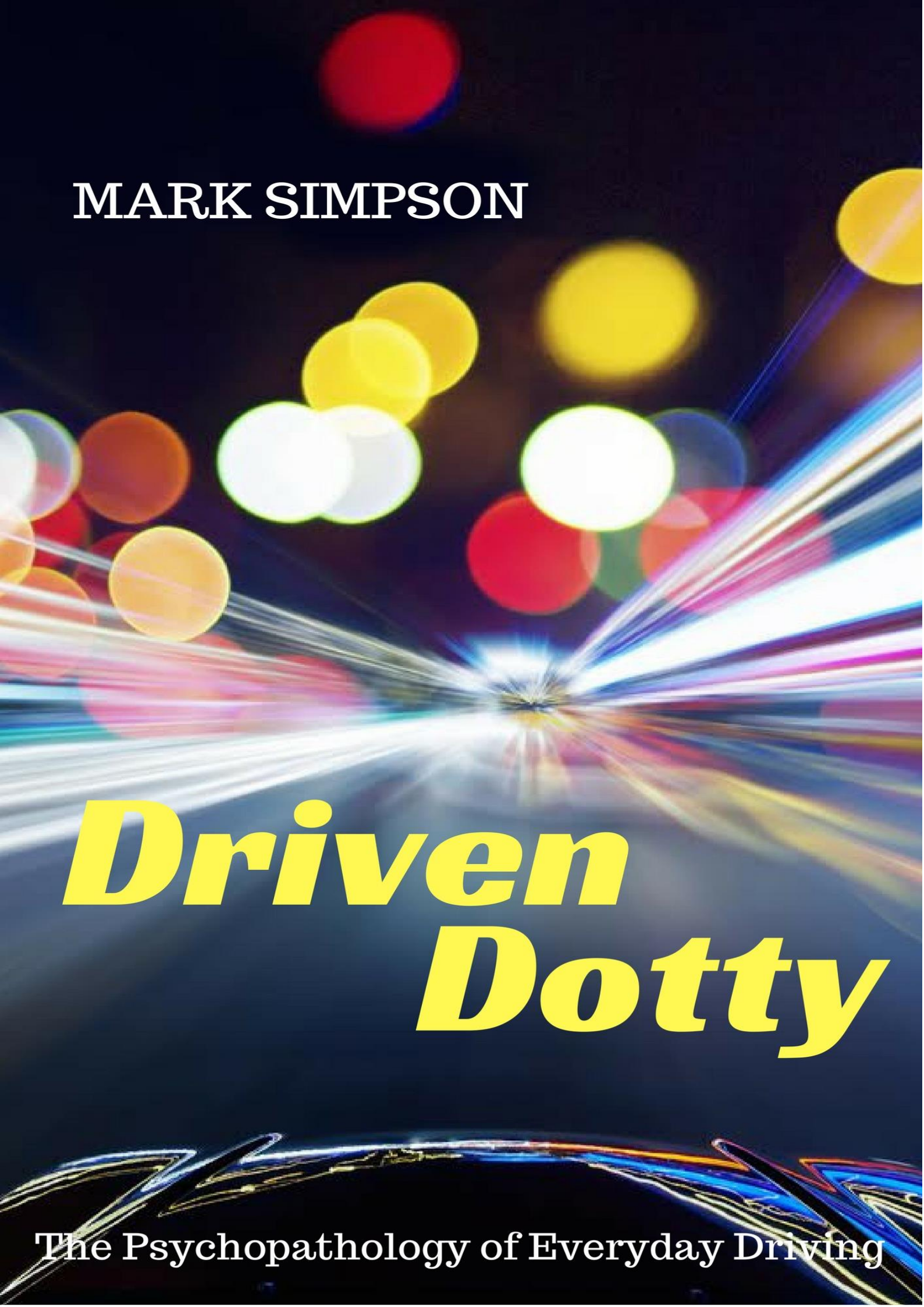

MARK SIMPSON
Driven Dotty
The Psychopathology of Everyday Driving

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The Psychopathology of Everyday Driving

By Mark Simpson

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Cover image by hxdyl

Special thanks to Simon Mason, who originally commissioned these pieces from 2014-16, and to Michael Blighton who's car I kindly wrote off in the 1980s.

www.marksimpson.com

DO YOU FANTASISE about roadside executions when someone fails to indicate?

Find yourself talking back sarcastically to motorway dot matrix signs talking down to you in **HUGE LETTERS**?

Abandon all hope for humanity whenever you visit the Hobbesian horror of your supermarket car park?

Hate cyclists when you're driving – and motorists when you're cycling?

Are you surprised and hurt when your wise advice and running commentary on your friend/partner's driving isn't gratefully received?

If so, then Mark Simpson's *Driven Dotty*, a humorous exploration of the psychopathology of everyday motoring, the strange lusts and loathings that possess us when we get behind the wheel, is for you.

Or perhaps for someone you know, but wish you didn't.

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confessions of a front seat driver

Some people are more proactive passengers than others. Hyacinth Bucket in the classic sit-com *Keeping Up Appearances* takes what we might call a 'hands on' approach to being driven.

'Mind the sheep, dear!'

'They're in the FIELD!'

'Richard, I don't appreciate your tone.'

'Minding the sheep.'

We all laugh at the snobbish battle axe's incessant and insistent backseat driving. Not least because it is meant to be horribly symbolic of her marriage to Richard. He may sit in the driver's seat, but it's definitely his passenger who does the driving. In a nice big hat.

Every driver hates a backseat driver. Until you're a passenger yourself. According to a 2011 survey, 92% of motorists admit to being backseat drivers themselves.

This however didn't stop 51% of them getting angry behind the wheel as a result of advice from passengers, or the same number claiming it was the biggest distraction for drivers. While 14% even claimed they were involved in an accident or near miss as a result of being told to blow their horn in a more refined way, dear, or some such.

The official advice from car safety experts is not to distract or frustrate the driver with backseat driving. They say it could be dangerous – both to your safety and to your relationships: partners are ranked by motorists as the worst back seat drivers. I suppose no one likes being criticised by their partner, particularly if being married to them has made you wonder if weeks in traction in the General Hospital might be a nice break.

But what precisely is a back seat driver though? Well, according to Wikipedia, it is 'a passenger who is not controlling the vehicle but who excessively comments on the driver's actions and decisions in an attempt to control the vehicle.'

Which confirms what I have always known: I'm not a backseat driver.

You see, I never *excessively* comment. There are so many things I *could* say, but I stoically bite my lip instead. Granted, there are still plenty of things that I *do* say, but they are always kept to the *absolute minimum* – and always thoughtfully designed to impart only the most pertinent pearls of my precious driving wisdom to the person fortunate enough to find themselves at the wheel in my presence.

Besides, I don't sit in the back. I prefer to sit up front, where I can see much more clearly what mistakes the driver is making, such as driving too close to the vehicle in front – and then too far away. And what hazards he or she has failed to anticipate, such as the deceptively harmless pensioner stood at the bus stop, leaning on a walking stick, who could suddenly and with *no warning whatsoever* sprint into the road. (And by the way, it needs to be mentioned that sheep in fields *can jump hedges*.)

Sitting up front also means you can more easily communicate with the driver, sometimes using non-verbal signals, such as sharp intakes of breath, grabbing arm-rests or anxiously checking and re-checking the seat belt. Even though I'm not actually Catholic, I usually carry Rosary beads with me as I find counting them loudly and crossing myself can be quite salutary.

And of course, if all else fails, there's always stamping on an imaginary brake pedal with a look of wide-eyed abject terror on your sheet-white face.

I also do my best to help the driver by leaning forwards at junctions and shouting 'YOU'RE ALL RIGHT THIS SIDE!'. Or 'YOU CAN GET A BUS THROUGH THERE MATE!'

When I'm not fiddling with the stereo and the air-con controls. I invariably find that people haven't set these at their optimum levels – and are tuned in to the wrong radio stations. I don't expect any thanks for these little considerations. Which is just as well as none ever comes.

OK, so perhaps I'm just ever so slightly controlling. But honestly, have you seen the way other people drive? It's not my fault that I'm a better driver than them and it would be just plain dishonest of me to pretend otherwise. Not to mention selfish – how are they going to get better if I don't tell them they should use the gears to brake more?

You wouldn't believe how downright ungrateful and rude people can be sometimes. Unfortunately, not all drivers are as open to advice as Hyacinth's husband. I've been yelled at just for suggesting that their screen wash isn't as effective as the brand I use. And that their wiper blades need replacing.

But when that happens I just tell them that they shouldn't talk to passengers and concentrate on the road instead. And adjust my hat

off their trolleys

There's a place where drivers lose all reason and all humanity. A place where not only the Highway Code but the European Convention on Human Rights apparently no longer applies. A Hobbesian world at the edges of civilization, where pedestrians are mere squidgy pin balls to be flipped between car bumpers, where anything goes and nothing is off limits.

Except staying longer than two hours.

I'm talking of course about the supermarket car park. We've all been there. And we're all going back. Even though we really, really don't want to.

According to the AA accidents in car parks are the most common single category of car insurance claims. A cracking 20% of all claims – equivalent to six million – are for damage caused there, and most of these are for supermarket car parks. Though the true figure is probably even higher since many people, mindful of their excess or of losing their

No Claims Bonus, don't bother claiming for minor damage unless it can be proven to have been caused by someone else.

But good luck with that, since according to other research at least a fifth of drivers hitting another car in a car park would just drive off if they thought that no one would notice.

It's true that many supermarket car parks function as meeting places for young tearaways with souped-up hot hatches throbbing menacingly with bass tubes. However, although noisy, these guys are usually relatively well-behaved – perhaps because an expensively lowered suspension tends to make you more careful. The ones you really want to watch out for are the 4x4s with 'Baby on board' stickers in the back window. The main reason people buy 4x4s isn't 'safety' of course – but just so they can speed over speed bumps. And possibly people.

Many drivers instead of slowing down, actually *accelerate* off the Queen's Highway into supermarkets. For them, supermarket car parks seem to be a cross between a track day and the dodgems – WHEEE!!! What's more, they're FREE!!! The fact that there will of course be other vehicles moving very slowly, or stationary – or reversing out of parking bays – only seems to add to their urgent need to get to the wine aisle ASAP and spend half an hour or so looking for a discounted wine that looks dead posh.

Supermarket car parks are also *pavements*, since people have to get to and from their cars – and load them up with their shopping before leaving. Which should give one pause. I mean, you might have thought that even the most reckless of drivers would be inclined to take more care here, if only because by definition they are about to become

pedestrians negotiating the *Death Race 2000* car park *themselves*. But only if you'd never actually used a supermarket car park.

Things are so bad, so red in tooth and claw in supermarket car parks, that local by-laws really should require all supermarket trolleys to be equipped with defibrillators.

Don't let it be said though that supermarkets don't bring the exotic into all our lives. You don't have to travel to the Continent to see people driving on the other side of the road – just go to Tesco, Asda or Sainsbury. And in the Italo-French style, junctions in supermarket car parks have been dispensed with – or rather, the meaning of a dotted double line across the carriageway changed to: 'DON'T LOOK, YOU LOSER! JUST ACCELERATE!!'.

All in all, it's probably just as well that something used in the construction of supermarket car parks *completely disables indicators*.

Another fun past-time seems to be opening your car door without consideration to the one parked next to you, leaving an indelible memento of your intimate inconsideration on their paintwork. You might try avoiding this by parking in the farthest corner of the parking area, surrounded by legions of empty bays. So far away that you actually have to take a bus to get to the entrance. But this never ever works.

Someone will always take the trouble to ignore the acres of empty spaces and drive out of their way to keep your lonely car company by parking right next to you – and then dinging you. Quite often, as an added gift, you will find yourself wedged in by two 4x4s and have to turn yourself into Elastoman to get into your (doubled dinged) vehicle.

And if, by some Biblical miracle, some ineffable stroke of luck, you manage to avoid all these terrifying hazards presented by other drivers when doing your weekly shop, still you will not I'm afraid escape unscathed. You will return to your car with your unexpected items in the bagging area and find that you have been rammed by a rogue shopping trolley.

Probably one thoughtlessly discarded by Thomas Hobbes.

whose road is it anyway?

Like many drivers, I hate cyclists. They're in your way. They're too slow. They're too erratic. They're too self-righteous. They get away with murder.

But when I'm on my pushbike, I hate drivers. They're up your arse. They're too fast. They're too aggressive. They're too impatient. They're murderers.

So you could say I have a balanced view.

As a cyclist I envy the way that drivers are dry and warm and protected by a metal box, picking their noses. I hate the way they can overtake me without having to break an honest sweat – polluting the environment instead.

As a driver, I envy the freedom and fresh-air healthiness of cyclists, the way they filter up to the front of the traffic queue, and don't have to pay anything, or take any tests to ride their pushbike in their Day-Glo underwear on Her Majesty's highway.

And of course, in today's urban/suburban traffic it's quite likely that you'll find yourself at a red light facing the lycra buttocks you took so much trouble to overtake and make taste your exhaust two minutes ago.

When you consider how much running a car costs – and at such moments you really do – this can be a bit humiliating.

Little surprise then that a recent survey of UK drivers found that three quarters of them think that cyclists should have to get a licence before they are allowed on the road alongside cars.

While nearly half (42%) thought that cyclists should only be allowed to use the pavement. This however is currently a fineable offence – though one that seems hardly enforced. When I'm a pedestrian, I hate cars and cyclists.

The survey also found that half of drivers agreed with the statement: 'Cyclists should all have their saddles confiscated'. Okay, I made that one up.

To be fair to drivers, there are a lot more cyclists around these days, on roads that are a lot more choked – and 'calmed', that is, narrowed – than before. It's increasingly difficult to safely overtake cyclists in urban areas. There are more cycle lanes, but often they're not used because of poor layout or maintenance.

Sometimes drivers must feel as if cyclists are being used by traffic management planners as 21st Century versions of the guys with red flags that had to walk in front of the first motorcars.

Also, it needs to be admitted that a significant proportion of bi-pedallists don't seem to think the Highway Code applies to them. And because a license isn't required to ride a bike, and because a pushbike doesn't have a registration plate, that's kind of true.

Yes, cyclists may be fined £30 for jumping a red light – but only if there's an actual bobby stood on the other side of the lights with time on their hands. Frankly, you've more chance of meeting a unicorn than a uniform. Or seeing a cyclist giving hand signals.

Some years ago, in a fit of madness I bought a moped. But I quickly got rid of it when I discovered that it was much slower around town than using my pushbike. Because it was wider and heavier than my bike I couldn't get to the front of the queue so easily. And because it had a registration I couldn't always take the 'shortest route'….

Drivers today have also noticed that cyclists today have become a lot more assertive. 52% of drivers have had an 'altercation' with cyclists – and 35% said they had been on the receiving end of 'road rage' abuse from the pedal-power people.

Who nowadays often have helmet-cams: 'YOU'RE ON CAMERA, MATE!!'.

We've all seen those shaming YouTube clips of drivers behaving badly, overtaking much too close – the Highway Code stipulates 'a car's width' – and then getting shirty or outright violent because the cyclist shouted at them. Usually in Essex: 'WHY WERE YOU IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD THEN, YOU F***CKIN C***HNT?!'

A surprising number of drivers seem to be unaware that cyclists are advised to cycle away from the gutter and, according to Transport for London: 'If the road is too narrow for vehicles to pass you safely, it may be better to ride in the middle of the lane to prevent dangerous overtaking'.

Yes, sometimes there does appear to be a kind of mobile class war going on: the white collar cyclist with almost a passive-aggressive Judge Dredd/Judy complex, chasing after loutish van drivers and goading them into saying or doing something stupid or just criminal on camera.

But generally these clips serve a useful purpose: they allow drivers to see the road from the cyclists' wobbly, exposed POV. In 2014, 113 cyclists died on our roads. According to a survey conducted last year, cyclists experience a 'very scary' incident on average once a week.

And the pedal warrior footage also remind drivers that although they may be riding round in powerful soundproofed, climate-controlled armour with seat-belts and airbags – while the cyclist is just a crumple zone wearing a plastic hat – that there are still potential consequences for their behaviour.

That said, road safety is ultimately the responsibility of all road users. Cyclists and drivers, the vertebrates and invertebrates of the highway, have more in common than just the road they share.

They always think they're in the right.

hairdresser cars on fire

Feeling envious or threatened by someone else's motor? Unable to afford it? Resentful of the pleasure and joy it clearly brings them? Allergic to bold style, design, and nice colours? Frightened of open-top cars because the world can see how ugly and bald you are?

Never fear! There is an easy, cost-free way to instantly feel better and make everyone around you admire and respect your enormous endowment of car knowledge! All you have to do is spit out two spiteful words:

"Hairdresser's car!"

And that's it. Once a vehicle is identified as being the kind driven by over-paid harvesters of head vegetation it is completely dismissed. It has ceased to be a car at all, in fact. It has been outed as worthless and

ridiculous a vehicle as a hair dryer. However much you might secretly want one.

But what does that bar-room phrase 'hairdresser car' really mean? Well, first of all, it's clearly not actual hairdressers as a species we're talking about, since a goodly proportion of, possibly most, hairdressers are women. And the kind of men – and let's face it, it usually is men – who say 'hairdresser's car!' are quite capable of dismissing something as a 'woman's car'.

No, the notional hairdresser of the Hairdresser's Car is implicitly male. But not male enough. And the kind of car they have in mind is found wanting not because it's strictly for chicks but because it's a seemingly 'male' car whose masculinity is suspect. Gay. The Hairdresser's Car is all mouth and no trousers. Style over substance. Pretty but no poke. Intake over horsepower. *Passive not active.*

And it takes a real man to be able to tell the difference between a real car and a Hairdresser Car. Which is why real men are so keen to point out a Hairdresser Car. Sometimes you might be forgiven for thinking that they're a tad obsessed. They're the kind of chap that would have, in a previous age, always been on the lookout for suede shoes, and who became dangerously apoplectic at earrings on earlobes attached to *a man.*

With cars of course this is all rationalised into talk about the handling, braking, torque, acceleration, horsepower. The masterful, manly qualities of a real car that Hairdresser's Cars are sadly lacking in. But this is, to use a technical term, *bullshit.*

Take one of the most famous Hairdresser Cars, the Mazda Mx-5. I happen to own one, which might explain my chippiness. I am also A Gay. But not an actual hairdresser. Because it isn't especially powerful or fast – and most particularly because it is a soft top sports car that doesn't wear apologetic camouflage trousers and is rather pretty – it is, I am told over and over again, an HC.

But as anyone who actually understands anything about cars will know, the Mx-5 is one of the greatest driver's cars ever made, designed for taking winding English country roads at heart-stopping, scarf-fluttering speed.

Nah. Hairdresser's Car, mate.

Ignorance, envy and timidity are what really drives the autophobic Hairdresser Car concept. Take perhaps the most famous HC the Audi TT. When it was released back in 1998 it was a literally shockingly beautiful design. True, its handling and performance didn't really live up to its bold looks, but this isn't the reason it was dismissed as an HC. It was dismissed as an HC because everyone wanted one. And everyone wished they had the balls to drive one.

In fact, I was so envious of them myself I looked for ways to dismiss them too. Though I probably called them 'sales executive cars' instead of hairdresser's cars.

All these years later we've become used to the geodesic good looks of the TT, and used ones are very affordable. Many of the sons of the men who dismissed them frothingly as an HC back in 1998 are now driving them on the way to the gym or the tanning salon. The younger generation

expect stylish design as a matter of course. They want their cars to be fun. They want them to look good – while they go about their business of looking even better. We're all hairdressers now.

Which reminds me, another sin of the HC is that they are most flagrantly not family cars. They're selfish. Selfishly reminding family men of their school-run, family holiday, B&Q chains.

A survey of your actual hairdresser's cars a few years ago found that the most popular car amongst hairdressers wasn't in fact the Audi TT or even the Mx-5 but rather the Mini One. Hairdressers were 3.5 times more likely to drive one than non-hairdressers. On its introduction in 2001 the Mini car was acclaimed by most reviewers, including self-consciously blokey Top Gear, as one of the best-driving, most fun small cars around.

And that, ladies and gents, is probably the biggest, most unforgivable sin of the Hairdresser Car.

It's *fun*.

driven dotty

In an age when there are so many channels to choose from and so many e-distractions to fidget with, there is one station with a very captive, very bored audience. You can't change channels – or even turn it off. And you'd better pay attention because otherwise you might get a summons in the post.

So, as you might imagine, the content doesn't exactly have to try too hard to get your attention.

If you drive on the UK's trunk roads or motorway network you will be, whether you want to be or not, a regular viewer of Dotty TV – those helpful messages and pictograms displayed on those huge dot matrix screens suspended over the carriageway on cantilevered posts seemingly every mile or so.

Officially installed to help manage the road network by giving drivers useful live traffic information, such as warning of road closures or accidents, and also warn of emergency speed restrictions, they are most

often used to display unaccountably annoying generic 'safety' messages such as

'WATCH YOUR SPEED'

Or

'THINK! DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE'

I say 'unaccountably annoying', but it's pretty accountable, really. You're driving on the motorway, you're so bored you could even listen to Jeremy Vine on Radio 2. But Lo! You spy a large, expensive-looking flat screen TV panel in the distance. How thoughtful and kind to install that for the bored driver! And it looks like it has a message on it! A message for YOU!!

Excited you approach this sign, this portent, wondering what thrilling, stirring news it conveys, what exotic auguries it betokens. But as it looms up, it slowly dawns on you that this is not *LA Story* – where Steve Martin is given relationship advice by a chatty freeway traffic flow sign – but instead patronising, useless, and slightly snotty 'safety advice'.

'KEEP YOUR DISTANCE'

Dotty TV is like those 1970s public information films, but without the charming animation, the catchphrases or the cats.

After a hundred miles or so, or even just fifteen, these nannyish exhortations from on high begin to feel like regular, smarting slaps across the wrists by a Highways Agency ruler.

You begin to think dark, crazy, and rather childish thoughts such as: Why SHOULD I keep my distance? Or watch my speed? Or take a break? Who can I phone RIGHT NOW and talk to in a very animated fashion while my fuel runs out? And where did I stow that bottle of vodka?

Part of the irritation is of course the realisation that because you're reading these signs you're almost certainly not the kind of person these Maoist exhortations are intended for. You're being taunted with reminders of the carefree fun that other more decadent drivers are having on the road – while you conscientiously read these bloody messages.

Some are just an insult to reason. For instance, the message:

'TAKE EXTRA CARE WHEN TOWING'

I don't think I've ever towed anything in my life, and I sincerely hope I never do anything so vulgar. But I have a hunch that if someone who is in fact *towing something* needs to be reminded they are *towing something* then they *probably* aren't going to take much care at all – let alone *extra care*. Or read stupid signs.

But come the Bank Holiday weekend I have to read that message a zillion times before I have an overpriced Americano in a Welcome Break.

A YouGov survey a few years ago for motors.co.uk found that 43% of drivers ignore dot matrix signs. Another 4% claimed never to have seen one, ever. Clearly these people are much, much more sensible than me.

The philosophical problem with 'safety messages' is not only that the wrong people read them, it's that in the context they're presented, the

infinite boredom of the liminal space of motorway driving – and on such huge, expensive, portentous signs placed, from the perspective of the driver, literally in the heavens – they are no longer safety messages.

They are bureaucratic fortune cookie slogans exalted into life-changing maxims. You end up thinking about them far, far too much before something more interesting happens, such as picking your nose.

A little research reveals that the signs I'm moaning about aren't dot matrix signs at all. They are actually called Variable Message Signs, or VMS, and began to be introduced to the UK about fifteen years ago. There are now c. 3000 of them along our trunk roads and motorways wagging their digital fingers at us.

The very latest VMS is the 'MS4', which the manufacturer describes as 'offering a full graphics area with a matrix of LEDs in two colours. This makes it capable of displaying an almost infinite range of pictograms and legends.'

Shame that those infinite capabilities are mostly used to tell you

'TIREDNESS KILLS'

Even when a VMS displays potentially useful information such as road closures ahead, it suddenly becomes all tongue-tied and taciturn, after all those miles and miles of pointless advice. They all too frequently just say: 'A1 CLOSED JCN 21-23' without giving any more identifying info, despite acres of unused display room.

Even before the infinite capabilities of VMS, most people didn't know their junction numbers, especially if the road isn't a motorway. They

tend, naturally enough, to go by place names, or intersecting road numbers. I'm convinced it's a deliberate wind-up. You find yourself suddenly shouting something at the Dotty TV you never, ever thought you'd hear yourself say:

'TALK TO ME!!'

signal failure

'That's alright. Don't bother indicating. I can read your imbecilic mind!!'

I often find myself coming over all Victor Meldrew when confronted with the worst offence in the entire motoring universe. *Failing to indicate*.

Well, OK, it might not be *the* worst, but it's certainly one of the most *annoying*.

Yes, I know. Not bothering to indicate does save you the Herculean effort of moving your hand an inch or two every now and again. And it makes it much easier for you to cut someone up. Also, what's the point of going to *all that trouble* of indicating if it just means that you then have to turn the ruddy thing off almost straight away?

Failing to signal is not just lazy and rude. It's dangerous. The US Society of Automotive Engineers estimates that US drivers fail to indicate an

impressive two billion 'FU' times a day, and that this causes up to two million crashes a year – twice the number of accidents caused by 'distracted driving', e.g. using a phone.

Regardless of the risk, the failure to communicate your intentions to other road users makes life more difficult for everyone. On the motorway, the habit of so many drivers for changing lanes without indicating, or worse, indicating *after* changing lanes ('See! I DID indicate!') – or not bothering to let you know they're about to exit as they mysteriously decelerate – makes long journeys seem a *lot* longer.

And also, perhaps, lonelier. Indicators are most of the time the only way of communicating with other drivers.

Perhaps it's because I drive a small car, but there seems to be a direct correlation between the size of a vehicle and the drivers' propensity to *signaphobia*. The bigger the car the bigger the damn they don't give.

Then there's the endless fun to be had at a junction when someone likes to keep you guessing which way they intend to turn. Or even better, they give no 'indication' that they are going to turn at all. Which is one of the reasons why failing to indicate is something that affects pedestrians – and their toes – as well as other road users.

And then we have the Brownian motion of today's roundabouts. So apparently loathe are drivers to communicate their intentions that just closing your eyes and holding your breath and going 'WHEEEE!!!' seems to be the most popular approach.

In fact, the only time you can be absolutely sure that someone will use their indicators is when they want you to let them into a queue of traffic.

It's not an indicator, it's more like a begging tin. Sometimes followed by the brief use of hazard warning lights to communicate 'Cheers Guv!'.

The good old Highway Code tells us that 'signals warn and inform other road users, including pedestrians, of your intended actions'. For signaphobes of course it is other road users and pedestrians' responsibility to guess their intentions.

It goes on:

'Give clear signals in plenty of time, having checked it is not misleading to signal at that time'

'Use them to advise other road users before changing course or direction, stopping or moving off.'

'Cancel them after use.'

The number of people who don't use their indicators seems to be almost matched by the number who leave them on after a rare occasion they did use them – probably when they wanted someone to let them into a queue of traffic a week previously.

Such is my detestation of failing to indicate that I do it when there are no other road users or pedestrians around. Partly because it's possible that I have missed them, even when driving across, say, the Australian outback. But mostly because I know how easy it is to get in a bad habit – and how difficult it is to cancel one when started.

Frankly, at my stage of life it's also a useful reminder to me that I intended to turn off at the next junction.

So imagine my horror when I realised in researching this article that I have regularly been failing to indicate properly at roundabouts. For years. Probably decades.

I was aware that if you wanted to take the first exit to the left you indicated left on your approach. I was also aware that if you wanted to exit to the right, or going full circle you needed to indicate right – and then left after you have passed the exit before the one you want. And was of course scrupulous in my observance.

But – the shame! – I didn't realise that if you were going 'straight over' a roundabout (that is, the second exit) or taking any other 'intermediate exit' you needed to indicate left after you have passed the exit before the one you want.

I'm mortified by this discovery. By rights I should drag myself out of my own car and shoot myself by the roadside.

But then again, I'm sure other road users and pedestrians were able to read my mind….

the lost manly art of map reading

I recently bit the bullet and had a clear-out in my rather cramped car. I freed up a surprising amount of space by getting rid of the yellowing, dog-eared maps cluttering it up with their obsolescence. Including a street atlas of North Yorkshire where I live, several city maps collected over the years (when am I likely to visit *Plymouth* again?) and a 2003 AA road atlas of Britain.

OK, I left one garage-bought UK road atlas in the boot of my car. But I'm not sure why, except perhaps to absorb spillages from my weekly supermarket shop. I honestly can't remember the last time I looked at it. Certainly no more recently than any of the other maps I removed. Call it a large-scale, absorbent safety blanket.

I was a little bit sad, as I felt as if I was losing a part of my past and indeed of my masculinity. I grew up in a world where maps were something that, if you were a chap, you consulted often with a competent frown, pretending to understand them as naturally and completely as

DIY and the offside rule – while wearing a square chin and a chunky wristwatch, like Richard Todd planning a daring raid on the Mohne dam.

Certainly you would much rather consult a map, even one with pages stuck together with sour milk, than *ever* ask for directions. Directions could be wrong, and were anyway likely to be too complicated to remember – no matter how many times the over-helpful pedestrian repeated them to you while you sat there, smiling, nodding and bitterly regretting your mistake.

Most of all, asking for them was an open and public admission that *you had failed as a man.*

But now of course no one needs to ask for directions, because we have a gadget in our car that will tell us where to go automatically and discreetly. And because it's a gadget and gadgets are manly it's OK to be told what to do by it. Even if it strands you in a raging ford or wedges you in a charmingly narrow street.

After a decade or so of widespread satnav use, and particularly the integration of satnavs into smartphones, map reading so twentieth century. It's a lost art. Several recent surveys have suggested that most UK drivers are so reliant on satnavs they don't know how to read a map any more.

A 2014 survey of 1150 road users by Flexed.co.uk found that 77% of people who use a satnav admit they rely on it totally on a journey – with an alarming 63% of drivers not even bothering with road signs when using satnav, let alone maps.

60% admitted they can't even read a paper map, and only 9% said they research the route before taking an unfamiliar journey. Often they have no idea of the route they've taken to reach their destination, while listening to Adele really loudly.

Another survey of 2000 road users by Telenav GmbH published at the end of 2014 echoed these findings with 57% of all ages admitting they couldn't read a map comfortably. But they also found that a whopping 85% of 18-24 year olds say they can't read a map.

Certainly, like middle-aged me, most of these digital kids can't be bothered to reach for a map, find the right page, find where they are on the page, find where they're going to, decode the symbols and colours and navigate the best route between….

Sorry, I lost the thread there – I was so bored just typing that last sentence I had to go and check my Facebook and Twitter feed and play Angry Birds.

Perhaps most alarming of all, the same survey discovered that half of drivers don't even wear wristwatches (you can determine North with one). The *Dambusters* spirit is truly dead.

These surveys usually prompt anxious headlines and editorial soul-searching about the loss of map-reading skills by a generation, and suggestions that map-reading should be included in driving tests. Obviously 'map reading' is some kind of code for 'moral compass'.

A 2013 survey of 24,000 drivers by the good old Automobile Association found a very different, more traditional picture. In the reassuring words of AA President Edmund King, 'most motorists are still turning to maps

when planning car journeys even in the age of high tech navigations systems'.

Perhaps because they were slightly afraid of being told off for being slack, 63% of drivers assured the AA they had used a printed map in the last six months, compared to 60% who had used satnavs, while just over 35% of drivers said they used both satnav and an atlas to plan a route (compared to 9% from the Flexed survey). Only 17% admitted they relied solely on satnav (compared to 77%)

When it came to those lazy, lost 18-24 year olds the AA offered hope, finding that only 43% said they depended on their satnavs alone to negotiate the nation's roads – about half the figure from the surveys a year later, and under that psychologically important 50% figure.

Now, far be it for me to suggest that the AA is worried about falling sales of its famous road atlases, but frankly, any recent survey that claims to have found that more UK drivers use printed maps than satnavs is clearly completely lost.

Even more so than 67-year-old Sabrine Moreau who in 2013 took a 1,800 mile detour through six countries after her satnav malfunctioned. She was aiming for Brussels from her home in Soire-sur-Sambre to pick up a friend from the train station but eventually ended up in Zagreb, Croatia.

And I think we've all been *there*, one way or another.

We all laugh at the stupidity or credulity of zombie drivers automatically following satnav instructions because they remind us uneasily of ourselves, but the reality is that most of the time Google and Garmin

read maps much better than most drivers, male or female. Who, in the glorious pre-satnav past, would often be trying to read them on their laps while driving.

It's time to face cartographic facts and not be distracted by the, er, legend. Printed maps are now pretty much as obsolete as driving gloves, hand-cranks and Richard Todd's pipe. And that's not such a bad thing.

straight down the hatch

Hot. Hatch.

In the world of car porn there is no other conjugation that raises the punter's pulse more than that one – evoking as it does fuel injection, tight handling, firm suspension, snug interiors and accommodating rears.

And amongst hot hatches, the Peugeot 205 GTI is the ultimate car porn star. This year the French stunner, launched back in 1984, when the miners were on strike and Frankie Goes To Hollywood were in the charts, turned an ancient and decrepit 30, but is still widely regarded as the hottest hatchback ever.

It's certainly my favourite car ever. I owned one in the early 90s, round about the time they stopped production in 1994, and I still dream

moistly about it in a way I don't about, say, my old Golf Mk 1 GTI, even though I suspect the Golf was a rather better made car.

I had a 1.9, 205, introduced a couple of years after the 1.6. It simply had to be a 1.9. Not because it had a few more HP than the 1.6 (126 compared to 105), or because it did 0-60 in 8 seconds (instead of 8.7), or because it had disc brakes all round instead of just at the front. And certainly not because it had more torque. But because of that '9' on the badge. Who wants an average 6 when you can have a whopping 9? Especially when you're still in your twenties, as I was at the time.

Apart from the badge, there were other key visual signifiers of your ownership of more cubic centimetres: the alloy wheels were fatter, and you had sexy half leather seats, vs cloth. I became practised at spotting these giveaways from a distance, before I could get a good look at the badge on the side. I'm sure I wasn't the only Peugeot 205 size queen, constantly dismissing 1.6ers as unworthy of my interest.

In fact, being so lightweight – or what safety engineers now would call 'horrifyingly flimsy' – either 205 GTI was a joy to drive, even though neither had power steering (drivers back then were expected to have shoulders when it came to parking). It would take bends with an alacrity and eagerness that was positively arousing. Admittedly the pedals were rather too close together, particularly if you had size '9' feet – but you just had to be careful to operate them delicately with pointy toes.

It was a great car for belting around a city like London before 'traffic calming' measures were introduced, speed humps installed every few feet, and rat-runs closed off – effectively turning London's roads into railways for cars. In addition to being great for engaging the 'safety

power' and nipping around 'obstructions', the 205 GTI would leave most cars standing at the lights, watching your sexy arse disappear into the distance.

It was remarkably practical too. Despite the fact that from the outside it looked like the proverbial rocket-powered roller-skate, a road-legal single-seater with the driver crouched over the sports steering wheel, head almost sticking out of the sliding sun roof, inside it was surprisingly spacious. People with legs could even sit in the back. If you owned a Peugeot GTI you could actually have friends, or a family.

If, that is, you had any time for anything that didn't involve zooming around with a big stupid grin on your face.

But if I'm honest none of these were the real reasons I possessed one. It was the 205 GTi's scorching looks that bowled me over. It was a very, very sexy piece of 1980s styling – quite possibly the definitive one. A kind of supermini American Gigolo with black and red bumper car trim. The wheels were exactly where they should be, in the corners, and it had a very sexual shapeliness to it. I even loved the two-tone plasticky interiors that everyone mocks now. (Though admittedly most of the plastic bits did break off.)

I had a red one, but I wanted a white one, and black one, and a blue one, and slate grey one as well. I thought they were all good enough to eat.

The Peugeot 205 GTI: the tastiest hot hatch ever.

red mist on the carriageway

"Take him over dad!!"

When I was a little nipper travelling in the back of my dad's Big Car on the motorway in the 1970s I would often encourage papa to overtake other road users whom I felt were impugning our family's honour. By being in front of us.

My dad, a good, sensible and careful driver, would wisely ignore my exhortations to give in to the dark side and tell me to belt up. Sadly, when I grew up and found myself driving in London in the 1980s I completely abandoned myself to the dark side, redlining my ego in my red hot hatch.

I was just like Goofy in 'Motor Mania', a 1950 Disney short about a Mr Walker who becomes, behind the wheel, demonic driver 'Mr Wheeler' –

'charged with an overwhelming sense of power'. I had seen this hilariously accurate cartoon on telly as a kid and it had had a profound impact on me – but instead of a warning, I had taken it as a manual on how to drive.

I not only 'took over' other drivers, but muttered, cursed and sometimes outright shouted at people who incurred my displeasure on Her Majesty's highway. Mine, in other words.

In my defence, this was pretty much the only way to drive in London back then. Before red light and speed cameras, before speed humps and the traffic island archipelago, it was dog eat motorised dog. You had to drive with aggression. You had to be 'Mr Wheeler' or else you would be 'Mr Wanker'.

'Road rage' is defined by Wikipedia as 'aggressive or angry behaviour by a driver of an automobile or other road vehicle.' Which suggests that almost everyone driving in London back then was a rabid road-rager.

Thirty years on our roads may have been 'calmed', but they're even more crowded, and road rage it seems is still part of the driving experience for most UK drivers: according to recent research by LeasePlan, 53% of UK drivers had experienced verbal aggression behind the wheel, 76% had experienced aggressive gestures and 73% had been blocked in the road by another driver.

But there's road rage and then there's road rage. The Wiki entry on the subject elaborates: 'Road rage can lead to altercations, assaults and collisions that result in injuries and even deaths.' The term originated in the United States c. 1987-88 when a rash of freeway shootings occurred.

In fact, it was only when I visited Nevada in the 90s and was driving an American friend around in a rental car that I began to realise that I might have a problem. “You can’t talk to people like that here!” he shrieked, white-faced. “PEOPLE HERE HAVE GUNS!!!”

Back in Blighty people were rather less likely to have guns. But that didn’t mean you weren’t going to get hit. Someone I knew drove around with a door pocket full of bolts he would fling at other drivers who crossed him. (He was from the Isle of Sheppey.)

Once driving through Lincolnshire a white van that I had had the temerity to ‘take over’, took me over a few miles later, slowing down and swerving dangerously around the road so I couldn’t pass, while the young male passenger leaned out of the window, screaming and shouting sweet nothings and hurling full drink cans at me. Fortunately, his mate’s psycho driving cancelled out his psycho throwing and the weaponised Tangos exploded harmlessly on the road in front of me.

Then there were a couple of sweaty incidents in North London involving big new Mercs full of gangsters from central casting. On the first occasion I accidentally, ever-so-slightly nudged their rear bumper in a traffic queue. Three shaven-headed heavies immediately got out and surrounded my used Fiat. “Sorry about that, gentlemen, is there any damage?” I asked, pointedly not getting out of the car.

“Nah, but there is now!” one of them declared and kicked my door, hard. I decided it was time to do a U-ey.

A few years later I had ‘taken over’ another Merc, this time driving a BMW. But then quarter of a mile later found myself, as you do, in a

queue for some traffic lights. In my rear view mirror I saw the Merc screech to a halt at the end of the queue a few cars down, all four doors were flung open and not three but four heavies started sprinting towards me. I decided I didn't fancy starring in an impromptu Guy Ritchie movie and instead accelerated off – on the wrong side of the road.

Which was norty, but if I hadn't I might have suffered the fate of a friend of mine who failed to give way to a van driver at the entrance to a car park – who then leapt out of his van armed with a hammer and proceeded, in front of several witnesses, to demolish his car as he sat in it, slack-jawed. Though I'm pretty sure those four heavies would have demolished me as well as my car.

Perhaps the scariest road rage incident I've been involved in though was a lorry driver from the Duel school of HGV driving who took exception to my driving in a tiny sports car at the speed limit in an average speed camera zone in a contraflow system late one very wet dark night.

He tailgated me doggedly for several miles, blinding me with his headlights and then when the contraflow ended and the dual carriageway resumed, though still in an average speed camera zone, overtook me, submerging me in spray, then pulled over into my lane right in front of me while braking, deliberately and potentially fatally cutting me up. For some reason the fact that he was driving a lorry delivering mattresses seemed to make it worse.

By the time this harrowing tale happened to me I'd long grown out of my tendency to 'take over' other road users. But that doesn't mean of course that you won't run into others who haven't. Literally.

the truth about filthy cars

“Just how badly do you treat your car?” asked the step-father of a 20-year-old woman recently in an ‘ad’ for her somewhat neglected gold Peugeot 307 with 91,000 miles on the clock.

“I bet it isn’t as bad as this stinking, petri dish of McDonald’s infested filth my step-daughter calls her wheels” he went on in his unconventional sales pitch. “She has left her car in our carpark and I decided to give it away before it makes me throw up a bit in my mouth.”

The stepdaughter-shaming story about her dirty car got a lot of traction in the media – and also got the apparently irate dad a lot of free publicity for his motoring blog. We all love the shameful joy of a story about a filthy car. Or at least, a car that is filthier than ours.

John, 27, a plain-taking Yorkshireman has seen a lot of filthy cars in his time. “To be honest, some of them made that ‘stinking petri dish of McDonald’s infested filth’ sound quite appetising” he says. Almost

nothing phases him. He has seen humanity in its true colours. And smelt it.

John you see works valeting traded-in cars at a busy used car dealership. He cares for cars that the previous owners have often fallen out of love with some time ago. His job is to make them look loved again – so someone else will fall for them. Sometimes Hercules had it easier with the Augean Stables.

The dirtiest, most unloved car he every had to clean was a Range Rover that belonged to a farmer. "It took four days to clean it," he says matter-of-factly. "I had to start by shovelling the boot out". For his troubles John found himself with a nasty case of ringworm.

Dirty cars can be a real health hazard as well as an aesthetic one. He once caught folliculitis from a Honda Civic. "The previous owner must have had the infection and not worn a shirt – we'd been having a heatwave. Fabric seats are very absorbent."

The filthiest item he's ever found? "Probably a pair of very heavily-soiled frilly pink nickers – stowed under the passenger seat of a Porsche Boxster."

The strangest item? "One very worn fleshy beige high heel, under the passenger seat of Subaru Estate. You would think that the owner would've noticed it was missing!"

John finds lots of ladies' collapsible brollies – a shelf on the wall of his corner of the garage sports three abandoned ones, just from that week. He also finds sunglasses. "People tend to come back for those." Unlike, say, soiled frilly pink panties, then.

"Some of the things people left behind can be quite poignant" says John showing me a Valentines card, still in the plastic wrapper, found in the glove compartment of a Ford Focus. "Did he/she forget to post it? Or was it an 'emergency Valentines card'? We'll never know".

Does he find many condoms? "Nope, never. But I did find lots of little see-through re-sealable plastic bags in a black C-Class Merc." I wonder what they could have been used for?

Bad car odour is a perennial problem. Dog smell is almost impossible to get rid of: "You can try shampooing the carpets and seats but it just ends up smelling of wet dog, which is even worse of course."

Mould smells the worst though. "Very difficult to get rid of it once it takes hold. Often find it in cars that have had kids in them. Milk spilt on fabric seats just seeps through the foam to the bottom where it festers and turns mouldy – then the mould grows through the seat and comes out the top. Once the spores spread it grows *everywhere*, on the window sills and door handles."

Car owner's strategies for dealing with pongs can be eccentric. "The Fiesta I cleaned this morning had *four* air Xmas tree fresheners hanging from the rear view mirror." He reaches into the bin and shows me them: Artic Ice, Black Ice, Strawberry and New Car. All of them ancient and shrivelled.

The worst carpets to clean are the woolly ones in cheaper cars. "You can never get the rubbish out of them it just sticks. Cleanest cars tend to be Prestige cars like Mercs, BMWs, VWs, Jags. They also have better quality carpets, that are easier to clean."

Is there a difference between men and women's cars when it comes to vehicular hygiene? "Men's cars tend to have more rubbish in them, but stuffed into door pockets and into the boot or glove compartment where they can't be seen from outside. Women's cars often have stuff just thrown everywhere and make-up on the controls."

The cleanest car he's seen? "An elderly couple brought in a Jag which was absolutely immaculate. That was the cleanest trade-in ever. They'd obviously ages valeting it inside and out."

Such patience tends to be lacking in the younger generation. "Most just can't wait to get rid of their old car once they've found a new one. And don't seem at all embarrassed about the state they're in when they hand them over. But I can't complain too much as it keeps me in work!"

With that John gets back to combing out the curly carpet in a Fiat Punto that looks like its previous owner was a herd of especially inconsiderate wildebeest.

smoking wheels of fire

smoking wheels of fire

This may sound a little worrying, but I can smell if the people in the car in front are smoking. Even if my windows and theirs are up. I do have a keen sense of smell, but I think the reason I can detect fag fumes so well is that I'm over-sensitised as the result of childhood aversion therapy.

Both my parents were chain-smokers. And they didn't smoke any old sissy cigs, no sirree, they smoked hairy-chested, unfiltered Senior Service – so high tar they could have powered battleships. When our family undertook long car journeys to see in-laws, or to Cornwall for our summer hols, it would be in a Rover full of sweets and tobacco by-products.

Perhaps I'm a particularly delicate flower, but four decades on I still remember how much I hated it. How much it made my eyes smart and my nose recoil every time one of them lit up. I dreaded the satanic red glow of the electric cigarette lighter.

But my parents, like most people back in the 1970s, had no idea of what second-hand smoke (SHS) can do to children's health, and probably were in denial about what it was doing to theirs. If they had known about SHS I think they would have stopped back then – instead of three decades later because they wanted to be able to continue breathing.

A burning cigarette produces 4,000 chemicals, most are pollutants and irritants, 69 of them are known carcinogens. For children, we now know, SHS significantly increases the risk of asthma, chest and ear infections, meningitis and cot death. Smoke in your family car and it becomes eleven times as polluted as a smoke-fugged bar – something which was, mercifully, largely made a thing of the past when smoking in enclosed public spaces was banned in 2007.

But despite the knowledge we now have about the danger of second-hand smoke, and despite nationwide education campaigns, too many adult smokers still insist on sharing theirs with their children when driving. According to the BMA more than 430,000 children are exposed to SHS in cars every week. The Department of Health says that there were 300,000 GP visits and 9,500 hospital admissions in 2011 as a result of children inhaling SHS.

So, from 1 October this year, drivers in England who continue to smoke in cars with passengers under the age of 18 could be fined £50. Which obviously, as a bitter, former un-consensual car smoker, I regard as very

welcome, if somewhat belated, news. Several other countries, including Australia, Cyprus and parts of the US and Canada, already have a ban on smoking in cars with minors.

Simon Clark, director of the smokers lobby group Forest, is less happy however. More sulphurous, perhaps. He told the BBC there was 'no justification' for the ban and that 'the overwhelming majority of smokers know it's inconsiderate to smoke in a car with children and they don't do it. They don't need the state micro-managing their lives.' Apparently writing-off those 430,000 children a week choking on Mummy and Daddy's driving nicotine addiction.

He also claimed that the police won't be able to enforce the ban, and 'will need a small army of snoopers to enforce it.'

Not to worry, Mr Clark! Help is at hand! This spring the police plan to introduce unmarked lorries to patrol motorways and A-roads nationally. A three-month trial last year, where a policeman videos drivers' illegal activities from the lofty vantage point of the HGV, led to the detection of 462 motoring offences. These were mostly texting or phoning or failing to wear a seat-belt – but also included a driver brushing his teeth while at the wheel and another reading a newspaper while in slow-moving traffic.

So spotting and recording adults smoking with children in the car should be a breeze.

Though perhaps the man from Forest has a point. It would be much simpler to ban all smoking in any vehicles altogether, as the BMA has argued.

Apart from eliminating the problem of establishing whether the passengers are under age or not, and solving persistent breaches of smoke-free legislation by shared work vehicles, refraining from smoking while driving when children or passengers are present is not enough to prevent the harmful effects of tobacco smoke being passed onto others.

All those lovely, rich toxins in tobacco smoke are impregnated – along with the lovely, rich aroma – in the plastics, carpet and upholstery of the vehicle, ready to share their love with whoever rides in that car. It's not just my obsessiveness talking – it's a recognised problem with a name: third-hand smoke.

What's more, smoking behind the wheel is potentially dangerous to others in itself. Looking for and lighting cigarettes can be a major distraction, even without the burning stick falling into your lap; smoking while driving may be as distracting as mobile phone use, which is of course already banned. A study in 2008 found that smokers are twice as likely to be involved in a crash as non-smokers, independent of demographic factors and risk-taking.

A total ban would also help reinforce the message about smoking. Even after all these decades of knowing what cigs do there are 79,000 deaths in the UK a year from smoking.

Even better, it would mean that I never have to smell the car in front's fag smoke again.

I realise though that it may take some time for the British public to be persuaded of the need for a total ban on smoking in cars. After all, it was once one of the nation's favourite, if most dismal, past-times. Perhaps I

should move to Taiwan, which plans to ban smoking while driving a car, riding a bike or walking on a sidewalk.

Which seems perfectly reasonable to me.

the blinding blandness of wheeled whiteness

I recently found myself – inexplicably – in a fashionable nightclub. Or as fashionable a nightclub as Birmingham allows. I was the oldest person there, but what struck me about all the bright young things bopping around middle-aged me – in those rare moments when they weren't snapping selfies with their smartphones to post on Facebook – was how boringly dressed they were. Almost everyone was wearing white and black. It was like a catering after-party.

Or, indeed, like the M6 that had brought me there earlier. White, you see, is now officially the UK's 'favourite' new car 'colour', accounting for 22 per cent of sales last year – 550,000 new ghost cars – tailgated by black at 19 per cent. Grey is in third place with 14 per cent, just pipping silver with 13 per cent.

I put 'favourite' and 'colour' in quotes because, of course, white is not anyone's favourite colour. It's not even a colour. Nor is black. They are an *absence* of colour. Grey/silver is an achromatic mix of both absences. Which is precisely why people choose them. You can go wrong with colours. Glaringly wrong. So 68% of new car buyers avoid them.

Today everyone, like the youngsters in the nightclub, is terrified of being tasteless. Or not being 'cool'. Of giving too much away. So everyone is being drearily sensible. Which isn't actually very cool at all. This may also explain why the UK's top-selling car models last year were Ford Fiesta, Ford Focus, Vauxhall Corsa, VW Golf and Vauxhall Astra. Want a portrait of the UK today? Here's a white Ford Fiesta.

White cars, precisely because they have no colour, are better at disguising dings and chips and dirt – their blandness blinds you to their imperfections. They also reportedly hold about five per cent more of their value from new than the market average for used cars; which can be several hundred pounds after three years. In austerity Britain this seems to be a 'primary' factor in new car purchases.

But then, everyone is now living in a house with white walls, white bathrooms, white kitchens and white bed linen. It seems we've all been visited by one of those bossy TV 'house doctors' that tell you to dump your personality in a skip.

People choose a white car because it 'doesn't clash' with their white lives. Forget White Van Man, here comes White Goods Man.

Some have suggested that the phenomenal rise in popularity of white cars – back in 2007 they accounted for just 1.1 per cent of sales – is down

to Apple and the minimalist whiteness of their 'cool' products which have invaded our lives over the last decade.

Perhaps a generation has been brainwashed into believing that white is 'cool' (rather than just cold). But it represents much more than this – a changing attitude towards cars themselves. They're now accessory-gadgets rather than vehicles. 'Mobiles' rather than motors. Their Bluetooth functionality more important than their engine capacity.

While at least silver, last decade's favourite 'colour', recognised and celebrated cars as *machines*, white cars seem to suggest digital boxes with wheels. Or very expensive iPhone holders.

True, 'neutral' colours are kind of where we began with our love affair with the mass-market motor car. Henry T Ford famously dictated you could have any colour so long as it was black. But he only made that stipulation after discovering black took less time to dry – and, in the earlier part of the 20th Century, car painting/varnishing techniques were laborious, taking many coats and even more days. Less time meant less costs which meant cheaper cars which meant more sales.

But even Mr Ford only made this monochromatic stipulation from 1915 until 1926, when demand and also increasing competition saw him reintroduce colour to his cars. The 1920s were a flamboyant, flapper time for car colours. Depression and then war painted the 1930s and 1940s dull. The rocking 1950s saw the introduction of pastels and two and three tone colours.

The swinging 1960s wore shiny metallic paints, including groovy gold. The glam 1970s were verdant with greens, browns and, err, mustard

orange. The power-mad 1980s were signal red, metallic black and cobalt blue. And the raving 1990s were… *metallic teal*. Which may help explain why, by the Noughties, sensible silver had become dominant.

Today's paint technology, having evolved spectacularly from the horse and carriage varnishing techniques employed on early cars, is able to deliver breath-taking, vivid colours of hypnotic depth and clarity, along with impressive durability and affordability. Which makes it bitterly ironic that colour has apparently become something you can only afford to risk if you're an Oligarch, a professional footballer or Katie Price.

But perhaps penny-pinching economics, and safety concerns, will change the colour of cars again – or rather, reintroduce colour. And what a colour! Light yellow-green is the most visible tint for vehicles in all-weather conditions, particularly for that vital WHAT-THE-BLAZES?! peripheral vision. Cars in this 'wincesome' hue are, unsurprisingly, much less likely to be overlooked.

People willing to endure it may end up with lower insurance premiums. Or maybe a future government, looking for further reductions in road accident stats and having noted that the public has already given up on choosing colours for their new cars, might offer drivers VED reductions for adopting it. In which case, the future might be chartreuse.

And everything is going to clash with it. If not actually crash into it.

But it's still better than white.

imperial confusion

When, as a kid in the 1970s, I first noticed the strange inner gauge with the inflated numbers on the speedometer of the new family car I asked my dad, as I always annoyingly did with anything in the car, what it was for. A civil engineer, he explained that it measured speed in kilometres per hour, and that kilometres were used instead of miles on the Continent.

At first I thought this meant that the car would drive almost twice as fast if we went to France on the ferry. When it was patiently explained to me that a kilometre was in fact equivalent to 0.621 miles, I then felt sorry for Continental drivers as their distances were so small and complicated and their speeds so tricky. Fancy having to drive at no more than 112.654 kph instead of 70 mph!

The dual speedometer was appearing in UK cars at that time not to encourage UK drivers to visit Europe – that kind of thing was still strictly for bohemians – but because back in the 1970s the UK was still supposed to be, officially anyway, heading towards the shiny new platinum future

of full metrication, and from 1977 all UK registered cars had to have a speedometer capable of displaying both imperial and metric.

This came about because in the 1960s, engineers like my dad, fed up with our feudal weights and measures system along with manufacturers concerned that their main market was no longer the jolly old Commonwealth but Europe had pressed for change. In 1965 the Labour Government of Harold Wilson, full of enthusiasm for the 'white heat of technology', had announced its intention to abandon British Imperial measures – implemented and standardised in 1824 – and adopt the metric system, with road conversion taking place in 1973.

This, as you may have noticed, didn't happen. The Conservatives under Ted Heath won the 1970 election and this new-fangled socialist road metrication nonsense was quietly parked and eventually allowed to be forgotten, despite taking us into the EEC in 1973. No administration since of whatever stripe has had any enthusiasm for it. Those dual speedometers in our cars are a constant reminder of a more rational future that failed to arrive.

But we didn't really stay in the past either. In the 1980s fuel sales were switched to litres instead of gallons. Though of course odometers remained in miles, and most quoted consumption figures remain in miles per gallon. To add to the fun, regulations on emissions, which have become increasingly important of course, are metric (g/km).

Hence UK motorists in the second decade of the 21st Century move through a twilight world that is neither here nor there, neither quaintly imperial nor usefully metric – just a daft, unintelligible blur of both, with no destination in sight.

Horribly symbolising this, from last year road signs showing height and width limits were required by law to also cram in metres and centimetres as well as feet and inches (this had previously been optional). Good luck reading those at speed – and getting them the right way round.

Alas, this was not to soften us up for full metrication as some pints and pounds fetishists feared – there are still no plans for it – but rather an attempt to reduce the embarrassingly large number of foreign metric lorries getting stuck under imperial bridges.

So we now have an incoherent bi-lingual weights and measures mess where road design and construction as well as car design and manufacture is now metric, but distances and speed and weight restrictions are imperial, with width and height restrictions in imperial *and* metric. Tachographs and speed limiters are metric, and so are motorway emergency markers, and car manuals. But distances and speed limits for road vehicles are only in imperial.

Surprisingly, possibly shockingly, there are however kph signs on our roads right now. The light railways built in the last thirty years, such as the Tyne & Wear Metro, the Docklands Light Railway and the Manchester Metrolink operate entirely to metric standards – and speed limit signs for trams running on public roads have a nice black-and-white diamond around them to avoid confusion. And panic amongst the little Englanders.

Britain is now the only country in Europe or the Commonwealth that still defines road speed limits in mph. Metrication advocates argue that not only is the UK out of step with pretty much everyone except the US, but

that metric speed limits offer a more versatile range of speed limits – because, as I learned as a kid, a kilometre is less than a mile.

Our colonial cousins Australia and Canada took the plunge and successfully switched back in the 1970s, when we said we were going to but then got cold feet. And in 2005 the Republic of Ireland completed its transition, leaving us looking like the butt of a casually racist joke.

And of course we're completely out of step with the US anyway. The US is a vast country and the most powerful and wealthiest one in the world, so it can do pretty much as it pleases. The UK isn't and can't. Besides which, American measurements aren't actually imperial – the War of Independence predates the 1824 British standardisation that created imperial units. So their gallons, for instance, are 17% smaller than ours. (But don't try telling them that.)

And the good old British mile is of course actually Roman – the *mille passus* – and imported back into Britain by that bloody Frenchie William of Normandy. Not to mention that British scientists and engineers such as Newton, Watt, Joule, Faraday and Kelvin contributed to the metric system.

It's well past time we gave up our imperial pretensions and renamed our weights and measures 'British Parochial'. Or just pulled our finger out and finally metricated our bloody road system.

the etiquette of denting

When it comes to minor bumps when parking are you a bit of a Penny? When no one's looking?

In the long-running TV sit-com *Big Bang Theory*, Penny the failed actress and Leonard's on-off girlfriend, asks "What's so great about being grown-up? Have insurance, pay mortgages, leave one of those little notes when you hit a parked car…"

Penny's friends don't share her *laissez faire* approach – especially when she lets slip that she broke one of their wing mirrors.

According to a recent survey, one in five UK drivers are Pennys – admitting that they have damaged another car and scarpered without making the owner aware of the incident, despite this being not only not terribly grown up but also rather illegal.

Though, actually, men were much more likely to admit Penny-like behaviour than women – 28% compared to just 16% of women. Perhaps

women drivers are much more responsible than men. Or perhaps they are less likely to admit it when they're not.

Clearly no one is perfect, however. Out of the 1,057 people surveyed, 100% of respondents had damaged another car by accident. And of those that 'dented and ran' over a third admitted they didn't feel any guilt, despite over a quarter admitting that they had made a noticeable amount of damage to the other vehicle.

Young people aged 18-24 were the least likely to own up to a bump, with just over a third denting and running. They were also the least likely of all groups to feel bad about it. Perhaps Penny was right: being grown up isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Though of course young people may also be less inclined to own up to a bump because they are already paying punitive car insurance premiums. And even reporting a no-fault dent to your insurer – something insurers often instruct you to do – can result in a hefty hike despite not claiming, as one young driver found out recently, when her premium jumped by a third for reporting a dent-and-run wheel arch scraping.

Minor dents and scrapes are reportedly an increasing problem. It's estimated that there are now more than 500,000 car parking collisions annually, 1,400 a day, costing £716M a year – a rise of 4% since 2010. Car parking bumps are now second only to rear-end shunts as the most common kind of car accident. Hardly surprising the way some people drive in car parks.

This may not be because we're getting clumsier but because cars have got bigger, and parking spaces have either stayed the same, or are more

likely to only meet the minimum standard. Over 20 years the width of cars has increased by a hefty 16 percent, meaning the average British car is now around two inches wider than the Department for Transport's 5ft 11in minimum width for on-street parking bay spaces.

You might be forgiven for thinking the popularity of electronic parking sensors and cameras would have helped us avoid bumps and scrapes, but their effect seems to have been cancelled-out by modern car designs which often have much more limited views than in the past.

It's all very well paying extra for a cool reversing camera, but it might be better to be actually able to see out the rear window of, say, your Range Rover Evoque – for free. Or out of the front of your VW Passat CC.

And whilst I'm moaning about the modern world, I should mention that another problem is that car bumpers are no longer bumpers. At least not in the way they were in the 80s when I began driving. Instead of solid bolted on rubber lumps they are now effectively painted and shaped parts of the bodywork. Which is great news for bodywork shops. Very bad news for everyone else.

As you may have worked out, I had Penny tendencies when I was younger and lived in London. I wasn't *always entirely scrupulous* about leaving a note if my bumper touched the bumper of the car in front while parking.

I didn't in truth feel tremendously guilty about it – no one ever left me a note for the minor bumps and scrapes on mine. And besides, I'd spent time in Paris. Where parking was so tight, Parisians drivers would habitually make room for their own car by merrily ramming the car in

front and the car behind. BANG! BANG! And never leaving a note, nor even a bunch of flowers.

To an Anglo, *everyone* in Paris is *tres* Penny.

pedal to the metal

There are few fully-clothed pleasures greater than the solitary, blissful one of driving to one's favourite music.

Pop on a beloved tune in the car and the world becomes a movie to your soundtrack, choreographed by your gear changes and pedal work, conducted by your talented hands on the wheel. Everything seems right and revvy in the world. Because, for once, just once, you literally set the tempo of life. You are DJ to the world.

Sometimes, when just the right track is playing and just the right stretch of road is unspooling before you, it even seems like the whole point of your existence and indeed the entire arc of human civilization has been to make it possible for you to sing along badly to 'Paradise City' by Guns N' Roses at the National Speed Limit.

But watch out! There's something in the road ahead! My god! It looks like a middle-aged academic! And he's flagging you down!

So he can criticise your music collection.

"The car is the only place in the world you can die just because you're listening to the wrong kind of music," says Warren Brodsky, Director of Music Psychology at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel (who also perhaps deserves an honorary chair in the Drama Dept.) Mr Brodsky recently published the first textbook on how music can affect driving habits, "Driving with Music: Cognitive-Behavioural Implications" (Ashgate Publishing Company).

Essentially his argument is that the music you like is the music that will kill you. "Whether it's Beethoven, Basie or Bieber is irrelevant," the professor says. "Ideally drivers should choose tunes that do not trigger distracting thoughts, memories, emotions, or hand drumming along to the beat while driving." In other words, music that evokes a response from you is the wrong kind of music to listen to in the car.

He writes: "…the optimal music for drivers to listen to are pieces with a moderate level of emotional energy (as intense emotional qualities of either positive or negative valence causes unwanted maladaptive driver behaviours)".

A study he conducted with 85 drivers aged 18 found that 98% of them made driving errors (such as speeding and tailgating) when listening to music. Worryingly, however, 92% of them made mistakes when listening to no music at all. When listening to Mr Brodsky's own soothing playlist

of 'safe music' only 77% made a driving error. So 'safe' music seems to be better than no music.

What was 'safe music'? Apparently, a blend of easy-listening, soft rock, and light jazz instrumental and vocal. Mr Brodsky should obviously be a Melody FM DJ.

Previous studies have suggested that 'boom cars' in particular and loud music in general decreases a driver's ability to react to sudden movements and make decisions – reaction times diminished by up to 20 per cent in a Canadian study when a person was subjected to loud volume. (The effects of flashing LED dashboard lights and furry dice was not measured.)

Another, not terribly scientific study conducted by Confused.com used a driving app called MotorMark to monitor the driving habits of eight drivers over 500 miles. It concluded that listening to hip-hop and heavy metal music produced high risk driving habits, such as speeding, fast acceleration and last-minute breaking.

The most 'dangerous' songs included Johnny Cash's 'Get Rhythm', Snoop Dog & Wiz Khalifa's 'Young, Wild and Free' and… Guns N' Roses 'Paradise City'.

The 'safest' included Elton John's 'Tiny Dancer', Jason Mraz 'I'm Yours' and Coldplay's 'The Scientist'. Though some might be forgiven for wondering what the point of living was if it meant having to listen to Coldplay.

Face facts, it's probably only a matter of time before we're banned from playing music we actually like in our cars – or have to pay a higher

insurance premium *not* to listen to droning tones selected by the academic DJ, Mr Brodsky.

Personally, I think they should ban passengers first. They're a bad enough distraction in your own car, but even worse in other people's. Whenever you're being held up by someone's dawdling it's always a car with two heads bobbing away above the front seats as they have a good old natter – and tut about the really impatient man in the car behind them listening to Guns N' Roses.

Very loudly.

moving music

While looking for an in-car mobile phone holder recently – an endless task since none of them ever seem to really work – I came across something which for the first time in years threatened to actually make that little, forgotten horizontal slot in the middle of your dashboard useful.

It was a holder that, instead of sticking, intermittently, to your windscreen or attaching to your air vent, thereby rendering something useful fairly useless, cunningly inserts itself into your CD player. Assuming of course that cobwebs, dust, uneaten crisps and total disinterest haven't already sealed it up.

I mean, who can be bothered to find a CD and load it into their CD player these digital days? Who has the time, or the energy? Worse, when you've finished listening to *The Best of Steps* and have no more need for it you have to reach over and press eject *and put the bloody CD away*. Or throw it into the passenger foot well.

Even car makers, who tend to be rather conservative and slow to adapt, have begun to notice how few drivers are using those slots. Only a third of cars worldwide are predicted to have a CD player in 2019. Many car models launched in the last few months have either offered the CD player as an optional extra – or, in the case of the Citroen C4, the Skoda Yeti, the Vauxhall Astra and several Hyundai models, have abandoned it altogether. CD player sales in cars are expected to fall by 80% in the US by 2021 – finally catching up with the plummeting sales of CDs themselves.

Likewise, more and more aftermarket stereo head units have begun to appear without that slot. The car CD player is on its final track – though it may of course start skipping before it reaches the end (one of the effects of storing unboxed CDs in your passenger footwell).

It wasn't always this way. In-car CD players used to be the very height of sophistication and desirability. When the first factory-fitted CD player was debuted in a Mercedes Benz in 1985 it seemed like the acme of modernity and luxury. Never mind that early car CD players tended to jump more than a box of frogs on a hotplate as a result of road vibration. Or that ambient car rumble and roar meant that you couldn't really appreciate the hi-fidelity of CD. (Ironically, it's only now that cars are nearly quiet enough to appreciate CD quality that we've all junked them for tinny compressed file formats.)

Until the arrival of the in-car CD player the compact cassette deck ruled supreme. In fact, up until 2010 they were still part of the standard fit of one car (the Lexus SC430). Introduced in 1964 by Phillips, who also

brought us the CD player, the compact cassette found its way into cars in the early 1970s, inaugurating an era of C90 mix tape drive tunes.

A forty-year innings isn't bad going, and is rather better than CD players will probably manage. Perhaps it was those two little wheels in the middle, but compact cassettes and cars seemed to have been made for one another. Despite the horrors of de-snagging an unspooled cassette from the innards of your tape deck at 70mph.

Besides, cassettes were utter perfection compared to the crappyness of the eight-track tape players that had preceded them, and which continued to be pushed by US car manufacturers such as Ford in the 1970s. Introduced in the mid-1960s, eight-tracks were a bit cheaper than compact cassette players, but much, much worse. If Fisher Price had made a tape player it would have looked like an eight-track, but would probably have sounded better.

There was however a worse 'music on demand' car entertainment system than eight-track. This was Motorola's 'Highway Hi-Fi' in-dash turntable that played 7-inch 45-rpm singles. Introduced in 1956 they jumped around and ruined records until being withdrawn in 1958. If eight-track was Fisher Price, this was Looney Tunes.

But then, Motorola (the name derived from 'motor' and 'Victrola') had introduced the first commercially successful in-car radio in 1930 – and of course radios are the most successful form of in-car entertainment of all time. Costing an eye-popping quarter of the price of a new car, Motorola's first effort, the 5T71, was still much cheaper and practical than one introduced by Chevrolet in 1922 – with an antenna that covered the car's entire roof. What's more, because ignition noise suppression

wasn't invented until 1927 you could only listen to Chevrolet's monstrosity with the engine off.

Motorola's radios quickly became the standard, and mass production, and the arrival of transistors in the 1950s helped dramatically reduce the size and cost. By 1963 over 60% of cars were fitted with radios – and in the US over a third of radio listening happened in the car. This was the highpoint of the AM era. (FM was introduced in 1952 by Blaukpunt, but didn't become common until the 1970s.)

Some of us might feel slightly nostalgic for that simple unalloyed crackle, wow, and flutter with all our present day frantic bluetoothing.

For their part Motorola diversified into semi-conductors and in the 1990s and early Noughties went on to great success with the very thing that is now wreaking such havoc on car stereos: mobile phones. But it's a fickle market – Motorola lost billions in the late Noughties and the brand was bought by Chinese electronics giant Lenovo. Who recently decided to drop the Motorola brand from their products.

So it came to pass that the great and mighty hi-tech ICE giant Motorola have ended up on the scrap heap of history even before car CD players.

Not to worry. A vast new fortune and empire is awaiting anyone who can come up with a *mobile phone holder that actually works*.

boys' toys

In the latest James Bond film *Spectre* Bond has a new car. An Aston Martin DB10. It looks very nice and very sleek. But it's nothing like the DB5 that first appeared in *Goldfinger*, back in 1964 and which I had a Corgi scale model of, complete with spring loaded ejector seat and plastic machine guns that emerged from the headlights. A highly-prized toy which I played with for much of the early 1970s, imagining myself all grown up and in the driving seat.

I'm sure it's a much better car in every way than the DB5, and has even better gadgets fitted as standard, but the reason the DB10 is nothing like the original Bond car is because boys are nothing like they were back then. Cars are not the coveted, magical things able to transport you to manhood they once were and probably no boy is going to play with a DB10 Corgi scale model making brum-brum noises.

Not even James May.

In 1983, the year I took my driving test, 82% of 16-24 year olds were learning or had learned to drive. It was a rite of passage, particularly for young men – a driver's licence was a badge of adulthood, declaring that you were a 'man of the world' even if you were still a virgin and weren't legally able to vote or order a pint in a pub.

Three decades on that figure has fallen to 64%, driving tests are down by 200,000 in the last four years, and seems likely to continue to fall, especially for young men, according to a report from the Independent Transport Commission and Office of Rail and Road. 15% of non-car owners aged 17-29 say they don't want a car in the future compared to twice as many (32%) of non-car owners aged 30-42 saying they do. It also found that car usage amongst under 30s, regardless of car ownership, is continuing to fall.

The report found several reasons for the decline: the rising cost of car insurance – which can be twice as much for young men as for women – and the rising cost of car ownership was cited by a third of young people. "How can young people possibly afford to run a car?" said one 28-year-old male from London. "If you manage to get an older car it's no advantage because you pay more road tax and burn more petrol."

An increasing number of young people are going to university and accumulating debts while real wages and employment rates for young people falling in the last ten years has made them more unaffordable.

Meanwhile concessionary travel, advance rail fares, car-sharing, and car clubs are cheaper than running a car. The quality of public transport in urban areas is also improving – and more young people are living in urban areas.

The report mentions other reasons why young men in particular are driving less, such as they form partnerships and become fathers at later ages compared to women, they are more likely to cycle – and are less concerned with personal safety than women. It also speculates that the theory test may have made driving licenses more difficult to obtain for working class males.

But perhaps the most interesting finding was that car ownership, especially of high end cars, no longer leads to higher status in the eyes of *other* young people. Even if they have an ejector seat. Cars are becoming less attractive than alternative gadget-rich consumer products, such as smartphones – which also happen to make using alternatives to car ownership, such as Uber and BlaBlaCar, easier.

Alternatives which, unlike driving a car, allows you to continue uploading your devastating selfies to Facebook.

Not only are smartphones more personal than cars – you always have your smartphone with you and your friends will always see it – but also, in an age when young men are much more visually-conscious than in the past, the kind of car you are likely to able to afford, unless you're a professional footballer, is probably not the kind you want to be seen in. And even if you can afford a flash car you probably won't be seen in it very much.

Worst of all, it's not you that gets the looks – it's the car.

As one 19-year-old builder in Manchester put it: "I like strutting around the town – let's face it – in a car it's the car people look at not you – when you're walking people notice what you're wearing and how you

look. Although I say it myself I put on quite a good show – I take great interest in fashion."

Today's young men have fallen out of love with the motor car and in love with themselves. Probably the only DB they've heard of is David Beckham.

one foot in the grave – the other on the brake

You're stuck behind a MG Rover that is going a little slower than you would like. It's driven by someone with white hair, glasses, and perhaps a hat and driving gloves. They are taking their time at junctions and traffic lights while peering over the steering wheel like that 'Kilroy Was Here' Second World War graffiti that they are probably old enough to have drawn themselves.

Suddenly the idea of bringing in compulsory re-testing of drivers who are over 70 becomes very appealing. Anything that thins out those doddery drivers from our roads must be a good thing, no? Especially now they're getting so crowded.

Every few years, usually after some gruesome collision reportedly caused by an older driver, sections of the media launch a BAN OLDER DRIVERS NOW! campaign. Polls are conducted in which, unsurprisingly, most people who are not themselves older drivers say that people who are older drivers should have compulsory re-tests when they turn 70, and every three years after.

Currently, drivers over 70 have to renew their license every three years, but there is no medical or driving test. They only have to declare that they are fit to drive, and that they meet the minimum eyesight standards.

There is also no upper age limit for driving. In 2015 there were 230 UK licence holders over the age of 100.

Earlier this year Prince Philip, aged 94, drove the President of the United States and the First Lady, along with the Queen of England, in his Range Rover. Though admittedly it was only 400 yards and on private – or rather, Royal – land.

Older drivers are certainly becoming more noticeable. As the number of younger drivers is falling, the number of older drivers on our roads is rapidly rising. In 1975 only 15% of over-70s had a licence. By 2010 the figure had risen to nearly 60%. Over the next 20 years the number of male drivers over 70 is predicted to double, while the number of women drivers will treble. By 2030 90% of men over 70 will be behind the wheel. By 2035 there will be c.21M older drivers on our roads.

This seems like a terrifying statistic. Until you realise that despite the tragic stories you've read about in the papers – often involving a confused pensioner driving the wrong way down a dual carriageway – older drivers are not necessarily more dangerous drivers just because they're older.

In actual, statistical fact older drivers are no more likely to be involved in collisions than other drivers.

Research by the RAC Foundation suggests drivers aged 75 and over make up 6% of all licence holders but account for just 4.3% of all deaths and serious injuries. By contrast, drivers aged 16-20 make up just 2.5% of all drivers but 13% of those killed and seriously injured.

Older drivers are less inclined to speed, or take risks – or be distracted by gadgets. Many older drivers avoid driving at night, in the rain or on motorways. Just 7% of over 65s admitted to using a mobile phone while driving, compared to 21% of drivers in general. Only one in 10 over-65s said they had looked for something in the glovebox while moving, compared with twice as many drivers of all ages.

Older drivers are also more likely to have an eye test once a year than the rest of the driving population.

Perhaps most counterintuitively of all, older drivers are half as likely to have memory lapses while driving – the 'how did I get here' syndrome – than younger drivers. (Though perhaps older drivers felt less free to admit such lapses than younger ones.)

The RAC did however find that some drivers over the age of 70 struggle at high-speed junctions, high-speed roundabouts and slip roads – locations where drivers are required to look around quickly and make quick decisions. Another study by Swansea University, published in September this year, confirmed these findings.

The Swansea University study also found that older women are more likely to have small accidents when doing tight manoeuvres. Older people are also more likely to be involved in accidents involving other older drivers, suggesting they make similar errors.

Forcing older drivers to get re-tested has been tried in Australia and Denmark without improving results.

Educating older drivers about new risks they may face and encouraging them to refresh old skills and developing new ones, rather than singling

them out and subjecting them alone to compulsory re-tests, is generally accepted as the best way forwards. Though perhaps as the road safety charity Brake have suggested, a compulsory eyesight test when reapplying for your licence – regardless of age – would be sensible.

The older you get the more your independence and social life tends to depend on your car, if you have one. It's something you can rely on when everything else is failing. Men in their 70s make more trips as drivers than do men in their late teens and 20s.

Of course, this may mean that some older drivers refuse to voluntarily give up their licence – even when they really should.

But it also means that younger licence holders should be less keen to deprive older drivers of theirs simply because they're older – and show some consideration to more mature road users slowing them down.

Particularly since one day that crumbly old bastard dawdling in front will be them.

white nights

Is it just me, or are the nights getting brighter?

Driving on UK roads at night seems to be getting more and more difficult and squinty – as the lights on other cars become more and more insanely powerful.

Modern HID, LED, and now laser headlights, are fantastic if they're attached to the front of the car you're driving. Being at least 50% brighter than traditional halogens they make bluish-white daylight out of night-time. But not so much for anyone who has to look at them. They're as bright as oxyacetylene torches – and feel like they're fusing your retina.

Even when they're dipped they seem to be on main beam. It's difficult to see anything else except the burning glare of those lights – and then,

once they've passed, it seems for a second or two like you can't see anything at all. Particularly of course if you have ordinary, wimpy halogen lights, like me. Because I drive a little, low-slung car I tend to be more easily dazzled than most. And perhaps it's also a function of age – after 40, the time your eyes take to readjust after being dazzled increases. But then again, I'm not the only middle-aged driver on the road, or the only person who drives a diddy car.

Undipped, or badly-adjusted headlights, particularly on older cars or vans, and fog-lights used illegally to pose in perfect visibility, used to be the bane of my nocturnal driving. But now it's perfectly-aligned, completely legal headlights on brand new cars that are the problem.

Especially on 4WD cars that rub up behind you, kindly flooding your car and your wing mirrors with the light of twin white-dwarfs, allowing you to see the bones outlined in your hands nervously clutching the steering wheel.

OK, I exaggerate a little, but due to their wave pattern, these headlights are extremely penetrating – it's why they're so good at showing up the road ahead, for the driver fortunate enough to be sitting pretty behind them rather than cowering in front of them.

And while I'm moaning, let's not forget those dazzling LED sidelights or Daylight Running Lights that now loom up in your mirrors night and day, since DRL were made compulsory on new cars in the EU in 2011. And those Sauronic high-level brake lights that seem to cover the back of some cars now, making your eyes bleed whenever they touch the brake pedal.

The latter always seem to be driven in front of you by someone foot-tapping along to their favourite drum and bass track, apparently blissfully unaware that the Highway Code (Section 114) stipulates that in stationary queues of traffic you should always apply the parking brake and, once the following traffic has stopped, 'take your foot off the brake to avoid glaring road users behind you.'

Perhaps that should read: 'to avoid road users glaring at you.'

Then again the same section of the Code says that 'You must not use any lights in a way which would dazzle or cause discomfort to other road users, including pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders.' Which in my book would mean many drivers of new cars, particularly VWs and BMW 4WDs, never driving at night ever again.

Despite quieter roads, night time driving carries a higher risk of collision per mile. So it's important to take even more care at night and show even more consideration for other road users. The Code says you need to make sure your lights are working and properly adjusted, and that you should keep your headlights dipped when overtaking until you are level with the other vehicle and then change to main beam if necessary, unless this would dazzle oncoming road users. You should also take special care to spot cyclists and pedestrians.

If you find yourself dazzled, slow down, and if necessary stop.

If like me, you find yourself being dazzled and having to slow down a lot, you might want to visit 'Lightmare', a possibly slightly Luddite but popular campaign against dazzling modern headlights. It was originally started by the late Ken Perham, a gregarious London cabbie who became

fed up with being blinded by modern headlights. (And unlike me, he was sitting high if not so pretty in his Hackney Carriage.)

The website includes medical data on why the blue-white light from HID is particularly dazzling, why the EU standards for new headlights are dodgy: like the ones for NOx emissions they were set in the lab rather than the road. It also includes some suggested solutions – such as polarising the light from HID and diffusing the light from LED.

Alternatively, you could just get a car with HID lights. But if you do, please try not to drive right up behind me.

Otherwise you'll see me shaking my X-rayed skull at you.

traffic triffids

Are you sitting uncomfortably? In an endless queue for your local traffic lights? Lights that seem to multiply in numbers weekly? Good. Here's a fairy tale that will brighten your dreary day.

Once upon a time in Wales, a set of lovely brand new traffic signals were installed by those clever wizards in the traffic engineering department at a tip-top cost of £800,000. However, instead of thanking the council for their kindness and thoughtfulness, the ungrateful residents and businesses whinged and moaned about the severe congestion which descended on the town after this upgrade.

The council, naturally, took no notice and refused to admit any error on their part – until the lovely new lights failed for a few hours. And, like a bad dream fleeing with the arrival of the dawn, the traffic jams that had plagued the town, simply evaporated.

The council was forced to agree to something incredible, something quite unheard of: a lights-off trial. There was a miraculous and immediate drop in congestion and journey time, queues disappeared on all the approaches, and the predicted chaos and anarchy of the doom-merchants failed to materialise. Instead drivers were observed being courteous and slowing to allow pedestrians to cross.

It's a lovely fairy tale isn't it? We all know that it couldn't happen in real life. Traffic lights once installed are *never* removed – they only breed.

Except it did actually happen, in Portishead, in 2009.

Similar successful schemes in Drachten in the Netherlands and Bohmte in Germany scrapped over 80% of their traffic lights.

'Seeing Red' a new report by the Institute of Economic Affairs think tank claims that four in five sets of UK traffic lights should be removed. That along with speed bumps and bus lanes this mania for traffic lights damages the UK economy. It estimates that a two-minute delay to every car journey ends up costing the UK about £16B every year.

It also argues that traffic controls don't increase road safety but have in fact the opposite effect, by making road-users rely on third-hand instructions rather than first-hand judgement: 'The most obvious example is the traffic light: in taking our eyes off the road, it flouts the fundamental principle of road safety: to watch the road.'

While it should probably be remembered that the IEA has an ideological axe to grind – and seems in its report to regard traffic lights and speed humps as Stalinist symptom of 'command and control' – they do have a point. In the town where I live a key roundabout on the ring round was

recently replaced – after enormous and year-long disruption caused by the roadworks – by a set of blindingly expensive, blindingly complicated and blindingly bright traffic lights.

There are so many of them – and of course they're LED – that when you approach, even in what passes for daylight in the north east, all you can see is RED!!!!. Or GREEN!!!!. Or ACCELERATE!!!! (as some people seem to understand amber).

And naturally, traffic queues are much worse than they were before. You have to admire the council's persistence. They introduced a universally-loathed 'throughabout' at another location a few years back – a throughabout is an ingenious piece of traffic engineering. Essentially, it's a perfectly good roundabout ruined by an unnecessarily complicated layout and… traffic lights.

Traffic lights are the Triffids of our road network, mushrooming regardless of utility or popularity, or the nightmares they can cause. From 2000 to 2014, when there was little growth in traffic volumes, the number of traffic lights increased by 25%. The number of junctions controlled by signals has risen to c. 15,000 with a further 18,000 pedestrian crossings.

The world's first traffic light was installed in London in 1868, near the Houses of Parliament. It was gas-powered and manually operated by a policeman. Essentially based on railways signals (complete with semaphore arms) it was not a great success – it exploded after a month, injuring the Bobby operating it.

The first (again manually operated) electric traffic light was installed in 1914 in Cleveland, Ohio – with two colours, red and green and a buzzer to warn of changes. Los Angeles installed its first automated traffic signals in 1920. Manufactured by Acme, and immortalised in Looney Tunes cartoons, they combined semaphore 'Stop' 'Go' arms with red and green lights. A loud bell played the role of today's 'amber'.

In 1967 Toronto succeeded in computerising, with the help of pressure pads and the telephone network, all the city's traffic lights, essentially inaugurating the modern system of traffic control. And our current traffic nightmares.

Perhaps though we've finally reached peak stop signal. As Hans Mondermann, the famous Dutch traffic engineer pioneer of shared space schemes, said: 'We only want traffic lights where they are useful and I haven't found anywhere where they are useful yet.'

The IEA clearly agree with this sentiment. They advocate that a high proportion of traffic Triffids should be replaced by filter-in-turn or all-way give-ways. 'Many bus lanes, cycle lanes, speed cameras and parking restrictions should also go. Culling such traffic management infrastructure would deliver substantial economic and social benefits.'

Yes, that's all very well, but one, vital question remains unaddressed: with all those traffic lights gone, where *will* we find the time to pick our noses

smartphones & stupid people

Remember the Japanese Tamagotchi craze of the Noughties? Remember how we all laughed at the foolishness and childishness of the little hand-held digital pet that demanded constant attention and 'feeding', otherwise it would 'die'?

Well, we've all got one now – but we call it a 'smartphone'. And it's much more demanding than the old Tamagotchis – so much so that they've convinced us that we are the ones that will die if we don't devote ourselves to them. Smartphones are, like, totally fascinating. Soooo cool. Amazing. Literally. Seriously. Really. THIS!

In truth, smartphones are jealous, vicious little digital pets – such fiendishly well-designed distractions that there's very little that can compete with them. Your partner, your job, your kids and even a fast-moving, very heavy lump of metal, glass and rubber, tend to get neglected. *Tamagotcha*!

You might feel you'd die without your smartphone, but actually your smartphone might kill you. Earlier this year a 32-year-old woman from North Carolina lost her life in a head-on collision with a recycling truck, while using her phone to post on Facebook how happy Pharrell's 'Happy' song made her.

Reportedly she had also managed to upload some behind-the-wheel selfies before the fatal collision.

This kind e-distraction may be behind a sudden rise in road accident casualties. In the UK the number of deaths on the road increased last year by 4% to 1,775. The number of serious injuries increased by 5%, to 22,807, and a total of 194,477 people were killed or injured – the first increase in overall casualties since 1997.

And it's not just distracted drivers, it's also distracted *pedestrians* that appear to be behind the rise. The number of accidents caused by both drivers and pedestrians 'failing to look' has risen by 12% over the last decade, according to figures from the department of transport. Across all reported road accidents, failing to look properly by all road users was the most frequently reported single contributory factor to a crash, being named in 44% of accidents, compared to 32% ten years ago.

In accidents where a pedestrian was killed or injured, pedestrians failed to look properly in 59% of cases. Which begs the question, how many people have been run over while staring at their phones by a driver also staring at their phone?

Road safety campaigners have blamed both drivers and pedestrians for being glued to their gadgets. Edmund King, President of the AA in

addition to cautioning on how some car drivers may be becoming complacent in their increasingly comfortable, gadget-filled cars, also identified the rise of the 'iPod zombie' as a serious problem.

'Pedestrians who have earplugs in or iPhones out,' he told The Times recently, 'they are listening to music or texting and they are not concentrating on traffic on the road. Walk down the road and 50% of people are on their phones. One wonders what we did before the mobile phone. Maybe we looked around a bit more.'

Indeed. Today's road user might be forgiven for thinking that pedestrians can't cross the street now without updating their Twitter status as they go, gawping and jabbing at their screen as they shuffle absent-mindedly over a four lane highway, trying desperately to think of something witty to share with their online friends.

Perhaps a solution would be to make cars look like really cool apps? Then they might actually be noticed by today's i-Zombie pedestrians. I mean, who would want to admit they were run over by Instagram or TripAdvisor?

The AA has, more sensibly, called for road safety to be taught on the national curriculum. The Institute of Advanced Motorists urged the government to reintroduce road safety targets which were dropped by the coalition government in 2010. The transport minister Andrew Jones has reminded us that thanks to new laws there are increased penalties for using a mobile phone at the wheel: three penalty points and a £100 fine.

But I have a hunch that the only real solution to our current state of techno-hypnosis is going to be even more technology.

Such as the new roadside apparatus that detects when mobile phones are being used in cars. Currently being tested in Sussex, it uses a Vehicle Activated Sign (VAS) and a mobile detector which can't be set off by pedestrians on their phones. The sign flashes a warning if a vehicle drives by with someone inside using a mobile phone.

Presumably something along the lines of 'GET A LIFE!!!'

I fear however, that whatever the warning is it still won't be noticed until they find a way to mirror the message on the screen of the phone user.

At the moment, it can't differentiate between a driver and a passenger, and officially the purpose of it is meant to be educational, though this may change in the future as the technology becomes more accurate.

Personally, I think these i-Zombie detectors should be made less accurate – they should also flash at pedestrians staring at their phones.

Of course, the final solution to the Tamagotchi epidemic is total surrender – in the form of fully-autonomous cars, which will allow drivers to devote themselves fully, legally and safely to fiddling with their phones when on the road. At the moment however we're stuck in a transitional period, where the technology has made driving deceptively easier, our cars more boring, and our phones impossible to ignore – but we're still supposed to be fully present and in charge.

Frankly speaking, too often we're not – or don't deserve to be.

Once widely-introduced, driverless cars are estimated to be likely to reduce deaths on the road by up to 90%. Of the three Google driverless cars involved in accidents during testing in the last six months, human error was found to be at fault in 100% of them. Usually they were rear-ended by distracted humans.

Probably updating their Facebook page with a photo of a Google car.

mx-5 love

I hate my car. I hate the way I'm blinded by other cars' headlights. I hate the way all the dirt and water on the road ends up covering it, turning it into a submarine on motorways. I hate the way I can't see past pretty much any other vehicle I'm behind, or alongside. Or in front of.

I hate the way I have to be so careful with the bottles in my supermarket shopping because the cramped boot is not very deep and the lid is terribly thin. I hate that it isn't very fast, except on roundabouts. I hate getting in and out of it in a kind of half limbo dance that will undoubtedly result in an early hip replacement op. I hate how noisy and exhausting it is over long distances – you always arrive feeling you've driven twice as far as you actually have.

And most of all, I hate the way I can't have sex in it because there's only two seats and they're buckets.

But I love my car enough to put up with all of this moany aggravation and more. Because my car is itself pure sex. You see, my car is an MX-5. If you already have one you will know exactly what I mean and slap me on the back. If you don't, you will probably be covered in bitterness and envy.

Yes, you may scoff and say love is blind even if it's nifty with a pair of scissors, but Mazda's famous 'hairdresser' roadster, launched way back in 1989 and made in Hiroshima, Japan, is the best-selling two-seat convertible in history. There are now nearly a million satisfied customers wearing a smile that can only be called post-coital.

Still sceptical? Here's that well-known lover of dinky underpowered cars – Jeremy Clarkson:

'Nothing on the road will give you better value. Nothing will give you so much fun. The only reason I'm giving it five stars is because I can't give it fourteen.'

So what do I love about my Mk 2.5 MX-5 exactly? I could talk about its responsiveness, about how its lightness and approximate 50/50 weight balance means it has nearly neutral handling. How rufty-tufty bends just see it coming, sigh, and surrender. How it is a car which connects you, sensually, to the road in the way no other car I've driven does. (Though this is also why it can be exhausting – all that fun and frolicking wears you down in middle age.)

Or I could talk about how it is the uncanny distillation of great British and Italian sports roadsters of the 1960s, such as the Triumph Spitfire,

MG MGB, Alfa Romeo Spider and Lotus Elan. But with an engine that actually starts.

But really, if there's one thing I can boil my MX-5 love down to it would be this: a cloth hood you can open and close with one arm while still seated. The MX-5 is a convertible perfectly suited to squeezing out the maximum exposure to daylight and fresh air in the vagaries of the UK climate.

The MX5 is only really, orgasmically, giggly fun to drive with the top down. This is after all what it was designed to do – to scoop up the sky and suck in the 360-degree speeding landscape while surging around corners. Even reversing is a thrill in the MX5: you turn around in your seat and you can see right over the flat rear, as if it were a 1950s Italian speedboat.

Driving the MX 5 top down in the UK is a blissful, illicit, almost kinky joy which you know is ultimately doomed to be cut short. Which is why I always distrust people who have an MX-5 as their second car, one which they only really use in the summer at weekends. I'm sorry but you have to suffer in it the rest of the year to earn and deserve the intense pleasure it gives you on those gold dust sunny days. Sorry, *day*.

And Mazda seem to agree with me about what really makes an MX5.

After going seriously astray with the 2005 Mk3 or NC version, which was too big, too heavy, over-powered, too quiet, and too comfortable – and most blasphemous of all offered a *coupe version with a powered retractable hard top* – they have just launched a Mk4 or ND

version which is a return to the MX-5's Mk1 roots. Smaller, slimmer, shorter in fact than any MX5 before. It's proper dinky.

This makes it even more responsive and pleasurable to drive, according to early reviews. But *much* more importantly, this means that the cloth hood is also smaller and even easier to raise or lower one-handed.

And there are no coupe versions

incompletely combusted

‘Can hate be good?’

This was the question posed ten years ago in an animated ad that was as impossible to avoid as the products of incompletely combusted fuel in built-up areas. It began with noisy, dirty diesel engines flying over a pretty, super-saturated green countryside which rebelled against them.

‘Hate something, change something’ choruses the soundtrack, and a flock of shiny, newly-designed, silent, clean – and green – diesel engines arrive from Japan and the countryside greets them in joyful raptures. Diesels have saved the world!

‘Grrr’ as the promo was called, was tremendously popular. It won several awards, including *Adweek*’s ‘commercial of the decade’. More the point it also succeeded in boosting the sales of diesel engine Honda Accords from a mere 518 units in 2003 to a gagging 21,766 in 2004.

Now, I'm sure that Honda's newly-designed diesel engines were rather better than the ones that went before, but the basic premise of the ad and more particularly of government and EU policy since the early Noughties that diesel represents a 'green' fuel that we should all embrace, was total *organic fertilizer*.

But embraced it we have. A decade on and half of all UK car sales are now diesel, the total on our roads rising from 1.6M in 2004 to 11M of the clattering things today. With the result that London is one of the most polluted cities on earth (again). Stung into action by whopping EU fines for being so filthy, its mayor Boris Johnson recently announced a £10 surcharge starting in 2020 for diesels entering the capital. Ever the populist, he also offered support to *The Sun*'s campaign to 'compensate' diesel owners for scrapping their cars. Diesel owners who have been in effect subsidised by petrol drivers for the past decade or so through a VED based on CO2 emissions.

London is unlikely to be alone in spurning diesel. By the end of the decade 18 cities across UK are expected to fail to meet EU clean air targets for NOx, or nitrogen oxide, thanks to 'green diesel'.

Hate something? Diesel engines emit ten times as many fine particulates as petrol engines and up to twice as much NOx**.** Particulates damage the lungs when inhaled and can cause permanent stunting of children's lung growth. NOx pollution is linked to 7,000 deaths p/a. Last year the UN's WHO declared that diesel caused lung cancer and was as serious a risk as passive smoking. Research estimates that diesel-related health problems cost the NHS more than ten times as much as comparable problems caused by petrol fumes.

Cheery cartoon stuff indeed. Ironically, the animated diesel utopia ad of 2004 showed a rural setting, where diesel engine pollution is minimal. It's actually in densely-populated urban areas with high volumes of traffic – i.e. where most people in the world now live – that the real problem lies.

The compression-ignition engine, to give it its technical name, was originally designed by Rudolf Diesel 1897 to replace stationary steam engines – and was intended to run on coal dust. It is, to be sure, an engineering marvel. Lacking a carburettor or spark plugs, instead the high compression of the air in the cylinder heats and ignites the heavy, paraffin-like fuel when it's injected. The higher compression ratio of the diesel engine combined with the higher density of diesel fuel means that modern diesel engines have an impressive 20-40% MPG advantage over petrol.

Which is the reason why they were touted as 'green' when combatting global warming became *the* headline environmental issue. Because of their greater efficiency they produce less CO2 per mile than petrol engines. Theoretically, by switching to diesel we would be helping to save the planet from man-made climate change. But you don't have to be a climate change sceptic/denier to consider this a very theoretical, perhaps almost *metaphysical* concept, given all the other variables.

And there's nothing theoretical or, alas, metaphysical about the impact of the other things that diesels emit in much greater abundance than petrol engines. It's in the very nature of a 'coal dust' diesel engine that it will be 'dirtier' because the fuel is not fully-combusted.

Shockingly, it's precisely for this reason that European standards for diesel exhaust have not been as strict as for petrol engines. It's also increasingly clear that much-touted modern technologies to control diesel pollution don't work very well in the real world, as opposed to the laboratory – or cartoon commercials. A 2011 government test to measure emissions from vehicles in everyday use found that while petrol emissions had improved by 96%, emissions of NOx from diesels have not decreased for the past 15-20 years.

Remember those other variables I mentioned? Well it turns out that the soot or carbon that diesels emit may be second only to CO2 in climate-warming. And 70% of carbon emissions in Europe, North America and Latin America are from diesels.

Full disclosure: I've always hated diesels. I used to live atop London's highest hill. A keen cyclist I would usually find myself gasping behind a diesel belching stinky soot straight down my sporty throat. As I type this probably a zillion particulates are embedded deep in my lungs, fizzing away and hastening the day I develop cell abnormalities.

Can hate be good? I don't know. But *schadenfreude* at the fate of smug diesels can be bloody brilliant.

fine dining over the fast lane

Leicester Forest East, situated – or rather, squeezed – between J21 and J21a on the M1, contains a slightly interesting paradox to those sufficiently undulled by the boredom of motorway driving and an entire family pack of Haribos to notice it.

Not its appearance, which now looks like a very average 1960s motorway services that has seen better days, but because it is in actual geographical fact *west* of Leicester and there is no Leicester Forest. On investigation however, it turns out not to be a Harry Potter-esque Platform 9 ¾ situation. The name is down to the slightly disappointing discovery that the services are located east of somewhere called Leicester Forest West.

And that, you might think, is all there is Leicester Forest East. Along with the usual bland modern quick fix carbs/fats/caffeine outlets, including a

Burger King, KFC, Baskin Robbins, Dunkin' Donuts, Krispy Kreme, Harry Ramsden and a Starbucks.

But you'd be wrong. Very wrong. LFE has a past. And *what* a past! When it opened fifty years ago on February 15, 1966, LFE was the most glamorous place to eat on the motorway – and very possibly the whole of Leicestershire.

It boasted a 692 seat Terence Conran-designed silver-service restaurant occupying the bridge above the carriageway, called 'The Captain's Table', fitted out with luxury carpets, ocean liner décor and a deck-like balcony. There were even waiters in sailor suits and a pianist on a baby Grand. And no, I'm not making this up.

Today, motorway gourmands stopping here have to make do with a pricey panini from Waitrose.

Although it now looks like a fairly non-descript unloved 1960s giant concrete bus-stop, LFE was an architectural novelty in the UK when it was built. Based on an Italian design used on the Autostrade, and placing terraces at each end of the two-storey bridge-come-amenity building, it was rather 'Mod'.

Frozen food retailer Ross had won the Ministry of Transport tender with their audacious design and a promise to bring fine dining to M1 motorists. They had decided that motorway services represented an exciting new business opportunity as well as a good way to publicise themselves – hence the fishy-themed restaurant, and their efforts to make the food as good as possible. By all accounts, they succeeded.

In a nice touch, the first private motorist customer, Andrew Thorp of Church Road, Leicester, and the first lorry driver, Derek Lashbrook, of Greenwich, London received a voucher entitling them to a free meal there every 15 Feb until 1991.

But the worth of those vouchers expired much quicker than anyone anticipated – the golden days and the good intentions didn't last very long. With more and more motorway services opening in the late 60s, the 'glamour' and novelty of eating on the motorway rapidly declined into a chore – while competition rapidly increased. And the competition was on price, not quality.

Inevitably, the Captain's Table hit the iceberg of economic realities and began to go under. It soon found itself sharing the commanding bridge at LFE with other service amenities, while the distinctive terrace was closed for 'health and safety' reasons.

In the 1970s, Ross reluctantly gave up on glamour altogether and introduced a betting shop, ice cream stall and a separate Happy Eater restaurant. Eventually Ross threw in the motorway services towel and sold LFE to the current operator, Welcome Break in 1985 – who are of course a byword for culinary delight….

While it's almost certainly a more convenient and much quicker pit-stop with more choice in its modern 'food court' than back in 1966, it's apparent that the glamour of LFE – rated 3/5 burgers by this motorway services review site – has long since fled. As it has of course from all other motorway services.

But sometimes it is still occasionally glimpsed, usually in the newsagents, buying crisps and a fizzy drink. In a recent BBC report on LFE's 50th birthday, Suzanne Chapman, who works in the newsagents, recalled the celebrities she's served: 'Terry Waite, Steve Davies, they've all been through'. Some were shyer than others: 'David Frost came, but he didn't come to the till, he sent his driver and stood in the background.'

Perhaps Frost, who of course became a celebrity in the same decade as Leicester Forest East, was busy reminiscing about the Captain's Table and the waiters in sailor's outfits.

gauging the future

Before we all started zooming around cyberspace and endlessly fiddling with games, apps and cool lock screens on our smartphones, the most exciting sense of interactive information – of informed control – that most people who weren't actually fighter pilots or engineers or micromanaging dictators got was from the dials on their car dashboards.

Needles and lights and counters monitoring speed, revolutions per second, oil temperature, oil pressure, water temperature, outside temperature, inside temperature, humidity, mileage, voltage, fuel, time – all facing towards the Sun King (or Queen), the big boss making it all happen, aka The Driver.

Constantly, relentlessly conveying information to you so that you can make correct, life-or death decisions as you slice through time and space. And so that you can feel incredibly important.

Driving is the original God game.

As a sprog, when my dad was in the market for a new car, I would scrutinise the brochures he brought home and tot up how many dials, lights and switches there were on the dashboard. Whichever car had the most was clearly the most car and I would then nag and needle my dad to get it. Wisely, he always ignored me – otherwise we would probably have ended up with a Ford every time.

To this day I'm still incredibly jealous that a school chum's dad's car had a dial that ours didn't – I think it was for wind speed, or something. This may explain the unnatural pleasure that a dial that looked like it belonged in a Second World War Italian fighter plane and mounted right in the centre of the dashboard of my first car, a Fiat 127 Sport, gave me.

But times change. As the level of technology and safety gear has rapidly increased in cars, so has the amount of information that you are inflicted with, whether you want it or not. Paradoxically, increased automation – traction control, cruise control, lane-keeping, collision-warning etc. etc. – has meant more information about the automation. And of course, climate control, sat-nav, Bluetooth calling, and infotainment systems have also increasingly hogged our dashboards and distracted our attention further and further from the road ahead.

Drivers have changed as well. They are much less likely today to be 'gaugist' boy racers such as I was twenty years or so ago – and much more likely to be women. And in a world where information overload is almost universal and round the clock thanks to our constant pocket companions more and more drivers find the level of persistent information and 'direct control' model of car instrumentation, where

each instrument and function has its own display/control, less and less flattering and instead something of an insult.

Our brains have been tamed by algorithms which tell us that we are God, but do most of the godlike work for us.

This is what excites people about the idea of the Apple Car. They are hoping that not only will it be really cool, and really compatible with their iPhone for once, but that it will have a dashboard that is 'intuitive' – like their mobile phone and thus the rest of their lives. The cluttered 20th Century unreconstructedness of current car dashboards are a terrible shock. It's like walking into a pop-up micro-brewery in your man-bun and finding Oliver Reed at the bar.

This male designer recently wondered aloud why car dashboards are all 'so wrong'. Essentially, he believes the 'direct control' model of car UI has reached the end of the road and that information and controls should only be offered when needed: 'My car's temperature is only important to me if it is trending in the wrong direction. Alert me when that happens, otherwise I don't need to know.'

A lofty, senior executive ('don't bother me with trivia') outlook is one that probably many people today, used to delegating responsibility to algorithms, would agree with. Though when he also says he doesn't need to know things like his speed 'all the time' you have to remember that he lives in California, where 'driving' is a very relative, very conditional concept. Or as he puts it: 'My morning commute is all about Zen, so my dashboard should be blank.'

But the future is already here. Or at least a slightly retro version of it that appeals to me. The new Audi TT's digital instrument panel combines the functions of a central multimedia interface monitor and conventional instrument cluster in a huge 12.3 inch TFT display where you need it, right in front of you behind the steering wheel. So basic driver information, such as speed and revs, as well as directions, maps and music and calling info are finally in one sensible easily, *quickly* glanced-at place rather than scattered all over.

Although it does away with analogue gauges, it reassuringly renders the speedo and rev counter dials in virtual form either side of the display, combining the best of both worlds – digital-analogue. Audi have dubbed it a 'virtual cockpit' – the TT is a 'sporty' car that attracts 'sporty' drivers – and it appears to merge the experience of driving with playing a computer game. Which totally gets my sadult vote.

The UI control menus are described by Audi as 'intuitive', but probably won't satisfy our Californian designer or most iPhone enthusiasts, since much of the on-screen info is persistent (you will know what speed and revs you're doing at all times). Worse, there's no touch screen.

There are however two modes: 'classic view', in which the speedo and rev counter are big grapefruit dominant; and 'infotainment' in which the map and 'tainment stuff dominates and the gauges shrivel to the size of plums.

I think I'll go with 'classic view'.

invasion of the driverless cars

Look out! They're coming! And they're driving really, really carefully!

This year driverless cars will arrive in the UK. As part of Government-sanctioned trials, the ghost cars will be quietly and sinisterly creeping around selected parts of Greenwich, Bristol, Coventry and Milton Keynes. Though some would argue that Milton Keynes was conquered by robots years ago.

The UK Government also recently announced that a driving licence would not be necessary to use a driverless car and expressed its intention to make Britain a world centre for driverless cars.

This may ultimately result in much safer roads, less congestion, faster travel times and cheaper insurance, as well as a life-changing boon to disabled and elderly people. But it will be the beginning of the end of the

world as we've known it for most of the last century. Albeit in a very boring fashion.

Yes, for the time being the only commercially available self-driving vehicles are harmless open-air shuttles for pedestrian zones that operate at an underwhelming maximum speed of just 12.5 mph. But don't be fooled.

Proper car manufacturers are planning to change all that. Nissan aims to launch driverless models by 2020. Tesla claims that their cars will be 90 per cent capable of autonomous driving this year. And Google believes that its Level 4 autonomous cars – that is, totally self-driving – will be available to the public within the next 3 to 5 years. One of their zombie cars already passed the Nevada state driving test in 2012. The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers believes that by 2040, 75 per cent of all vehicles will be autonomous.

Worse, the dastardly road robots are here already, or at least their fifth columnists in the form of all those 'driver's aids' fitted in production cars today. Self-parking and emergency braking are common, while adaptive cruise control is available on a wide range of production cars – using cameras, lasers and radar, it can control your distance from the vehicle in front as well as, on some models, staying in lane.

Some cars such as the latest Nissan Qashqai can now even 'read' speed limit signs – just in case you don't have a passive-aggressive partner to do that for you.

But perhaps the most dangerous fifth columnists for the driverless cars invasion are the humans who enthuse about them. They paint a picture

of a safe, stress free, luxurious future in which we're all Lady Penelope, driven around by our robot Parker, who never ever makes any mistakes – and doesn't see what's going on in the back.

Or else they think they they're going to be David Hasselhoff in *Knight Rider*, with his trusty, rather tasty KITT. Or Tom Cruise in *Minority Report* in his sexy autonomous Lexus. In reality, driverless cars will be much more like the chirpy, crappy robot taxis in *Total Recall*. But without the joystick override that Arnold was able to grab having uprooted and ejected the annoying robot driver.

Once humans are unplugged from the business of driving cars and become instead glorified luggage, the automobile will stop being an extension of the human body/spirit/ego. Instead of some strange, techno body-art, this wheeled thing that humans have had a torrid, Freudian love-affair with for over a century will become a long distance automatic pick-up machine, shuttling people around like stock in an especially gigantic Amazon warehouse. While they update their Twitter status with pictures of the view of the strange 'Real World' glimpsed from the car window – and buy more stuff online.

One man's utopia is another's 'carpocalypse'. Cars will vanish from the sides of our streets and car sharing will become usual rather than exceptional. Uber + driverless cars = the end of mass car ownership. Taxi drivers, chauffeurs, lorry drivers and much of the ancillary motoring business of car dealers, garages and spare parts will be scrapped. Essex will become depopulated.

With fewer cars and greater efficiency, consumption of fuel is likely to fall dramatically, and along with it government revenue. People awaiting

organ transplants might have to wait longer, since traffic collisions are the main source of human spare parts.

There will be no going back. There's no reverse gear on car automation. Once surrendered to robot cars, human agency is gone forever. I don't mean that in a Stephen Hawking AI Skynet takeover sense – though that as well – but that eventually most driverless cars, like Google's already, won't have steering wheels or pedals.

They would only get in the way, and be a reminder to the passengers of their obsolescence. Most of all, it would be frankly crazy to allow people who haven't actually driven anything for years except their finger over their smartphone – or *Grand Theft Auto* – to take control of a vehicle *in an emergency*.

We don't need to wait until all or even most of cars on the roads are driverless. Once there are significant numbers of them on the road they will change the way human-operated cars drive – making them drive more like machines. Which is very bad news when humans do it. Studies have shown that human drivers sharing roads with autonomous cars copy the autonomous cars' driving styles and leave less space between the vehicle in front. But are not able to stop nearly as quickly.

As the number of driverless cars on our roads rise, insurance premiums for human operated cars are likely to rapidly become prohibitive, especially when compared to goody-goody autonomous ones that never nod off, smoke, eat, drink, do their hair, use their mobiles or look for a Genesis CD while driving.

Perhaps the scariest development is the way autonomous cars could have 'ethics settings' to deal with the 'trolley bus dilemma' – do I kill that child or my passenger? Split second decisions which were usually a secret between you and your god will have to be legislated and coded.

We will have made machines not just our unpaid and unloved chauffeurs but also our judges and executioners.

the driverless driver

Driving is a wonderfully useful thing. It gets you from A to B without breaking a sweat, without getting cold or wet, and without having to listen to other people eat crisps ludicrously loudly, or watch them spill their large, very sugary Virgin Trains tea all over the table you're sharing with them.

There is however a drawback. Driving involves decisions. And attention. And having to turn this thing in front of you called a 'steering wheel'. When you would rather be chatting to your passenger in an animated fashion about office gossip, or finding that Adele track you haven't listened to for at least a week. Or perhaps just having a nice open-eyed snooze.

Lots and lots of drivers really don't like driving and proper driverless cars are still a few years off. What to do? Fortunately, there is a solution to the problem – *become your own driverless car*.

It's really very easy. Though it does make life very difficult for everyone else. Just find a motorway, find the middle lane and then make yourself at home! No need to turn the wheel much again, look in your mirrors or engage your brain until you need to exit the motorway. Suddenly, without indicating.

Or at least, that used to be the solution. However, the much-publicised conviction of a van driver in Leeds Magistrate Court last week threatens to wake middle lane hogs from their cosy slumber, wrapped up between the outside and inside lanes. The court was told he was driving a Citroen Berlingo van at 60MPH and repeatedly refused to move out of the central lane of the M62 near Huddersfield.

In what will sound a frustratingly familiar scenario to many motorway users, police said drivers had to brake and swerve to overtake the blissfully unaware Berlingo and that he had numerous opportunities to move back into the left hand lane but failed to do so, choosing instead to drive in 'an inconsiderate manner'. (Though you can be sure that like most people confronted with blatant road-hoggery they used a ruder expression at the time.)

The law was changed in 2013 giving the police more powers to issue on-the-spot fines for driving misdemeanours such as hogging the middle lane, tailgating, undertaking and failure to give way at junctions. Figures published last year revealed that 10,000 motorists have been fined under these new powers for dealing with 'anti-social driving'. Though many drivers moan that there doesn't appear to have been much of a decline in middle-lane hoggery, particularly in the South East where most lane-hogging seems to happen.

The bloody-minded Berlingo driver is believed to be the first to be convicted in court of the offence. It's not clear why the case came to court rather than being dealt with by an on-the-spot fine. Perhaps he refused to pay and decided to have his day in court. If so he seems to have changed his mind about being Britain's most famous Middle Lane Hog – Mr Berlingo failed to turn up, was convicted in his absence and ordered to pay a £500 fine, £400 in costs and a £40 victim surcharge and handed five penalty points.

£1000 and five penalty points is a bit more than Days Inn charge for a snooze on Her Majesty's highway, so who knows? Maybe indicating and actually turning the steering wheel every now and again will become more common on motorways now.

It seems unlikely though that all middle lane hogs are going to suddenly discover the existence of the left lane, particularly as traffic congestion continues to increase. And the (self) righteous anger of other drivers at the selfishness of middle lane hoggers is unlikely to go away.

After all, whatever lane they're in, *all* other cars on the road are 'hogging' it. Unlike yours. Deep down, all drivers think that the road they're driving on was made just for them.

The real crime of the middle lane hogger is to not even try to hide that presumption.

a hitchhiker's guide to free-loading

When an ambulance rushing to Plymouth General Hospital carrying a man suffering from a life-threatening blood clot stopped to pick up a couple of hitchhikers, one of whom engaged the man, 'writhing in agony', in chit chat it made headlines.

Probably because most people found it difficult to believe that people still hitch-hiked at all, let alone that anyone – ambulance drivers or otherwise – actually stopped to pick them up.

Likewise, the incredulity that greeted 66 year-old John Waters' new book, *Carsick*, about an attempt to hitch from the East Coast of the US to the West, shocked people not just for its apparent recklessness but because he actually succeeded.

Hitchhiking seems to belong to the era of cassette players and leaded petrol. The outstretched thumb and bit of cardboard box with a hopeful

destination scribbled on it in marker pen was once a staple of the driving scenery in the UK. No longer. Insurance issues, fears of crime, and probably a rise in general contempt towards 'freeloaders' have reduced the willingness of people to stop.

But the supply of hikers has also been stemmed by increased car ownership and by the arrival of stupendously cheap coach tickets. Megabus will get you from the North East to London for £5. And frequently stops to pick up punters in places, such as Scotch Corner Services, that would have been used by hitchhikers trying to thumb a ride. Megabus are in many ways a kind of commercial hitchhiking service.

As a freeloading layabout in the 80's I used to do a lot of hitching. And it wasn't entirely because I had no money and plenty of time. I used to enjoy the promiscuity of hitchhiking. And by that I don't mean sex – the nearest I came to that was a pock-marked Frenchman near Perpignan, who was so embarrassed by my polite refusal that he drove 80 km out of his way.

No the promiscuity of hitchhiking is the casual randomness of whoever stopped to offer you a ride – which you almost never would reject unless they weren't going your way – and the intimacy of the hour or so car journey with the 'ride'. Who would often tell you, a complete stranger that they will never see again, more about their lives and their hopes and fears than their mates. Though admittedly quite often they would tell you mostly about their holidays. The one they'd just had or the one they were looking forwards to. 'Only five weeks now. Can't wait.'

I didn't have the heart to tell them that I was *always* on holiday.

Many's the time I stood at start of the M1 at Brent Cross – a spot once so popular with hitchhikers there was actually a queuing system – with my thumb outstretched to the world. And the world can answer your digital prayers in the strangest ways.

Such as the day in the Summer of 1985 when a brand new Volvo Turbo came to a precision-engineered halt in front of me. Behind the wheel wasn't the expected sales rep (a common hitchhiking 'john'), but a precision-groomed Max Hastings, first journalist to enter a liberated Port Stanley in the Falklands War and soon to be editor of The Daily Telegraph, on his way home to Northampton. We spent a very pleasant forty minutes together chatting, and I marvelled at his then very rare car phone, which he used to call his wife, who was disappointed because fog meant she couldn't ride her horse that day.

Hitchhiking was a truly classless society – at least for the time you're sharing someone's posh car.

Probably my best hitchhiking experiences were on the Continent. I was once picked up north of Paris by a Professor of Philosophy at Lille University. Since I had just dropped out of a philosophy course at Oxford University we had a great deal to talk about – in his strained English and my much worse French. A glutton for punishment he ended up taking me for a meal with his wife at a swanky brasserie in Lille and putting me up for the night.

Gallic generosity didn't stop there, however. The very next day I was given a lift by two young sisters on their way to a wedding dinner. They insisted on taking me along, and everyone was ridiculously kind and friendly to this sunburned, dishevelled English freeloader with very little

French sat at the table gobbling their (very tasty) food and guzzling their fine wine. Afterwards they dropped me off at the ferry terminal in Calais.

Sometimes you ended up accepting lifts that you probably shouldn't. Back in the UK, hitching to Brighton, I was picked up by a motorcyclist on a frighteningly powerful bike. We arrived, me riding pillion, breathlessly quickly. But doing a ton on a bike with no helmet can be very noisy, apart from anything else, and I was deaf for days.

Waiting times in the 80′s varied, and sometimes you could end up a bit stuck at a windswept roundabout, as the paranoia and the rain soaked into your soul. But the wait was generally a lot shorter if you were hitching with a young woman: one of the pair e given a lift by the Plymouth ambulance driver was a woman – reportedly dressed in a short skirt and blouse 'despite the foggy weather'.

I once hitched back from Cambridge with a female friend. Although she wasn't wearing a short skirt and blouse, I don't mind admitting that I hid in the bushes while she stood by the side of the road. We waited all of two minutes before a Ford Sierra screeched to a halt. I can still see the crestfallen look on the driver's face when he saw me scrambling out of the hedgerow. 'Oh, and this is my mate,' she said, smiling sweetly. 'You don't mind giving him a ride too, do you?'

Now that I'm a car owner myself do I stop to give lifts to hitchhikers? Well, no, not really. Largely because they're so few and far between these days that the sight of one by the side of the road is so surprising that by the time you've got over the shock they've disappeared into the distance.

Plus, I hate freeloaders. Unless they're John Waters

motorways wise-up

Hard shoulders don't sound very inviting – and often look very unloved and untidy. But you may miss them when they've gone.

This month, another twenty miles of them will disappear from our motorway network as the latest stretch of 'smart motorway' opens on a section of the M1, between junctions 31 near Worksop and 28 near Mansfield.

By way of exchange, the more than 95,000 vehicles a day using it will benefit from an extra, fourth lane – as well 100% CCTV monitoring and information about traffic conditions displayed via overhead electronic variable messaging signs (VMS) – and variable speed limits designed to avoid traffic queues and keep traffic flowing. Journey times should be shorter and more reliable. At least for a few years.

For those experiencing a breakdown, running out of fuel – or a health emergency – there are now 'refuge' areas instead of the trusty hard

shoulder. However, you need to be careful where your big end goes, or your dodgy lunch, since the refuges are a rather lengthy 2.5KM apart.

You will also have to hope there is no one else already occupying the refuge area (including foreign lorry drivers who reportedly sometimes use them to kip in) since there isn't a lot of room in them. Additionally, because they don't have a slip road, once your car is repaired or your lunch lost, you will have to wait for someone from the Highways Agency to come and stop the traffic to let you out.

It's now ten years since the first smart motorway opened in the UK, between junctions 4 and 3A on the M42 in the West Midlands. Back then however they were called 'managed motorways'.

Perhaps having taken some marketing advice, since 2014 the DoT calls managed motorways 'smart motorways'. A smart motorway - which by definition is always better than a 'dumb' one – is where active traffic management (ATM) techniques are deployed: these include variable speed limits and hard-shoulder running (either permanently or only at busy times). There are three types: 'controlled motorway', 'dynamic hard shoulder running' and 'all-lane running'.

A controlled motorway has variable speed limits without hard-shoulder running, such as on the M25 from J27 to J30.

'Dynamic hard shoulder running' motorway has variable speed-limits with part-time hard-shouldering in busy periods. These have a solid white line differentiating the hard shoulder from the main carriageway, and overhead gantries displaying a red 'X' over the lane when it is closed

to traffic. DHSR has been extended to sections of the M1, M4, M5, M6 and M62.

'All-lane running', variable speed limits with the hard-shoulder converted to a permanent running lane, can be found on sections of the M6, M62 and M25. This is the new standard for all new smart motorway schemes – 'dynamic hard shoulder running' seems to have been a softening up exercise, getting the public ready for eliminating hard shoulders altogether on smart motorways.

In addition to several currently under construction, there are ten more smart upgrades planned across England as part of a £1.5B investment. By 2021 the DoT promises there will be '292 extra lane miles added to motorways'. Given that they will be all-lane running, this also means that our motorways will permanently lose 292 miles of hard shoulder.

So why have hard shoulders become suddenly so unnecessary – and so cannibalised by our motorway network?

Because of course smart motorways are much cheaper than road-widening (smart motorways are 'widened' within the existing boundaries of the motorway), much less politically and environmentally costly than new motorways, and they are supposed to take much less time to construct. Though people enduring 50mph average speed cameras on the M1 for the past few years while it was 'smartened' might disagree.

In 2007 it was estimated that installing ATM on UK motorways would take c.2 years at a cost of £5-15 million per mile – compared with 10 years and £79 million for widening.

Not everyone is convinced that smart motorways are so smart, however. Parliament's Transport Select Committee recently published some feedback criticisms, such as the distance between refuge areas, and the frequency of gantries (they can be every 500m).

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents have also expressed concern that emergency services would take longer to reach an incident – but the Highways Agency rejected this, citing the 5000 miles of dual carriageway that doesn't have a hard shoulder.

For its part the AA has expressed concerns about breakdowns in lane one, saying it believes that the risk to a vehicle stopped there at night is too great to accept. Then again, perhaps this may be something to do with the fact the AA is not allowed to attend broken down vehicles in a running lane.

Advocates of smart motorways also point to studies which suggest that they're safer than un-managed motorways with hard shoulders. Though if you've ever seen a drowsy articulated lorry ahead of you wander half way across the hard shoulder in a cloud of dust before suddenly turning back onto the main carriageway, it's difficult not to wonder if the smaller 'margin' for error on smart motorways means that it's just a question of time and mileage before there is a seriously nasty pile-up.

But whatever you or I or even the AA may think of them, smart motorways are here to stay and you'll be seeing a lot more of them – and fewer hard shoulders. Of course, traffic volumes are only likely to continue to rise, eventually choking the smart motorways – and there won't be a hard shoulder left to cannibalise.

But at that point a hidden appeal of smart motorways to politicians may reveal itself – with their gantries, CCTV and digital cameras they already have a lot of the infrastructure needed to introduce road charging.

And although unpopular now, when we run out of hard shoulders to cannibalise, charging may seem like the 'smart' – or only – option.

i spy an m-way onanist

Statistically the safest roads to drive on, there's nevertheless something about motorways that seems to bring out the very worst in drivers. Other drivers, that is. Never you or me, of course.

Some would argue it's because there's no motorway driving required in the UK driving test. But I think it's because M-ways aren't really anywhere. They're a limbo-land of anonymous boredom where people's darkest personality defects come out to play – magnified frighteningly by the horsepower they're barely in charge of. A motorway is a three lane, high speed Rorschach test.

Here's a list of some of those that fail it. Badly.

The Tailgater

Everyone's favourite M-way psycho, the tailgater is the driver who insists you admire their shiny BMW badge in your mirrors. Before you both meet a sudden, mangled, sticky end.

Responsible for the very worst motorway accidents by ingeniously turning the two second rule for the minimum safe distance into a two inch maximum one, on-the-spot fines of £100 and three penalty points were recently introduced to deter the tailgater (and also the lane-hogger). Though no one really expects them to work. Tailgaters live – and die – to tailgate. You just can't put a price on sadism.

Diagnosis: Penis smaller than the gap between your bumpers.

The Bonnetgater

Overtakes you and then cuts you up, forcing you to slow down so as to maintain a safe distance. Hilariously, the bonnetgater will often *actually decelerate* after they've plonked themselves two inches in front of you. They've achieved their objective – making you taste their exhaust – so why waste fuel while picking their nose?

The worst thing about the bonnetgater isn't their thoughtlessness towards other road users, who no longer exist once they're no longer in the way. No, it's because they turn you *into an unconsensual tailgater*. You're on their bumper and you haven't even been introduced.

Diagnosis: No sense of personal space. Or sense.

The Undertaker

Decides that the minimum safe distance you've left between you and the car in front as you overtake a vehicle on your left is in fact reserved for them and overtakes you at 100 MPH – on the inside lane – to occupy it, while on the phone and eating.

Diagnosis: Probably a former chairman of an ethical Bank.

The Brake Light Flasher

Hasn't worked out that if you drive properly on a motorway, leaving a safe distance, and actually looking through the rather useful device called 'a windscreen', the accelerator is of much more use – and much less bloody annoying for everyone else – than the brake pedal.

Diagnosis: Doesn't plan or even look ahead.

The Outside Lane Kamikaze

Literally cannot leave a motorway from any lane other than the outside one – braking as they swoop across three lanes because they've left it far, far too late. Not because they forgot their exit but because they have to overtake as many cars as they can before they leave the motorway OTHERWISE THEIR LIFE IS A TOTAL FAILURE.

Diagnosis: A total failure

The Slip-Road Kamikaze

This is in fact the Outside Lane Kamikaze when they *join* the motorway. Instead of 'giving priority to traffic already on the motorway' and matching their speed 'to fit safely into the traffic flow in the left hand lane' as dictated by the Highway Code, they treat the slip road as an overtaking lane – or a pit-stop exit ramp.

Once again, they have to overtake as many cars as possible before swerving in front of you just before they run out of slip – and then finishing the manoeuvre with a masterful swerve across two lanes into the outside lane, *sans* indicator, natch.

Diagnosis: Still a total failure

The Dozy Racer

Accelerates while you're overtaking. Can be a deliberate tactic of boy racers showing off their torque, but more usually a sneaky application of the throttle by someone waking up to the horrifying fact there are other people on *their* motorway.

An annoying dilemma. If you refuse to rise to the bait and don't accelerate, pulling in behind them instead, they're bound to slow down and you'll find yourself in the same situation again. But if you give in to temptation and accelerate you may then have to keep up the same excessive speed as you find yourself both locked in a battle of pretending that you're not racing.

Diagnosis: Passive-aggressive nightmare .Probably your ex.

The Lorry Driver From Duel

Pulls out their eighteen-wheel rig faster than it takes their indicator to flash once – while you're just beginning to overtake. Will also sometimes tailgate you to pass the time, especially when you're alone together in an average speed check contraflow at night, in the rain, dazzling you with headlights the size of your rear window. (Lorry drivers seem to know something the rest of us don't about average speed cameras).

Diagnosis: Misunderstood gentle giants (PLEASE don't tailgate me again!)

The Whiner

Passes the time by complaining endlessly about other motorway drivers and compiling whingeing lists of their failings – while hypocritically practising some of the very same outrages himself from time to time.

Diagnosis: Journalist.

the greatness of the great north road

What's so 'Great' about 'The Great North Road'? Better known in our more impatient era as the A1?

Well, if you're unfortunate enough to find yourself in the south, it takes you to the north – or 'The NORTH' as the signage rightly has it. And unlike the more popular M1, it goes all the way NORTH – instead of petering out like a big Jessie near Leeds. And that's the proper shining, horny helmeted, be-sporroned NORTH. Not the damp, camp north west of the M6.

For all its butchness, the A1 is also the most glamorous road in Britain, connecting the capitals of four countries – England, Scotland, the UK, and Yorkshire. The A1 is a metalled Union, starting in the English Baroque shadow of St Paul's Cathedral, flowing up the eastern side of

England, past the Romano-Viking-White Rose splendour of York, once England's second city, spooling up and over the much-contested border fortress town of Berwick Upon Tweed, and finishing with a flourish in the Caledonian heart of Edinburgh with the grand panoramic, kilted sweep of Princes Street.

True, along the way, you also have to go through Holloway, under Hatfield and past Stevenage, but glamour always has a price. For size queens out there, the A1 is also the biggest. At 410 miles it's the longest numbered road in the UK.

Above all, the A1, still mostly dual carriageway, is a road with a view – on the past and the present. Not a virtual 'M' road built and engineered to connect industrial centres as fast and as boringly as possible, the A1 is a road that takes time to tell you a story. (Thankfully, plans to downgrade the whole of the A1 to motorway were dropped in 1995).

OK, very often the view it offers is the back end of two lorries labouring up a hill, one overtaking the other at a speed differential of 0.5 MPH. Or during the summer months, those suburban juggernauts of despair – otherwise known as caravans. But nonetheless, and despite all the by-passes and 'upgrades' to stretches of it, detouring the A1 from the old 'coaching' Great North Road route of Dick Turpin yore, it's a road that still allows you to see or at least glimpse England and Scotland, instead of hiding it behind cuttings and another Unwelcome Break.

A lush, lowland Eastern England of market towns and fertile arable farms, grain silos and Cathedrals, country houses and garrisons – and, just outside sleepy Grantham… a roadside sex shop. Try finding one of those on the M1. Near Doncaster you zoom around Ferrybridge power

station's colossal steaming cooling towers, looming like concrete castles with dragons lurking within – a legacy of the rich coal seams of Yorkshire that helped fire the Industrial Revolution.

Just before the York turn off you pass a mile west of Towton, site of the bloodiest battle on English soil, where in 1461 the Yorkists triumphed over the Lancastrians leaving 28,000 dead and dying in the snow.

If you look to the West before Scotch Corner, site of the Angle's decisive defeat of the Goddodin in 600, you might on a clear day glimpse the preposterous beauty of the Yorkshire Dales. As you head up through the land of the Prince Bishops and past Durham, its Romanesque Cathedral and final resting place of the father of English history, the Venerable Bede, is sadly hidden from the current A1 route. But as a consolation prize you might be able to fleetingly scope Lumley Castle, once the residence of the Bishop of Durham and now a luxury hotel where travellers can break their journey in turreted style.

Onwards to Gateshead, where Antony Gormley's famous Angel of the North, welcomes you, wings outstretched over the A1 like a Norse god, braced forever against the wind sluicing in off the North Sea without the benefit of even a Geordie t-shirt. 'The Gateshead Flasher' as locals dub him, is a steely sign commanding you to start paying serious attention, man, pet.

For after you skirt Newcastle's Western suburbs and fly over the mighty Tyne – with or without fog on it – towards Morpeth, you enter the enchanted Middle Earth of Northumberland, where the A1 frequently narrows and slows to a single lane the better to allow you to enjoy the timeless, undulating landscape, and permit you perhaps to catch a

glimpse of mighty Alnwick Castle, seat of the Duke of Northumberland and easily most photogenic star of the Harry Potter movies. A little further on, bold Bamburgh Castle, ancient seat of the Kings of Northumbria. And just beyond, holy, lonely Lindisfarne, where St Cuthbert, patron Saint of the North, got up to whatever it is saintly monks get up to.

Why ever did they film Lord of the Rings in plain and dull New Zealand?

Over the Tweed and just over the border you can enjoy Scotland's own very abbreviated Amalfi Run as the A1 snakes you along the top of cliffs overlooking a shockingly blue North Sea, and on to the glittering Firth of Forth, with the brooding promise of the Highlands beyond – if it's not raining horizontally again.

But keep your eyes peeled at all times for the anti-Sassenach speed cameras.

Just south of Dunbar the A1 takes you right through – and over the bones – of the bleak battlefield where in 1650 Cromwell routed the Scottish army loyal to Charles II, who had been proclaimed King of Scotland in defiance of the Commonwealth. Next year of course the Scottish vote on whether to divorce the English and end the 306-year-old Union. If it's a 'Byazz!!', then the A1 will become a truly international road again. Possibly with border posts, passport checks and maybe even the occasional border skirmish and raid just like in the good old days.

Call it what you will, and 'upgrade' it as much as you like, The Great North Road is the axis by which Scots and English, invaders and defenders, Romans and Britons, Vikings and Saxons, rebels and

loyalists, Catholics and Protestants, Rugby Leaguers and Rugby Unionists, have sought to impose their will and their map-reading on these British Isles.

For other books by Mark Simpson visit: **www.marksimpson.com**