

# The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down  
Advanced Motorists Group



November 2021





## The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down Advanced Motorists Group (Group 8199)

Helping to Improve the Standard of Driving on the Roads in Northern Ireland and the advancement of road safety

November 2021

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### Test passes

Bike and car Observer **Simon Beckett** achieved his bike Masters with distinction and recently joined bike Member **Jo-Anne Crooks** achieved a F1RST pass.

Many congratulations to both Members.

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### November 2021 cover picture

This was an easy one. It was the Sydenham by-pass looking towards Tillysburn. It was taken from the Dee Street Bridge. Congratulations (in order of receipt) to Ivan McStea (Belfast Group), Norman Shearer, Ivan Greenfield and Angela Bell.

Do you recognise the location of this month's cover? If it helps, it's not in North Down. For what it's worth, I got a soaking from passing trucks while taking it. No prizes, just the satisfaction of good observation and, of course, a mention in the next Road Observer. Submit your answers to: [secretaryndam@gmail.com](mailto:secretaryndam@gmail.com)

## Covid-19 Update

With the easing of some restrictions as detailed in last month's issue, we have made a tentative start to car observing. After an 18 month lay-off we have done some Observer to Observer runs to allow our Observers to get some practice and we have been able to conduct some observed drives for Associates.

As indicated last month we are now back in the Boathouse (see dates for your diary below) but given that our current car Associates have been through the presentations on the different aspects of advanced driving we will not be resuming the presentations until the next STAC begins in February. The remaining Tuesdays of this session will focus on observing practice and observed drives. Hopefully there will be no more restrictions and we can get back to full operations in the New Year with the next STAC enrolment on 11 January 2022 and the STAC sessions beginning on 1 February.

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### Dates for your diary

Groomspoint Boathouse unless otherwise stated

23 November - STAC session

30 November - STAC session

7 December - STAC session

14 December - Group Night - Christmas dinner, Carnalea Golf Club - 7pm for 7.30

Christmas and New Year Break

11 January 2022 - STAC enrolment and demonstration drives

1 February - STAC session 1

8 February - Group Night - TBA

22 February - STAC session 2

1 March - STAC session 3

8 March - Group Night - TBA

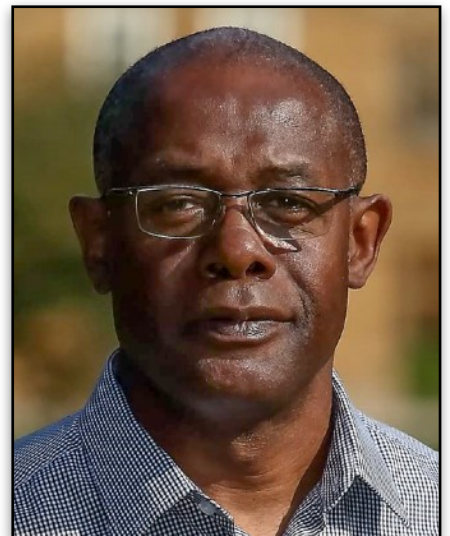
22 March - STAC session 3

STAC - Short Term Associate Course for drivers.

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### November Group Night

This month we had a guest speaker Paul Lawrence who is a work colleague of our Chairman David and is also a semi-professional photographer. For the first time we did this using ZOOM where Paul was in England and we had some members in the Boathouse and with others watching from home. In the Boathouse, David had arranged a link between his phone with the internet connection, a laptop and the digital projector which meant that we could see the presentation projected on the big screen. There was an issue with the sound when we couldn't get the external speakers to connect but we got around this by using the speakers on the laptop. This arrangement meant that Paul could see his audience in the Boathouse and we could carry on a two-way conversation.



An early interest in photography led to him achieving O and A levels in photography. He spent some time in the airforce before the move from film to digital rekindled his interest in photography. His approach to photography can be summed up by saying that he seeks to provide a connection through the image.

His presentation was based around 3 themes: people, birds and mammals.

### People

His first image was of an elderly fisherman taken while on holiday. He eventually plucked up the courage to ask him if it would be OK to take his picture and he agreed. He said that getting over the potential for a negative response to that question is the secret to people photography. If the subject says OK, great, but if it's a no then simply thank them and move on. He has since photographed carnivals in his home town of Northampton and in Leicester. He is now a regular photographer at these events and as such can get into the carnival itself to do close-ups of participants to show facial expressions and details of the costumes. The image below is of a carnival queen in a fantastic costume where the person represents the stamen of a flower. All images: copyright Paul Lawrence.



### Birds

He showed us pictures of many different birds - buzzard, wren, common egret, grey heron, curlew, partridges and red kites taken in a variety of locations. However, Paul is fortunate in living across the road from a park where he has the opportunity to photograph birds without travelling. There are kestrels, buzzards, owls and sparrow hawks. There is a particular tree with a hole in which kestrels return to nest and this next image shows a brood of 4 kestrels waiting to be fed.



## Mammals

Paul photographed deer in Woburn and in a deer park near Leicester where there are several hundred fallow, sika and red deer. Amongst many images he showed us was a spectacular one of two red deer during the rut where the challenger was being chased off in a flurry of grass thrown up during the confrontation.



He also related an amusing incident where he was leading a workshop of photographers and told them he had arranged for a model to come along to be photographed. The model turned out to be a

neighbours black Pomeranian dog and during the event the dog caught a squirrel which, after being removed from the dogs mouth, scampered away no doubt relieved to have got away with its life.

Paul finished with a wide range of other images from dog displays to jousting. I think my favourite shot of the night was a head on shot of a red kite in flight where the light was catching the leading edge of the wings showing the depth of colour in the feathers. Paul is an accomplished photographer across a wide range of genres and was happy to engage in answering questions from our members. It was an enjoyable evening and Paul said he would be happy to provide us with another talk sometime in the future. If you would like to see more of Paul's work go to <https://www.blacktomcatphotography.co.uk>

In addition is showed that it is not necessary for speakers to have to travel to Groomsport so if anyone has suggestions for other speakers who would be willing to do a zoom talk rather than face to face please let us know.

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## Preparing your motorcycle for a winter lay-off

With the arrival of colder and wetter weather, most riders decide now is the time to hang up their helmets and stop using their bike throughout winter. However, it isn't as simple of just not riding a motorbike, that's why IAM RoadSmart has pulled together some top tips on how to store your motorcycle safely.

Richard Gladman, Head of Driving and Riding Standards at IAM RoadSmart, has put together his expert advice on how to make sure your bike will be ready for action when drier and brighter weather rolls around.

- **Make sure it's clean** Before you store and cover your bike, it's important to give it a thorough clean and always remember to dry it off completely. It's also wise to apply a spray-on, anti-corrosion protectant or dispersant to all the exposed metal areas to prevent any damp. It's vital to re-grease any moving parts such as cables that have been cleaned of their lubricant to ensure they are in working order next time you come to riding your bike.



- **Look after the battery** Batteries really don't like the cold, so if they're left unused for any prolonged period, it will start to go flat. Flat batteries remain the number one cause for recovery services during winter, so to avoid this, you should either remove the battery entirely and store it in a warm place (please note: alarms and immobilisers won't work without the battery), or you can use an optimiser to keep the battery levels topped up.
- **Check the liquids before winter** The liquid parts of a bike (e.g., fuel and brake fluid) are just as vulnerable to winter conditions as metal surfaces. Brake fluids can attract damp, which can create air bubbles in the system when using the brakes. Did you know fuel can degrade? One being the octane level reduces overtime, which will affect performance, the other being that while standing, fuel can become gum-like and clog the system. Special additives are available on the market to help prevent this from happening. If you are storing your bike for some time ideally drain the fuel out of the tank and fuel system.
- **Prepare your bike's tyres for storage over winter** Your bike's tyres may suffer if left stationary over prolonged periods, but a top tip is to check the pressure periodically and rotate the wheels slightly - this will help them keep their shape when not in use. It's always recommended that both wheels should be lifted off the ground by either using the bike's main stand or two paddock stands. If this isn't possible, simply place a piece of carpet under the bike, or blocks of wood under each wheel to prevent contact with the cold floor.
- **Find a home.** To keep your bike in tip top condition this winter, store it indoors, in a garage or shed. This will prevent the cold and damp damaging your bike, but don't just plonk it in their and leave it. Try to make sure your bike is away from a window as sunlight can fade the paint. If you're limited on space indoors, you can use a bike cover and if you do choose to use your bike, you will need to clean it frequently and maintain it, or you might find your motorcycle won't come out the same quality as it went in. Regardless of whether you store your motorcycle outdoors or in, when your bike is static it will be prone to gathering dust and/or moisture. Always make sure you have a good quality cover on your bike.

Richard said: "If you do not intend to ride through the winter, it's important to give your bike the best chance of survival by winterising it correctly. With the advent of E10 fuel there are some concerns that it will deteriorate even more than usual if left for a long period, so consider draining it completely if you can. If you do intend to ride, it may be worth investing in a bike specific protection spray which will help fight the effect of salt, at the very least make sure you rinse the bike after every ride and clean it properly as often as you can. Of course we may get days when it's possible to ride during the winter with a smile and to that end I'll be keeping my bike clean but ready to go."

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## Oil and other fluids by David Harcourt

Modern cars rely on a lot of special fluids, each of which serves a particular function and they are seldom interchangeable.

The one we interact with most frequently is fuel, though we seldom actually see it directly. Petrol is light and volatile, usually with a pale straw colour. It is very easily ignited by a spark or flame, which is why fuel pumps require you to hold the trigger while filling as that keeps you in contact with the pump and vehicle, so you cannot generate a static electricity spark. Diesel is oilier, less volatile, and a little bit darker in appearance, and let's face it, not the fuel of choice for a fun car. Each has its own distinctive smell. However, there are a number of other fluids under the bonnet keeping the car operational.



*Editor's note: Oh for a return to lower prices, even the 2013 prices illustrated!*

**Engine oil** – oil performs a couple of functions in the engine, the most obvious of which is lubrication. Without oil, the multiple moving parts in the engine would grind together and create a terrible screeching sound right up to the instant that something breaks, seizes or friction welds. In general, oil is thicker at lower temperatures and becomes thinner and runnier at higher temperatures, and thick oils provide better lubrication while thin oils flow better to all the nooks and crannies. That conundrum has been solved by the scientists at the big oil companies who have given us multigrade oil, which has sufficient flow for low temperature use while remaining sufficiently lubricating at high temperature.

Some classic cars use oil with a high proportion of vegetable oil, and the real car enthusiasts among us really enjoy the smell of a classic on Castrol R (40% castor oil). Oil degrades with exposure to heat, exactly as cooking oil degrades and gets darker as it breaks down and acquires contaminants. Castor oil, while having excellent lubricating properties, is particularly prone to degradation, so needs to be changed frequently. Most cars use mineral oils, refined from crude oil. These are a mixture of molecules of similar size, which have similar properties, but may age differently with exposure to prolonged heat. Many modern cars use synthetic oil. These are factory made, building up an oil molecule from smaller components, so they are very consistent and predictable. Fortunately the classic owners are comfortable holding an oily rag and spanner set, and for them, this is part of the joy of ownership. The rest of us want an oil change to be a once a year event, and for most manufacturers it's at 12, 15, 18 or maybe even 20 thousand mile intervals, but check your service book.



The other main function performed by oil is cooling and temperature distribution. The engine will typically have 3 – 6 litres of oil, maybe a bit more in a very large engine. As the oil circulates, it distributes heat from the very hot components to the less hot regions. Keeping the oil level near the maximum means more oil in circulation, which gives better temperature stability. For example, if the engine should have 6 litres but is run extremely low to 3 litres, those 3 litres must circulate twice to do the job of 6 litres of oil, so there is just less oil to carry the heat and it will be exposed to temperature extremes twice. However, when topping up the oil, be sure not to exceed the maximum as that risks forcing oil to places it does not belong, and it could break seals and lead to mechanical damage.

Using the wrong oil will not damage the engine in the short term, so if you get an oil warning light, any available oil will be better than none, both for lubrication and thermal management. However, let your mechanic know so he can drain and refill if necessary. On a related note, be aware that additional to the thermal degradation of oil in a petrol engine, diesels inevitably accumulate soot in the oil, so used oil from a diesel is black and foul. Oil for a diesel is labelled HD as it carries a high level of detergents to disperse the soot and prevent excessive accumulation within the engine. If you top up a diesel with regular oil, be sure to inform your mechanic as soon as possible.

A lesser known function of the oil is silencing. As the oil level goes down, the gap in the engine can act like the sound chamber of a musical instrument. Restoring the oil from very low to the correct level often has a dramatic silencing effect.

Some oil consumption between services is normal, and it varies by vehicle. However, a rapid increase, or indeed decrease is a warning sign.

**Gearbox oil** – gearbox oil is generally thicker than engine oil, and as it is not exposed to the same heat as engine oil, it does not suffer the same degradation, and generally lasts the life of the vehicle. The average driver can get by just fine without ever having to think about gearbox oil.



**Coolant** – coolant is a lot more than just water in the radiator, and there's more to it than antifreeze too. As with oil, any coolant is better than none, so an emergency fill with water will get you home, but get the car to a garage as soon as possible to get the correct fluids.

The cooling system is a pressurised, closed system. There are two main types of coolant, and depending on whether your engine is predominantly steel or aluminium, the coolant colour will likely be yellow/green or pink/orange. The coolant has chemicals to inhibit corrosion in that particular suite of metals, and while the wrong coolant won't damage your engine overnight, it shouldn't be left in the engine long term. The coolant also has antifreeze, ensuring that even on a frosty morning, the cooling system has circulating liquid to distribute and remove heat.



**Screen wash** – this is the one fluid you may have to top up routinely. It is water, with a mix of antifreeze and non-foaming detergents, designed to shift traffic film and bug splat. There have been scare stories in the press about washers being destroyed by using screen wash other than the manufacturer's branded solution. There is an element of truth to this, but it's not the whole story, and you're certainly not limited to the dealer brand. The antifreeze, typically glycol, is yummy for certain bacteria and algae, and the detergents contain phosphorus which encourages both these microorganisms to grow. Branded screen wash therefore has additives to inhibit their growth, whereas a cheap mix probably won't, and it may lead to a plug of what is essentially pond sludge in the jets. If you're lucky, the jets will just spray badly and can be recovered with a proper fill-up. However, a total clog is a possibility, and while not a difficult fix, your mechanic is unlikely to do it for free. *Editor's note - try not to mix different screen washes as this can lead to smearing and also to clogging up the system.*

**Brake fluid** – this is essentially a sealed system, used to transfer pressure from the brake pedal to the four wheels. It may need to be topped up at the annual service, and it is good practice to drain and replace it every five years or so as it has a tendency to absorb water vapour from the atmosphere. This can cause it to be less effective, though that's not likely to show up on anything short of an Alpine descent. However, the introduction of water to the internals of the braking system can encourage corrosion, so a complete freshen up of the brake fluid once in a while is not a bad idea.

**Power steering fluid** – the car may have a pump and reservoir for power steering fluid. In general, it will be topped up at the annual service and doesn't require a lot of attention otherwise. However, if the pump gets old and worn, it may leak fluid and become less effective. This generally manifests as noise and noticeably heavier steering with a lumpy feel. The majority of recent cars have electrical powered steering, which does not require any fluid.

**Automatic transmission fluid** – this is generally a totally sealed system, though there may be a top up at the annual service. If your automatic gets noisy, gives harsh gear changes, or smells of toasted marshmallows when hot, see a mechanic.

**Hydraulic fluid** – a small number of cars, notably a subset of Citroens, have a hydraulic pump which operates the brakes, steering and suspension. Maintenance and top-up is generally a garage activity

at the annual service. I once had a Citroen BX which burst a pressure line, and unbeknown to me was dispersing hydraulic fluid as I drove. I still had suspension, brakes and left turn, so the problem only became evident when I attempted a low-speed right turn and there was no assistance.

**Battery acid / distilled water** – I don't know of any modern car which requires battery maintenance. Even the classics which required each battery cell to be opened, checked and topped up have probably been converted, to the horror of absolute purists, to sealed, maintenance free batteries.

**Pre-drive checks** - Remember to include fluid checks in your pre-drive checks. Some of these are for all practical purposes maintenance free, but a quick ground check for any fluids outside the vehicle which should be inside can be an early warning of trouble. Signs of leakage are likely to appear on your driveway, but because the fluid may flow along structural members and the under engine tray, the leakage spot may be far from the source of the problem. The air conditioning unit, particularly at this time of year, may drop a substantial pool of fluid when you park. This is normal and not a cause for concern. If you have any worries about the fluid, dab it with a paper tissue. Air con condensate is almost pure water and will be colourless. Anything with colour, or anything noticeably oily or aromatic, requires investigation. Oil will eat up tarmac so if it's anything more than a few drops, soak it up with kitty litter and wash the area with warm soapy water. Coolant will generally have a vivid, almost fluorescent yellow or pink colour, but won't really harm your driveway. Brake, power steering and hydraulic fluid may be various colours, and can be almost as damaging as oil.

I wish you safe, reliable and enjoyable motoring.

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And finally.....

A pack of cards saves lives:



*Thanks to Colin Fogarty of the Mid-Ulster Group for reposting this on Facebook.*

And while we are on this, having nearly been swiped from behind, what about requiring electric scooters to make a noise, have an audible warning device and/or requiring them to be on the road?

**The views expressed in the “Road Observer” are not necessarily those of the Editor, the North Down Advanced Motorists Group or the Institute of Advanced Motorists**