

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group

October 2021





Official Provider



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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

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Test passes

Last month's issue recorded that Don McQuillan had passed his Masters re-test. What I failed to record was that it was a pass with distinction. Apologies to Don for omitting this and congratulations on this achievement.

New Members

This month we welcome two new motorcycle members - Jo-Anne Crooks and Vicki Smyth together with one new car member - George Megahey. We hope you not only gain from being members of our Group but will also enjoy the friendship and camaraderie of our get-togethers.

September 2021 cover picture

This one was of High Street, Killyleagh looking back up towards Killyleagh Castle. Congratulations (in order of receipt) to David Harcourt, Jim O'Brien, Norman Shearer, Ivan McStea (Belfast Group), Davie Hall, Angela Bell and Annie McFarland.

Do you recognise the location of this month's cover? 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

Covid - 19 update

The word from IAM RoadSmart is that Groups in Northern Ireland (and Scotland and Wales) have to interpret local regulations and guidance for themselves in relation to returning to operations. Our request for clarity from our elected representatives in the Assembly with regard to car observing has resulted in a letter from the Health Minister Robin Swann MLA that advice in relation to driving instructors would be applicable to advanced driving instructors also.

The Committee has therefore decided that subject to mitigations to reduce possible Covid transmission eg sanitisation, mask wearing, ventilation etc in accordance with IAM RoadSmart recommencement guidelines, we can resume car observing. However, as it has been over 18 months since observing last took place we are arranging for refresher training for our car observers before they can recommence.

We will recommence in the Boathouse on the first and last Tuesday of the month, initially concentrating on refreshing our Observers on 26 October. We will notify our car Associates as soon as we are ready to fully resume our advanced driving presentations and observed drives.

Dates for your diary

Groomsport Boathouse 7.15pm unless otherwise stated

26 October - Observer refresher training

2 November - STAC session

9 November - Group Night - Speaker: Paul Lawrence, Black Tomcat Photography "Always an opportunity"

23 November - STAC session

30 November - STAC session

7 December - STAC session

14 December - Group Night - Christmas dinner - venue TBA

STAC - Short Term Associate Course for drivers.

Annual General Meeting 2021

We had a smaller than usual turn-out for the 2021 AGM on 19 October probably due to the general lack of Group activity over the last 18 months. However, we were there in sufficient numbers to carry out the formal business and to elect the new Committee for the 2021/22 session. Chairman David Harcourt's report highlighted some activities since the last AGM and provided information about the return to car observing shortly. We currently have 8 Associates on the books and a further 8 enquiries who have been put on hold until we can clear some of the backlog.

David finished by reminding Members that the Group is their Group and he would welcome other Members to join the Committee to help us take the Group forward.

Treasurer Gareth Hughes' report showed that with little expenditure being incurred our closing balance is actually £16.75 greater than the opening balance.

Angela Bell, our former Regional Group Co-ordinator, conducted the election of the Committee for the next year:

Chairman: David Harcourt	Treasurer: Gareth Hughes
Secretary: no nomination but see note below	
Committee members: Leslie Ashe, Simon Beckett, Ronnie Brown, Lisa Carson, Ivan Greenfield, Colin Hay, Annie McFarland, Frank Robertson, John Seawright, Kyle Thomson	
In the absence of nominations for the office of Secretary, Leslie Ashe (former Secretary) will continue in the role of acting Secretary and Associate Member Stephen Patterson is shadowing him with a view to taking over when he has passed his Advanced Test.	

IAM RoadSmart CEO to step down

From IAM RoadSmart Statement:

Given the significant changes brought about by COVID-19, the green agenda, changes in legislation and technology, we are about to embark on the next stage of a very exciting time in IAM RoadSmarts' development. This involves defining and executing our strategic five-year plan and at a time of change it is also important to contemplate our individual goals. As a result, our CEO, Tony Greenidge, who has been with the us for four years, has decided to step down.

During his four years with IAM RoadSmart, Tony has made huge strides and achieved much success in moving the commercial customer portfolio and business forward. As CEO Tony has spent the last 18 months guiding the team and the wider charity safely through the COVID pandemic making a significant impact on our need to control costs and ensure financial stability. During this period Tony has worked hard to strengthen IAM RoadSmart, bringing in specialists to fill key roles, to further enhance our capabilities.

Tony said: "This is a key time for IAM RoadSmart as we are about to embark on an exciting journey which will be underpinned by a new five-year strategic plan. After much contemplation, I feel it is important the CEO who takes our charity forward into a new phase of change and strategic growth remains in place to see it through to completion. With this in mind, I have decided to step down as CEO as this vital requirement does not fit with my own personal work/life balance plans.



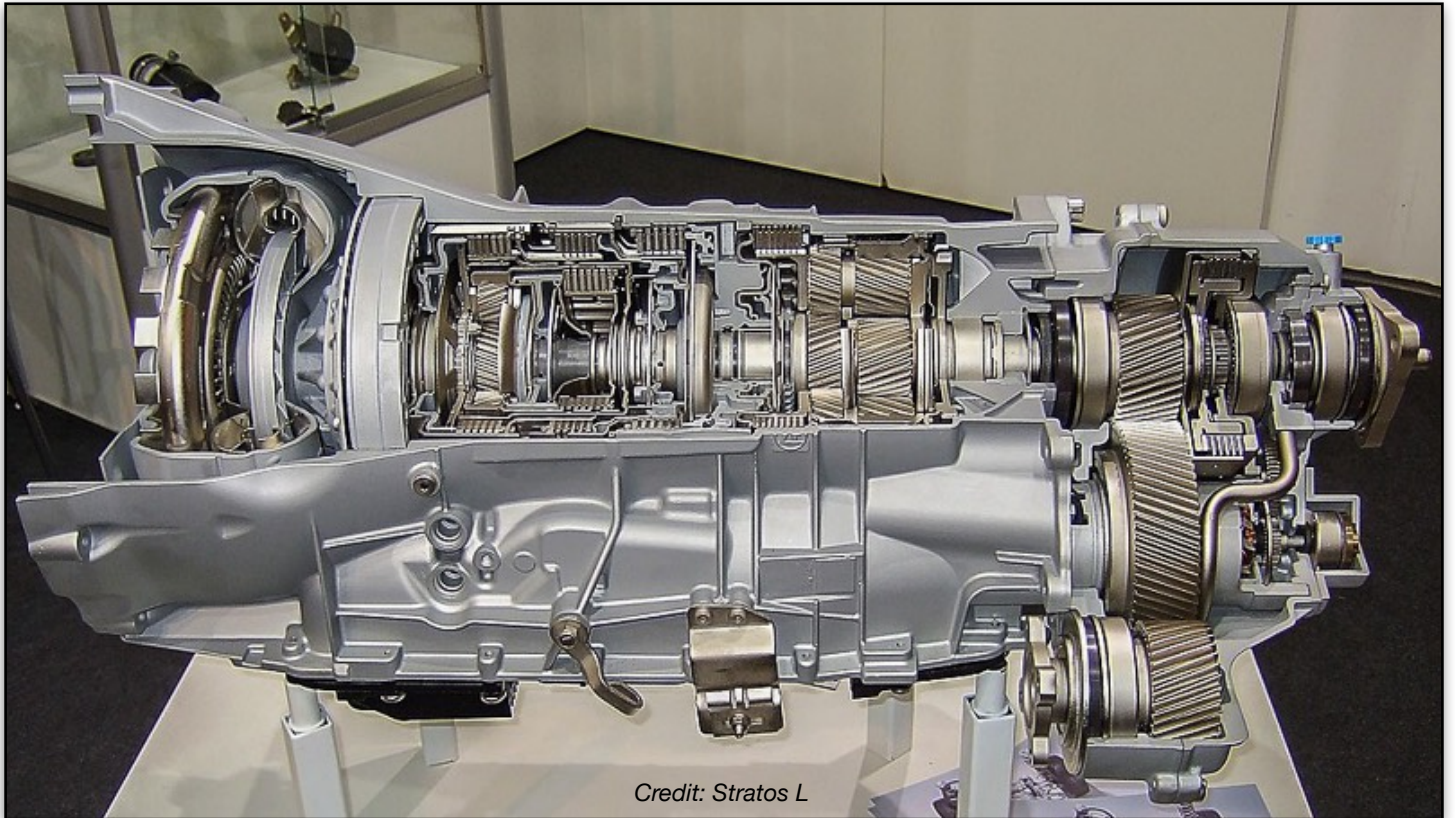
More about automatics by David Harcourt

As I wrote in the last newsletter, automatic transmission, in whatever form, is becoming more common, especially with the growth of hybrids and electrics, and it is increasingly likely that your next car may lack a clutch pedal. A common question is "should I change to Neutral (or Park) when stopped at a junction?". That is a good question, not only for new automatic owners, but long-time auto drivers may find their current auto is fundamentally different from their first. I'll give my brief answer first, then elaborate. Read the owner's manual, and if possible, try to understand the mechanism, at least at a very basic level.

- Should I change to Neutral when stopped?
 - Probably not, but it depends. See the manual for your vehicle.

- Should I select Park at traffic lights?
 - Definitely not.

I have driven automatic for many years now, and the only time I ever got momentarily confused was in switching from my own auto Vauxhall Signum to my dad's manual Signums as the cockpit was otherwise identical. I have also driven a number of other automatic vehicles of various types, ranging from tractor lawnmowers, through fork-lift trucks, off-roaders and large earth-movers, right up to a Challenger 2 tank, and of course a variety of regular cars. They're all the same, but subtly different.



(In case you ever wondered what the inside of an automatic gear box looked like)

The question which comes up most often relates to holding the car for a few moments at a junction or traffic lights. Holding a manual car in gear when stopped requires you to depress and hold the clutch. If you hold at biting point, the friction material will heat up and experience excess wear. If you hold just past biting point, it's a strain on the pressure plate spring and thrust bearing, again leading to excess wear, so in a manual, it's best to knock it out of gear and rest the clutch. Looking ahead at the traffic movement and the traffic light sequence, it's time enough to select first gear when the vehicle two ahead of you moves off.

However, in an automatic, you're already in first gear. If your introduction to automatic is via an electric or hybrid, it won't move at all until you press the accelerator. Many recent models also feature stop-start technology, so the engine will cut and the car will not try to creep, and very often the electronic parking brake will automatically engage when stopped to hold the car. However, in a more traditional automatic, there may be a tendency to creep. A pure automatic has a torque converter to connect the engine and gearbox, which is a fluid coupling with no mechanical connecting parts, so leaving it in Drive is normal and acceptable. The slippage in the torque converter may account for a little bit of fuel consumption and generate a bit of excess heat, but no actual wear. This is by far the most popular transmission in the USA, and even in the southern desert states, the heat issue does not cause issues so the risk of overheating a well maintained auto in the UK is minimal. However, if you expect to be stopped for a few minutes, manual or automatic, it's good practice to cut the ignition.

So, why would I not select Neutral when stopped at a junction? Because, in a true automatic:

- It's unnecessary. The torque converter accommodates slippage without wear and tear.
- It doesn't achieve anything as the torque converter will still be turning in neutral.
- I'll put more wear on the selector and gearbox by selecting Neutral than by leaving it in Drive

Why would I not select Park when stopped at a junction? Because, in any automatic:

- I'm not parked, I'm still driving.
- Park mode is designed especially for parking, and it engages a mechanical lock (pawl, spline or dog-clutch) on the shaft. This is the single component in the transmission most prone to wear.
- If I'm in park and get hit from behind, it will almost certainly damage the mechanical lock, so I'll have much bigger problems than a bent bumper.
- Pulling the lever directly to Drive in response to a green light can be quite harsh. In most modern vehicles, the auto gear selector does not select the gear, but sends a command to the Transmission Control Unit, which may impose its own delay to the selection. The gearbox for the Ford Mustang, used in the Jaguar S-Type, has a six second tolerance on the selection – it's usually quicker, but if it responds within six seconds, it is within specification, and that's a long time to be sitting at a green light holding up the lane of traffic.



- Moving the selector from Drive to Park and vice-versa can involve going through Reverse, and it can be alarming for the following driver to see me apparently fumbling the gears and making a hesitant start.

The torque converter has no friction components, no wear while idling, and mechanically moving the lever to Neutral and back to Drive will cause more wear than leaving it in Drive. My Vauxhall Signum expressly stated in the owner's manual that holding it on the footbrake automatically engaged neutral. That does perhaps cause you to display brake lights to the following vehicle in a line of traffic, which is itself not good practice, so in my Signum I applied the handbrake and released the footbrake at cost of a little fuel for the comfort of the following driver. However, brake lights are not

the biggest crime against fellow road users so at times I'm sure I probably held the car for 20 seconds on the footbrake.

The situation with other auto styles may be less clear-cut. My wife's Abarth 500 drives like an automatic, but is fundamentally a manual with computer actuation. As such, the mechanical clutch is prone to wear on the friction plate, springs and thrust bearing, so the handbook recommends manually selecting neutral if you're stationary for more than a few seconds. My daughter's Citroen has a very similar gearbox to the Abarth, but the handbook makes no mention of selecting neutral at rest. I have had conflicting advice from salesmen, but the mechanic advised treating it like a manual. The VW Audi family have a very nice Direct Shift Gearbox (DSG) with a dual clutch mechanism under computer control. I have seen conflicting information as to whether it should or should not be shifted to neutral when stopped, and I don't have access to a handbook, so once again my advice is read the owner's manual for your particular vehicle, and please let me know.

Having read the manual, you will be well versed to tell your observer, and eventually your examiner, why you have made certain choices. The examiner is a motoring enthusiast, and will be interested in your understanding of the function and how to use it best. You will create a good impression as a thinking driver, and a thinking driver is a safe driver.

Happy motoring.

Editor's note: The handbook for my car (Audi 7-speed DSG) states that position N be used for example in a tunnel car wash (a carwash where the car is taken through on a conveyor system). It is silent on what to do eg at traffic lights but it has "hold assist" and "stop start" which, when operating together, means that 99% the time when stopped at lights or in queuing traffic the "stop start" is activated, the engine is not running and therefore there is no need to move into neutral. Just to repeat David's advice - read and understand the manual.

I have always found it annoying when stopped behind someone at traffic lights and they keep their foot on the brakes the whole time - at night the 3 brake lights can be very bright. However, I have discovered that when I use hold assist in my car say at traffic lights the brake lights are illuminated - so I have joined the people annoying those behind. I'm not convinced this is a necessary function. By all means have your brake lights illuminated when someone is approaching from behind but they are not necessary in a line of stationary traffic.

Winter is on the way

Although the sun is still shining, the chilly mornings are starting to creep in. Here are some tips to help you through the winter conditions.

- It's important to keep the windscreen clean. Try to get scratches, abrasions and chips fixed as colder temperatures can make the damage worse. Keep the windscreen washer topped up with a more concentrated screen wash mix to ensure it doesn't freeze in action. And don't forget your de-icer.
- Check your tyres. The legal limit of a tread depth may be 1.6mm but anything under 3mm will see a potential fall off in grip and braking performance. Most of us drive with summer tyres all year round. If long-term cold weather is forecast, and you can afford it, invest in a set of winter tyres approved by your car manufacturer. Alternatively try all-season tyres which perform well in both winter and summer conditions. Don't follow urban driver myths of reducing the tyre pressure to get more grip – it simply doesn't work



- Set up a pre-winter check list. List things that need to be checked such as the car battery, bulbs, wiper blades and electrics. You don't want to be stranded in a cold car in the middle of night waiting for the recovery team to get you up and running again.
 - Dress appropriately for the weather. It may be surprising but too many drivers dress based on a working car heater. If it breaks or you are stranded you can easily be caught cold.
 - Start to plan for the really bad weather with a survival kit in the boot. Spare clothes, a torch, mobile phone charger, some emergency rations such as water, chocolate and a tow rope and shovel to help yourself and others.
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And finally.....

I came across a report about a mini-roundabout in Glenrothes, Fife. The Council decided to paint direction arrows around the roundabout to assist road users and got it wrong..... they were hastily repainted.



It's the junction between Bilsland Road and South Parks Road and if you look for it on Google Earth you can see the the new arrows and traces of the wrong arrows.

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