

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# May on Motors

James May

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## About the Book

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‘Sooner or later I’m going to have to admit that I just like cars, and that I’ve wasted a life that could have been spent gainfully employed in direct marketing.’

James May has car fever. There is something about cars that drives him crazy, from how they make him feel about himself to how they make him look to the outside world. And it all started with a Matchbox Aston Martin.

In *May on Motors*, the *Top Gear* presenter and writer for the *Daily Telegraph* brings together a collection of his most controversial and humorous writing. Covering all aspects of car ownership from the art of driving to complicated issues of technology, these gems from the number-one car connoisseur create a fascinating read that will amuse and inspire car enthusiasts old and young.

# May on Motors

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James May







# INTRODUCTION: CAR FEVER

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## IT ALL STARTED WITH A MATCHBOX ASTON MARTIN

IT REALLY *DID* start with a Matchbox Aston Martin. I was very small – no more than three years old and asleep in bed. My dad had been away on a business trip of some sort and had bought the pocket-sized, iconic GT car (although this was long before the association with James Bond was cemented) as a sort of commemoration of his homecoming. I should have bought him one, I suppose, but he already had a real Ford Cortina.

The moment I woke up and found it on the pillow was, I think, the moment I realised that I was deeply interested in cars.

Then again, every small boy I've ever met, and even quite a few girls, like playing with toy cars, and that supposedly seminal, die-cast revelation is hardly a good excuse for making a living from writing about them. In fact, I'm absolutely amazed that it's even possible.

Driving around in cars is not exactly the exclusive preserve of a few, in the way that walking on the moon or being a member of Pink Floyd is. The vast majority of adults is entirely familiar with the process. Yet there are no regular newspaper or magazine columns given over to Buzz Aldrin or Roger Waters, while acres of space are still devoted to people who drive about in cars. Why? Why are there no weekly columns about washing up or laundry? They are no less remarkable. It's not as if I have to be possessed of remarkable insight to find something to say about motoring. All of my friends have opinions on the subject. In fact, when they have a really good one, I write it down and use it in my column.

Let's imagine my dad had come home with a microscope instead. I might well have become very interested in bacteria or the shape of sugar crystals. My mate Cookie *did* have a microscope, and was. However, he didn't slip unwittingly into an adult life of trying to find something droll to say about bacteria or the shape of sugar crystals. He eventually threw the microscope in the back of a cupboard and found a job in banking.

It's not even as if there's that much to say about cars *per se*, the whole business being so well understood. This is both a hardship and a great relief. Every motoring columnist sits down in front of the blank screen with its mocking cursor in the top left-hand corner and thinks, 'Right. What can I write that's really interesting without having to think of too much to say about the bloody car?' The benefit to you, I hope, is that motoring columns are full of surprises and rarely about cars.

So I could, of course, argue that driving and the possession of a car is actually a window on to some deeper and less well-charted region of the human condition. But I won't, because that would be pretentious crap, which is something to be avoided. Sooner or later I'm going to have to admit that I'm just like cars and that I've wasted a life that could have been spent gainfully employed in direct marketing.

So I'm afraid to have to tell you, reader, that you've just bought a book about cars, for which I should probably apologise. In my defence, however, I have never written anything that wasn't intended to be read on the lavatory. So I hope that's where you'll keep this book.

## SOME HOT AIR ON THE ETHICAL ISSUE OF AIRBAGS

DARWIN WOULD WORRY. Sure, the painfully slow process of natural selection, which makes even the development of the Porsche 911 look rapid, has been largely circumvented by developed man. We can interfere with the copulating habits of horses to produce an exceptionally swift one for the track or a sturdy beast to haul the plough, and we have largely outwitted those diseases whose toll on humanity was considered by Darwin's inspiration, Malthus, to be necessary for the control of the population. But segregating mankind for the purposes of procreation can only lead to disaster, as a quick glance at the Royal Family reveals. Likewise, granting certain people special privileges where survivability is concerned is likely to cause problems.

With that in mind, the latest developments in airbag technology can only be viewed with misgiving. 'Your passenger's life is not an option,' trumpets Honda, revealing that it is the latest maker to offer a passenger's bag as standard, on the Civic five-door. The implication is that it is thrown in gratis, though Honda is taking an egalitarian stance on life preservation. Very laudable.

But who most needs this airbag? Not the occupant of a brilliantly engineered, ABS-braked and ultimately progressively crumpling Honda; it is poor sods such as I, lashed behind the hard, spindly wheel of my '67 Triumph Vitesse or '70 Rover P6, against whose unyielding columns I am the most likely to be unwittingly dashed by deficiencies in the handling and braking departments. Yet an airbag remains resolutely absent from the options list of cars that need one most.

The problem is that to acquire the airbag – any airbag, in fact – you first have to buy a new or nearly-new car, and only a certain sector of society enjoys that privilege. A social imbalance of Darwinian implications looms: all road users share danger equally, yet the selection system is being manipulated in favour of the survival – and hence procreation – of a specific group. Taking this idea to its extreme, the most likely survivors of a Malthusian population-pruning scenario based on road accidents rather than disease are the drivers of weighty, voluminous and multiple-airbagged off-road vehicles. Clearly, this does not bode well for the species.

But, fellow paupers, those of you whom Malthus would have eradicated by TB, fear not. I have had an idea. It came to me at a recent lunch, where some boffin was talking bullishly of the latest thinking in 'peripheral airbag technology'. We already have airbags in the seats; now there is a move towards airbags in the doors, airbags in the back, airbags in the roof and, for all I know, an airbag in the boot to protect your shopping. Why not, I thought, airbags in the bumpers, triggered by a simple radar device at the instant before a collision and thus allowing cars to bounce harmlessly off each other? But that would still leave our favourite safety feature firmly welded to new-car purchase. And then it came to me. The airbag should not be fitted in any of these places; it should not, in fact, be fitted to the car at all. The airbag should be worn by the driver. This is a precept of glaring apparency onto which the motor industry has completely failed to cotton.

May's Acme Airbag Shirt (pat. pend.) has numerous advantages over traditional airbags, not least of which is that it allows all people to benefit from life-saving technologies hitherto the preserve of wealthy new-car buyers, thus levelling the survivability playing field once again. It is not without precedent, either – on a Boeing 747 you will find an individual life jacket under your seat, not one giant one attached to the aeroplane and inflated by a red toggle in the cockpit. Furthermore, as the

trunk forms the main bulk of the body, the bag in the Acme Shirt (or Bagshirt, as it will come to be known) will automatically be tailored to suit the weight and dimensions of the wearer. How will it work? Allow me to, er, expand.

The only part of an airbag that needs to be attached to the car is the sensor that measures the severity of retardation in an impact: it is mere idleness of thought that sees the bag itself stuffed into the steering wheel or glovebox along with it. The Bagshirt will come with a small, self-adhesive sensor unit, to be attached to any part of the car that will not deform in an accident – say the dashboard of the Triumph or anywhere aft of the front bumper on the Rover. The sensor is connected to the bag and detonator in the shirt by a coaxial wire like the one on your Walkman headphones, thus the whole enjoys universal compatibility with any car.

Indeed, once the airbag has been separated from the car its applications are endless. The fitment of a manual override ripcord makes the shirt attractive to public transport users, pedestrians and even the likes of window cleaners who absent-mindedly step back to admire their work.

Stylish, versatile and discreet, the Bagshirt adapts to any health and safety scenario and protects you from the moment you get dressed until you return to the safety of your bed. For cyclists, to whom lightweight and sartorial absurdity seem to be of paramount importance, I have devised an airbag headband. This not only looks even more stupid than a polystyrene helmet, it offers the added benefit of preventing cyclists' heads from damaging the bodywork of cars.

Apart from the difficulty of finding a backer, there remains only the small problem of legislation. The Bagshirt is open to abuse so, as with the emergency cord on the train, there would have to be penalties for improper use. There will be plenty of opportunities for that, such as down the pub last night, trying to enjoy a quiet pint when that bloke from round the corner came over, breathed cheese and onion in my face and started talking about his Caterham again . . .

Dunno, officer. I was just standing there talking and my airbag went off.

## AH, MR BOND – WE WEREN'T EXPECTING YOU TO DO THAT

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I MAY HAVE given an impression to the contrary in the past, but I'm really not averse to the idea of European unity. As a business arrangement, it's a great thing – if it makes it easier to truck a load of Melton Mowbray pork pies to a Belgian supermarket and sell them, then that can't be bad.

But the notion that the peoples of Europe can become subsumed into some amorphous *Homo Continentalis* is deeply offensive to me and, I suspect, to our neighbours too, and I find attempts to Europeanise things a bit insulting. Remember, it's because of Europe that the Marathon bar became Snickers and the label in your Marks & Spencer's underpants says 'cotton/coton' for the benefit of French people who can't fathom out the English word.

I like national stereotypes. They're fun and, in the final analysis, often not that wide of the mark. I don't mind that Italians think I buy condoms in packs of twelve so I have one for every month of the year, and in return I expect to be allowed to think that all Italians are mad and that the whole of Italy is *chiuso* whenever I go there on holiday. I expect Frenchmen to have a profound and chauvinistic love of France, even if I can't fathom it, and look, Jerry, I know we're always banging on about the war but it's the last significant thing we did. You could learn to take yourself a bit less seriously. You did lose after all.

So as the House of Commons vigorously debates the pros and cons of a single European currency, I wonder if our honourable members could take a little time to discuss something with far greater implications – the Euro Bond. I'm talking about Bond, James Bond. For in his new film, *Goldeneye*, our hero may well be wearing Church's brogues but he will also be flouncing about in Italian design suits. He may even eat croissants for breakfast for all I know. And though his personal car will be his old Aston Martin DB5 from the *Goldfinger* days, guess what car Q will provide for Bond's mission to the Bahamas to blow everything up? Why, a BMW Roadster. *Aber ja, natürlich*.

I know it's not my job to tell Albert R Broccoli how to make his films any more than it's his to ring me up and tell me what to write in my humble column, but – do pay attention, Cubby – double-oh *seven* is no longer just a fictional film character, he is an ambassador for a certain British stereotype that may not exist in reality but which is greatly admired the world over, especially in the States. Nice though the BMW is, Bond simply cannot drive it any more than Douglas Bader could join the Luftwaffe in the film about the Battle of Britain.

'The Roadster,' puffs BMW, 'reflects the essence of James Bond – smart, a little audacious and always in control of the situation'. Well, excuse me but Bond, as I remember him, is not 'a little audacious'. He is an elitist, a cad and a complete bounder, and it is these qualities that should be reflected in his car. It just so happens that an appropriate one is available and from the marque that so excellently provided for the best Bond (Connery) in the best Bond film (*Goldfinger*). That car is the Aston Martin DB7. Now there's a motor for the kind of bloke who regards seduction as something he must 'do for England'.

I happen to know that Aston came close to a deal on the *Goldeneye* film. The producers had even got as far as specifying an interior trim to match Bond's Italian wardrobe when suddenly, and for reasons United Artists won't reveal, it was over to BMW and, for Aston, goodbye, Mr Bond. Newport Pagnell must be hopping mad. The release of the film in November would have coincided nicely with its efforts to promote the DB7 in the States, and that, too, would have been good for what Lord Young used to call UK PLC. And if not the Aston then why not a supercharged Jag or even a rorty TVR, in some ways a spiritual descendant of the original DB Astons? This is a matter of national prestige worthy of attention from Bond himself, except that he seems to have gone a bit soft.

Perhaps the new Bond is a vegetarian. Perhaps he will slip into his leather sandals and chunky sweater and set off to battle against the dark forces of sexual inequality. But that wouldn't be quite right, and neither is the BMW. Bond in a Beemer is like Byron in Esperanto. Next thing you know he won't have his dinner jacket on under the wet suit.

I'm not sure I'll be going to see *Goldeneye* in November. As a fan of Bond, a lover of British cars and a patriot, I think it will annoy me. I mean, do I really expect a BMW-driving European 007 to endear himself to a fan club of stuffy, pompous, stereotypical old British farts like me?

No, Mr Bond – I expect you to die.

# JESUS CHRIST – THE WAY THAT BLOKE DRIVES IS BEYOND BELIEF

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A MATE OF mine is entering a competition to win a Mini. The first bit, where you have to match road signs to pictures of junctions, is easy, but even four pints couldn't flush out a satisfactory tie-breaker. What innovation or initiative, it asks, would do most to improve road safety?

I don't think he'll win; not even if he tippexed out my idea when he got home and wrote 'airbag' instead. I fear the judges will be looking for the current perceived wisdom on road safety, which goes something like *raise driving standards by introducing a tougher driving test with regular re-tests every ten years*. That, in fact, is smack on the fifteen-word allowance. But though that might win the Mini, it's not the answer.

I've met a lot of people who support a harder driving test, and I expect they could all pass it, too. And yet many of them are the sort of drivers in whose cars I hesitate to tread and to whom I most certainly would not lend mine. Their abilities behind the wheel are beyond compare, but safe driving has little to do with skill and everything to do with attitude, and you can't test for that. So the roads are full of ditherers, but so what? You know when someone is about to do something dozy, yet how many drivers deliberately allow an awkward or even dangerous situation to develop so that they can lean on the horn and enjoy a moment of self-righteous indignation? An emphasis on driving skill leads to arrogance and elitism among those who think they've got it. With all due acknowledgement of my own sanctimoniousness, what's needed is a healthy dose of humility. Safe driving is not about being good but about knowing just how bad you really are.

On the roads, courtesy and humility are about as evident as Talbot Tagoras. Back to that tie-breaker then – what eminent body could take the initiative of promoting a bit of common decency? The government? I don't think so. The Royal Family might have been up to it once, but not in its new role as the nation's tackiest soap. I was wrestling with this one when I was cut up by a cyclist wearing a jacket bearing the embroidered legend 'Don't follow me, follow Jesus'. There was no disputing the first part of his edict, as he proceeded to ride across the pavement and into a shopping arcade, but nevertheless, I think he had the answer. The perfect model for road safety already exists in good old-fashioned, God-fearing, fire-and-brimstone Christianity.

Hey, don't turn over. I'm not one of those guys you come across when channel-hopping on a Sunday morning, I'm not wearing a brown cable-knit jumper as I write this and I couldn't play 'Lord of the Dance' on the guitar to save my life, let alone my soul. But it's on the roads that we will see again the value of Jesus' teachings. Providing you're prepared to be a bit ecumenical with the truth, they can be readily interpreted as parables on road safety. Did He not scold the rich Pharisee Simon for making Him unwelcome in his house, blessing instead the poor woman who bathed His tired feet with her tears? And would not a little similar humility improve traffic flow and defuse aggression? If a Samaritan could save the life of a sworn enemy, surely to God we can forgive people who merely pull out in front of us? And it is the repentant tax collector, not the arrogant man who believes he's a good Christian, who earns Jesus' forgiveness. The meek, then, shall inherit the road.

Apart from anything else, Christianity needs a bit of a rethink. Hardly anybody goes to church these days (except Japanese tourists) and a few months ago the foundation received a further blow when the infamous Rev. Antony Freeman was caught preaching to his dwindling flock that, er, there isn't a God. The General Synod, itself unsure of its exact position on God these days, felt it necessary to debate this at great length before throwing him out, but then that's hardly surprising when another C of E bigwig comes on Radio 4 and talks of 'faithless Christianity'.

Those ministers who lament the declining authority of the church should shake off their stuff

cassocks (I was a choirboy, so I know what it's like in there) and take religion on to the roads of Britain. If the Messiah comes again this Christmas, He will arrive by car.

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I tested the new faith over two weeks during which I had to drive the same journey to and from the office every day. For the first week, I was the devil's own driver. Nobody was allowed to overtake me, nobody joined a queue in front of me, pedestrians remained marooned in the middle of the road and anyone gave me so much as a look, I gave 'em the finger.

For week two I was Christian Motorist, and all went before me, for he who is last shall be first. And it came to pass that a taxi driver fell upon me from behind, and he was sorely wrath and worshipped false gods upon the loud trumpet, saying unto me that I shall beget no children and that my seed shall be spilled fruitlessly in the wilderness, if you see what I mean. But I heeded him not. And lo! The journey times were no longer but I went in peace, knowing that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world.

No, I don't think Gideon's bible in the glovebox will win the Mini, and the judges' decision is final. But come the final judgement, perhaps I'll be rewarded in heaven.

# THIS MAN'S DRIVING LIKE AN IDIOT – HE MUST BE STARVING

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ASK YOURSELF THIS simple question: which is more important, a man's life or Chicken Tikka Bhuna?

Well the votes are streaming in and the swingometer is moving decisively to the right. It's too early to be absolutely certain but it would appear that the constituency of *Car* readers has voted unanimously for the human existence. It looks as if you alone have voted for curry, Mr May. Any comment on that?

Well, it's easy to be sanctimonious when you're sitting nice and comfy in your armchair, reclining in the bath or perhaps settling in for a long stretch of solitary confinement in the smallest room. But now put yourself in the position I was in when I was dropped, unsuspecting, into this dark and uncharted corner of the moral maze.

I had just returned from some culinarily bankrupt country like France and was looking forward to a meal of honest, hearty British cooking. My alimentary canal had attained the status of favourite organ and as I drove the gentle two miles home from the Light of Nepal, breathing deeply of the Empire's most enduring legacy, I allowed my mind to wander and then dwell on one of the sweet mysteries that attend the cult of curry.

Such as how, if you strike a whole poppadom with a clenched fist, one of the resulting pieces – may be as large as your hand or it may be a tiny fragment retrieved with a wetted pinkie – but *one* of them will always be in the shape of India. *Always*. And how if you break that piece, you will still find another, smaller India; and so, I believe, it must go on until you arrive at the atom. And then some worthless drunkard stepped into the road right in front of me.

I braked. Of course I braked, it was pure instinct. But it was merely the driving instinct, and within a fraction of a second – and we're talking about the sort of timespan your ABS deals in here – a stronger, more deeply rooted one, the survival instinct of the hunter/gatherer, took over. From the corner of my eye I had seen the brown bag begin to topple. I released the brakes thus condemning the witless buffoon before me to certain death. I caught his uncomprehending eye with mine and braked again, but by now the physics of the curry instability problem were becoming very complicated, the whole bag beginning the second of its metronomic oscillations, but the less heavily damped sauce within probably on its third. These two frequencies, I dimly knew, could conspire to hurl the whole lot onto the floor, and man cannot live by naan bread alone. I released the brakes.

Now he was hopping, skipping and stumbling sideways along the road, vainly trying to fend off the huge Ford with a limp hand. I cadence braked in a desperate attempt to bring the rapid cycle of stop-and-go into opposite phase with the bhuna-bag's swayings until, as it reached its greatest rearward deflection, I stabbed home the pedal and came to a halt with everything still upright. Looking up, I was further encouraged to discover that my victim, in medical parlance, was shaken but unhurt.

Good God; I had weighed a man's life against my next meal and the alarmingly pale upholstery of the Ultima-spec Galaxy had almost tipped the balance in favour of the food. It seems unthinkable now but in that terrifying instant when I reverted to the Neanderthal his life meant nothing to me – it was but one grain in a sea of pilau – and my dinner was everything.

Still appalled? Who hasn't pulled away from the garage forecourt and immediately inserted the tantalisingly crimped end of a Ginster's pasty into the mouth, only to find it coming apart at the scrotal underbelly, leaving you in need of two hands to stem the egress of filling, and driving the next two miles in first gear at 8,000 rpm? Who hasn't resorted to steer-by-knee at motorway speeds to do battle with a recalcitrant crisp bag?

Speed does not kill, using a mobile phone while driving is no more hazardous than smoking



listening to the radio, and the fatuous press release from some safety organisation urging me to MC myself before taking the wheel is a nonsense. For the most dangerous driver on the road is the one with an empty belly. Next time you're thinking about using the car, don't ask yourself whether you're fit to drive, think when you last had a good square meal.

# WELSH, THE MYSTICAL AND ANCIENT LANGUAGE OF ROAD SIGNS

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THE OTHER DAY I heard on the radio that, somewhere in Brazil, an area of natural beauty the size of Wales has just been destroyed. This isn't the first time this has happened. A similar report comes out about once a year.

And, once a year, some wag in a pub somewhere will say 'Why couldn't it just have been Wales?'

Well, it wasn't me. For some reason, I've spent much of the last two weeks motoring in Wales and have to say I've come away rather liking the place. Wales is a land of Dafydils; of green valleys and gentle hills. Of Port Talbot steelworks too, but as they make the sheet metal for your fridge, your washing machine and quite possibly your car, this is a good thing.

The Welsh all seem to drive old Ford Fiestas at about 25 mph, but so what? Provided you're in a Nissan 350Z, as I was, it's a simple matter to drop down a couple of cogs, fly past and continue marvelling at a view of the world pretty much as Adam would have known it.

Now you're expecting me to say something like *the only problem with Wales is that it's full of Welsh people*. But, again, I'm going to have to disappoint you. They may say 'there's lovely' rather too often and they do seem to be more susceptible to being ginger than the rest of us, but we can hardly hold that against them. In any case, there are only a few hundred Welsh people, and most of them seem to be either in the pub or at choir practice. Or learning Welsh.

I wonder if there is anyone in the world who can only speak Welsh. Presumably there is. Why else would a cash machine ask you to 'choose your language' and then offer only English and Welsh? Fair enough. If a bunch of pasty-faced ginger separatists insist on conversing only in their native tongue, then that's their look-out.

For the rest of us, meanwhile, it's baffling and even dangerous.

In other European countries, it is always possible to find some common ground between a new word you see on a sign and one you already know; so in Italy, *curva pericolosa* obviously means 'dangerous bends'. Walk into a Welsh hotel, however, and though the sign in reception may be imagined to say 'welcome', it looks more like an insult. Maybe it is. There is no way of knowing, because Welsh has nothing in common with any other language I know of.

Of course, similar difficulties are experienced by travellers in Japan, but that's different. Japan isn't in England, and Wales is.

Here, for example, is a Welsh coastal road sign: *Pergyl – ochrau dibyn*. It means 'Danger – cliff edges'. Yet elsewhere on the same prom is a sign saying *Dim nofio ger y creigau* – No swimming near the cliff. Now both of these signs include a word for 'cliff', yet they have no word in common. How can that be? I know Wales has a lot of coastline but having more than one official word for 'cliff' strikes me as asking for trouble.

Out on the road, the visiting motorist will endure yet more confusion. Motorway services are the *gwasanaethau*, but by the time I'd worked that out I'd already overshot. The next *gwasanaethau* wasn't for another 35 miles, and I was desperate for a leek.

'Please drive slowly' appears first as *gyrrwch yn ofalus*, but by then you're through the village anyway. And I'm not even going to attempt to translate 'road liable to flooding'. It was something so enormous that it required a second, huge sign. Good news for the sheet metal producers at Port Talbot I suppose, but less good for the residents of the nearby hamlet, who are now shrouded in eternal night.

The impression is that some nationalists have loaded a blunderbuss with consonants and then rampaged around the land firing indiscriminately at the road furniture. In some places I saw electronic dot-matrix signs presumably updated from some central nerve centre. After the third or fourth

concluded that Evans must have nodded off with his face resting on the keyboard.

~~But the Welsh problem is at its most acute on the country's many winding roads, and especially on~~  
the approach to a treacherous bend (of which there are many in the hills). In Cornwall, Yorkshire or  
even Scotland, the legend SLOW would be writ large upon the tarmac as a warning. It's writ large in  
Wales, too.

But first, it says *ARAF*. And by the time you've thought 'Gosh, I wonder what *araf* means', it's  
already too late.

And then your Nissan 350Z ends up in a ditch.

(Letters of complaint from Welsh readers should be addressed to Motoring at the *Daily Telegraph*.  
English.)

## SOME BLUE-CHIP BULLSHIT FROM THE MARKETING MEN

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THE OTHER DAY, a man from Mercedes-Benz said something very strange to me. Explaining why the long-wheelbase A-class had been extended by 170 mm, he said it was ‘designed to appeal to those customer groups interested in more space-oriented concepts’.

I wrote this down and smuggled it home with me. Then I rang directory enquiries to get the number for Bletchley Park, but discovered that it had closed down in the 40s. In any case, I was informed someone had nicked the Enigma machine.

There was nothing for it but to apply my own decrypting skills to this apparently meaningless string of letters. Long into the night I toiled with dictionary and thesaurus and eventually, as the candle spluttered towards extinction, I had it cracked. Ha! This new A-class was *for people who want something bigger*.

It wasn't code at all, it was just marketing, the art of stating the bleedin' obvious in as convoluted a way as possible. And I've finally had enough of it.

In fact I've been feeling this way for some years but have so far hesitated to say anything for fear of alienating quite a few people who I would count amongst my friends. Now, though, I've decided that it's all their fault for not getting a proper job. Marketing is first-rate, premium-brand cobblers. I am amazed to learn that some of these people have a degree in marketing, which amounts to a first-class honours in waffle from the University of Whittering.

In fairness, I have met one or two marketing executives from the motor industry who talk plain good sense. At the recent launch of the X-Type, Jaguar's John Able stood up and spoke almost entirely in the language of Keats and Byron. But this is rare. All too often I am assailed with guff about how many A-levels the prospective owners will have, or about how the customer profile embraces the active lifestyle and the needs of the young and young-at-heart. If there were such a thing as a Marketing-English/English-Marketing dictionary, everything in it would be translated as *cf: horse arse*.

The Jaguar man was actually talking about *sales*, which is what marketing is really about and a perfectly worthy pursuit. Unfortunately, though, most marketing people are far too middle-class to admit that they're in the business of peddling stuff, so they dress it up as a cod philosophy instead. They somehow imagine that the genius of Beethoven can be reduced to a few fatuous ‘attributes’ which could then be fed into a Palm Pilot to produce another nine symphonies.

‘The brand,’ they're always telling me, ‘is everything’. This is the biggest chunk of blue-chip balderdash out there. The product is everything. The BMW brand is revered across the world because it appears on the bonnets of some very fine motor cars. Start sticking the same propeller symbol on a series of unreliable rust buckets and the cars would not suddenly be perceived as great; no, the BMW name would be destroyed. Look what happened to Jaguar in the 70s – the most evocative brand in motoring was worth the square root of sod all whilst it was in the hands of resentful communists. And contrary to popular opinion there is nothing wrong with the Marks & Spencer brand; it's just a sign above the door and the only time there's anything wrong with it is when one of the light bulbs blows to give us Marks 'n' Sparks. The root of the retailer's recent problems has been that there's something wrong with the clothes. Except the pants, which are still excellent.

The marketing mentality is, in my view, at the root of this country's dumbing-down problem. There are too many people with marketing backgrounds controlling television and publishing. Government is marketed. Projects such as the Millennium Dome fail because they rely on too much corporate sponsorship, and corporate sponsorship puts them in the hands of marketing people who ultimately

insult your intelligence, because they somehow imagine they're being very clever and you're very stupid. Speaking personally, the opposite is obviously true – that's why I have an influential column in the august journal *Top Gear* and they're all poncing about with pie charts and PowerPoint presentations.

The truth is that far too many people in marketing are those who didn't have sufficient talent or imagination to find proper creative work in the media or advertising, and I'm sick of them treating me like a halfwit. On a car launch I'd rather talk to engineers and boffins. I know they have some strange ideas about sports jackets and an overt fondness for the 0.0005 mm Rotring Propelling Pencil, but in the end anyone who understands the workings of a diesel injector down to the last few microns of its tolerances is going to be a stimulating company, because engineering is a true and exact science enlivened with an occasional burst of pure artistry. Marketing is just rubbish.

But, fortunately, it won't last. The mistake marketing has made is the one made by the used car business – it has revealed too much of its own workings to the people. Words such as 'aspirational', 'attribute' and 'awareness' are already entering the common language in their marketing usage, and most people are beginning to understand how brands are being manipulated in an attempt to fool them into thinking they are buying 'exclusivity' or a 'premium product'.

Next, everyone will start to question all this, then they will realise that it's all nonsense, and that, finally, will be the end of marketing. Good.

# FOR PETE'S SAKE GO OUT AND CATCH SOME RAPISTS

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SOME WEEKS AGO, in this column, I made some cheap cracks about Welsh road signs, and as a result I was sentenced to death in my absence by the Welsh National Assembly.

I am now prepared to retract my comments, but on one condition. Wales can keep its multi-lingual roads signs – *da nhw*<sup>1</sup> – but in return must also agree to keep its chief constable Richard Brunstrom, who I'm disappointed to learn is English.

Mr Brunstrom, who is also head of road policing at the police, has annoyed everyone (but especially the Welsh) in the past with his uncompromising stance on speed enforcement. But now, in a further attempt to disguise his force's dismal record on burglary detection, he has decided to target old people as well.

He's backing a new device called the impairment-o-meter, which will be used to test old folk's reaction times at the roadside. Little is known about the constable's evil machine, other than that it is a hand-held instrument that will require its victim to make push-button responses to some sort of visual challenge. Something similar was a feature of fun fairs when I was a lad, only now it's being used to tyrannise your aged parents.

'When you get older, your brain cells die and your body is slowly shutting down,' says Brunstrom. 'We know tiredness is a problem, but we don't yet know the impact of age. We need to find out.'

Well, if he spent more time out on the beat he'd know perfectly well the impact of age on driving. Wearing a hat, sitting too close to the wheel, owning a Honda Accord for twenty years and keeping it suspiciously clean, buying a hard-backed road atlas, and completing five laps of the M25 before working out which exit to take. This sort of thing is great for more cheap gags but as far as I can make out none of it is a serious threat to road safety.

Ah, you're thinking: but old people drive very slowly. So? Wait for a clear, straight stretch, drop a cog and overtake in accordance with the police Roadcraft system of car control. And if they happen to be driving as slowly as Mary Limond, a 75-year-old who was recently fined £200 and given 6 penalty points for driving at 5 mph, you could jog alongside and regale them with stories about the blitz.

I find the Mrs Limond case curious. She says she was driving slowly because she had new glasses and was having difficulty adjusting to them at dusk. So, surely, slowing down was the right thing to do. We'd be expected to slow down in fog, because visibility is reduced. Visibility was reduced on whatever evening Mrs Limond was driving – it's just that it was only reduced in her car.

We're fined for driving a bit too fast, and fined for driving too slowly. Not so long ago the police were telling us that young drivers were dangerous, but now it's old ones. My insurance company tells me I'm a high risk because I work in the media and I'm not married. If this sort of thing goes on we will arrive at a situation in which unless you're a 38-year-old married accountant with two children driving a Volvo estate at 29 mph, you may as well go straight down the station and hand yourself in.

Apart from anything else, picking on old people is dreadfully un-British. So their brain cells are dying off? I'm fairly confident that I haven't generated any new ones recently, and neither, I suspect, does the chief constable. We can accommodate the trifling shortcomings of the elderly, if only because none of us is getting any younger.

Some old boy may be taking an inordinately long time to negotiate a mini roundabout, but for all we know he may once have had the steady hand and razor-sharp reactions necessary to plant a bouncing bomb on the face of the Eider Dam. In which case he's entitled to dither about in a Nissan Micra during his twilight years.

It's time for the rest of us to stick up for our senior citizens, and for my part I'd like to help them prepare for the impairment-o-meter, slated for introduction in 2006. My guess is that the machine will present an unfinished sentence and a choice of two concluding words, the right one of which has to be selected with a button before the arresting officer can say 'You're nicked, Grandad.' Practise on this example to avoid being prematurely banged up in a rest home.

Eeh, bloody hell, policemen these days look so . . .

- Young
- Old

(Richard Brunstrom is 50).



[1](#) Good for them.

# BUYING A HOUSE? BUY A CAR INSTEAD

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LET'S HEAR IT for the motor trade. What a smashing bunch of blokes they are (none of them seem to be women).

I mention this because of the activities of two of my good friends this week. One is thinking about buying a new car, so I've been tagging along with him to various dealers, he being of the belief that I know what I'm doing. In truth, I've never actually bought a brand new car, although in fairness I have bought quite a few brand new motorcycles, which amounts to the same experience only with leather instead of carpet in the showroom.

Another chum has moved house today, although when I say 'today' what I mean is that he's just resolved a process that's been going on for what seems like years. Observing his eternal suffering, and leafing through the heaving file of admin that accompanied the buying of my own house in an attempt to help him out, has persuaded me to reassess my opinion of our brave lads on the nation's forecourts.

You see, some years ago a very authoritative survey of the British public revealed that most of you would rather go to the dentist than visit a car showroom. If, as you read this, you happen to be sitting on an upturned packing case under a single 40-watt bulb, clutching a knackered kettle and wondering how you're ever going to get rid of the smell of aftershave, you should find this sentiment truly remarkable. A car may be in second place in the hierarchy of financial commitment for most of us, but buying one is like going out for an ice cream compared with the league-topping transaction that is securing somewhere to sleep.

It's nearly five years since I moved house, but I'm still reeling from the experience. These days you can walk into a Ford dealership with little more than a pair of your old pants and drive away in a new Fiesta. But the instant you slap the 'for sale' sign outside your existing property, an ugly mob queues up from your door to eternity, all wanting to take your money in return for doing the square root of sod all.

You can go to a good car dealership and be quoted a price for the car in the window; tax, insurance, registered, full of fuel, engine running and ready to drive away. However you want to pay – cash, deposit and finance, part-exchange, lease plan, whatever – the salesman can come up with the figure in a blur of index finger and calculator. But make an offer on a house, have it accepted, and after the initial euphoria the cogs on the adding machine go into overdrive.

Where, for example, did my solicitor's charge of £165 for phone calls and faxes come from? I can't spend that much on phone calls in a month, and my phone is smouldering from overuse. Apart from anything else, I don't remember him ringing me. I always had to ring him and he was never, ever in the wrong. Never.

Meanwhile, within seconds of entering the average car showroom, you will meet a man who is almost impossible to shake off, even if you've turned up at the Porsche garage in your decorative, patterned trousers. If you have a vague interest in a car and can produce a driving licence, you can usually go for a test drive. The first two times I came to view my new home, the estate agent couldn't even find the key to the garage.

The other day, for example, I found myself in a VW dealership with mate no 1, poking around a line-up of nearly new Golfs. I deliberately baited the salesman with questions about engines and specs, but however much I thought I knew about Golfs, he knew three times as much. A surveyor, on the other hand, will send you a bill for £500 and tell you that your prospective home probably won't fall down. But then again, he will point out, it might. Who knows? He obviously doesn't.

I reckon the business of conveyancing is at least thirty years behind motor trading. I notice that the



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