



Let the fun begin...

When it comes to taking your very first drive on the road, the wild open landscape of the East Anglian Fens has both advantages and disadvantages

Words & pictures: Simon Goldsworthy

You never forget your first drive. And I don't mean the one sitting on your dad's lap and steering round the car park while he works all the controls, but the first one on the road when you can reach the pedals and have full command of the car. Mine was at 6.30am on my 17th birthday when poor old Mr Smith the driving instructor had to turn out of bed

early so I could have my first lesson before going to school.

As you can probably gather, I was pretty keen to learn to drive. I turned 17 in November 1982 and back then in Norwich where I lived it took three months to get a driving

test appointment. Mr Smith was a bit surprised to learn that by the time he arrived at 6.30am, I had already been to the post box and sent off my test application despite never having driven a car before. As I said, I was very keen.

The car I learnt to drive in was a white Volkswagen Polo, nothing special but then instructors' cars do tend to be pretty dull. There was a rumour in Norwich at the time that one guy taught in a big Ford Granada on the basis that novices were unlikely to stall a car with so much torque, but this may have been an urban myth. Since then, there have been a number of changes to the driving test, including the introduction of a separate theory test alongside the practical examination, but



one thing that hasn't changed is that most people learn in the duller of cars. And that brings me to the cause of this particular amble down memory lane – my eldest son, Ben, has just turned 17 and wants to learn to drive.

A while back, we ran a feature on Paul Campling, a driving instructor whose weapon of choice is an MG ZR. Working on the theory that there is no harm in getting the next generation started young, I called Paul to see if the MG was still going strong. It was, and Paul was happy for me to sit in the back while Goldsworthy Junior had his first lesson. Goldsworthy Junior was happy with that arrangement too because it meant I would be paying, and I thought it would make interesting reading for those of you who have children or grandchildren of this age, or simply to remind you of your own first adventure behind the wheel. And so it was that I went back to school.

As I sit in the back making notes, Paul goes through the basics of seat adjustment, mirrors, controls and so on, plus giving the foot brake a prod to make sure it feels firm. Then he explains about the biting point on the clutch, demonstrates this in action and sets off to find a suitable starting point for Ben away from the built up area of Gosberton. All the while he talks through what he is doing – use of mirrors, signals, hand position on the gear stick and the wheel.

And then he pulls over and it is Ben's turn. I should explain here that Gosberton is in the farming Fens of Lincolnshire,

which in some ways is ideal for a beginner's first lesson. For one thing there are no hills to contend with, and for another the country roads can run straight for miles across the rich farmland. This makes them perfect for getting the hang of moving off and stopping before having to deal with anything more complicated than a straight line.

With Ben behind the wheel, the first task is to adjust the seat and mirrors to suit. Paul relates how people used to tell learners to adjust the rear view mirror slightly off the ideal spot so that they had to move their head to use it – that way the examiner would know when they were using the mirror. And yes, I can remember being told exactly that all those years ago, though probably by friends rather than the driving instructor because as Paul points out, that also means the examiner knows equally well when you are not using the mirror, so it can work against you too. And besides, it is safer, quicker and easier to adjust it

Above: Nerves of steel meet the Play Station generation – instructor Paul Campling gets 17 year old Ben ready for his very first drive on the road.





Above: In this rural setting, we are up to fifth gear in the first lesson.

Right: Mirror, signal, manoeuvre, not forgetting to check the blind spot.

Below: Paul helps guide Ben through the first of a series of 90 degree bends.

properly so you can see behind with just a flick of the eyes.

Paul runs through the controls again now that Ben is behind the wheel, and points out the air bag in the centre of the wheel – we were always taught never to cross your hands when turning the wheel so that you didn't lock up your arms, but now there is the added incentive to feed the wheel through your hands because if they are crossed in an accident, the air bag would explode into your arms and shoot them into your face.

There's a lot to go through – the controls you need to make the car move, plus all the others such as fog lights, demisters, wipers and washers that you need to know not only where they are on this car, but also the theory of how and when to use them. There are safety checks too including ensuring the hand brake is on (and learning how to release and reapply it), gear stick in neutral, checking the foot brake for feel and then, half an hour into the lesson, Ben is told to turn the key – but only to the first position! There is more to being a safe driver than simple car control, and Paul also runs through the warning lights that come on as the circuits are energised, and which ones would indicate a problem that means you should stop driving immediately and investigate.



Finally, the moment arrives when Ben is told to start the engine. With the K-series idling, he is grinning and ready to move off, except that Paul wants to go through the stopping procedure first. Ah, good idea. I'd forgotten about that, but as Paul says, he prefers to teach a student how to stop before they are travelling down the road.

Then it is time and Ben follows Paul's instructions to move off: 'Get the clutch down – try not to look at what you are doing with your feet, your eyes are much better employed out there – and into first gear. Hand on the hand brake, but don't do anything with it yet. Ease the clutch up until you feel the bite, then stop as soon as you do. Start with your left mirror, interior mirror then right, check the blind spot. There's nothing behind you so the hand brake goes down – look ahead as you do it – and give it a bit of gas. Not that much gas! Then ease the clutch up all the way and once it is up, don't use it as a foot rest.

'That's good, so now we are going to bring it to a stop at the side of the road. The first thing is to use your mirrors. We've got a tractor coming up behind us so give him a left signal, ease off the gas, don't do anything with the clutch yet but move over to the foot brake and brake gently. Now put the clutch down all the way, brake a bit more and bring it to a stop. Hand brake on – whoops, don't release the clutch until you have put it into neutral or you will stall the engine. So, fire it up again...'

And that is it. Not the most earth shattering of events, but Ben's first drive on the road. And while he did stall it after coming to a halt, the moving off and stopping were commendably smooth, certainly smoother than my first attempt when the little Polo lurched down the road with kangaroo juice in the tank! Then, after a few more starts and



stops in first, second gear is added to the mix. Then third, followed by ... well, I'm sure you know how it goes. By the time we are up to fifth gear, we are barrelling along at a heady 45mph and Ben's smile has become wider with each additional ratio. This is driving as he has imagined it!

Sitting in the back seat, it is not quite how I imagined it, however. This is probably because the environment is so very different to the city roads on which I learnt to drive. The problem is that while a typical Fenland road is straight and quiet, its surface also undulates like a big dipper and it has a sharp camber that falls directly into drainage ditches on either side. Very deep drainage ditches that are very close to the road, with nothing but a narrow strip of grass between us and them. 50mph seems very fast indeed when the person behind the wheel has never driven a car before – I hadn't expected him to get above 30mph on this first lesson.

Paul, however, seems completely unperturbed. Partly this is because, as a good driving instructor and experienced MG racer, he has the requisite nerves of steel. But he also has 25 years of teaching experience to assess the student and the road, not to mention his own clutch and brake pedal with which to override Ben's enthusiasm should the need arise. Sitting in the back while my son drives is, however, a new experience for me. I'm not the best of passengers anyway, but knowing that Ben's driving experience has been limited almost entirely to the Play Station and Grand Theft Auto is not exactly a comforting thought – I believe the point of that game is to crash as spectacularly as you can to gain extra points!

But he cannot be accused of lacking in confidence, and with a typical teenager's belief in his own immortality he gets us up to 60mph. I just have to trust in Paul's instincts – and, of course, the brake/clutch pedal in the passenger footwell.

Having gone up through the gears and brought the car to a safe stop in whatever ratio he's reached, Paul then teaches Ben how to go back down the gears and a few miles down the road both Paul's trust and Ben's confidence have been vindicated as we are still safely on the Tarmac. But I can see another typical characteristic of these Fenland roads up ahead – after running arrow straight for miles, they suddenly turn at 90 degrees for no apparent reason. By the time I was 17 years old, I had covered quite literally thousands of miles on my bicycle and then my moped, so I had some idea of how to tackle corners. Youngsters these days don't seem to get out and about in the same way and I am mildly interested to see how far Ben thinks



he needs to turn the wheel to get round a 90 degree bend, and how fast he should be going when he does it. Especially now that it has started snowing and is blowing a gale.

It turns out that whether by luck or judgment, he nails it perfectly as we swing first right and then left through 90 degrees with the car perfectly placed and under total control. It helps that all the while Paul is talking him through the process and giving pointers as to what he should be doing, including the need to keep his eyes on the exit point as we round the first corner and then looking ahead as the second one approaches.

This idea of looking ahead to where you are going is a very important lesson to learn. Whenever Ben looks to one side of the road or down at the gear stick instead of relying on touch, the car moves off line and into that direction. It really does follow your eyes and as Paul says: 'What you look at is what you hit.' I am not totally reassured by this and take it to mean that if you have a choice between a hard and a soft obstacle, you should look at the soft one. Fortunately Paul explains that

Above: A shower of rain and even a short flurry of snow fail to make a dent in our progress.

Below: The ZR is an ideal vehicle on which to learn, being small, light and with good visibility.





Above: The quiet roads make an ideal starting point, but next up will be a visit to Boston...

Below: If you live near Paul and want your child to learn in an MG, the number you need is on the ZR's door!

he means you should be looking at the gap between them.

We are now one and a half hours into the two hour lesson, and the curves look a great place for pictures. We are about ready to turn round anyway, so I hop out and Paul turns the car around so that Ben can take the first of a few passes while I snap away. At the end of each run, Paul turns the car round for the next one because reversing is not on the schedule until Ben has got a few more lessons under his wheels, but as we wrap things up and head back to Gosberton, I am amazed at how much has been achieved on this very first day. Not quite enough for me to insure Ben to practice on my own ZT just yet because long, straight and quiet roads such as this can lull you into a false sense of your own ability, but I'm sure it won't be long. A few more lessons with Paul to cover junctions, reversing and emergency stops and that will be it – I'll never have a car to call my own again.

Taking the theory test

These days, the driving test consists of a multiple choice theory test as well as a practical examination. There are 50 questions in the test, and you can find two free practice tests on the website at www.safedrivingforlife.info. As part of writing this feature, I did the first of these tests to see how much of the *Highway Code* I had forgotten after 30 years of driving. To my amazement, I passed the test with 48 correct answers out of 50 (the pass mark is 43). The two I got wrong were that the speed limit on a motorway when towing a trailer is 60mph (I selected 50mph, but that is the limit on single carriageway roads) and that level crossing lights start off amber rather than going straight to flashing red (though I reckon that any light at a level crossing would cause me to stop, so I don't think this gap in my knowledge would ever have put me in danger).

However, several things surprised me about the test. One was how hard it was to relate the written descriptions to what you actually experience on the road, and another was just how much emphasis there was on first aid and the environment rather than driving safety. I was also quite frankly disappointed with how poorly selected the questions were. For example, two of the answers effectively counted for double points, and they were hardly the most important ones either. One of them referred to the white line marking the edge of a carriageway. Yes, the compilers of the test thought it was worth two points to know that a white line along the edge of the road meant that this was the edge of the road, whereas I thought that was common sense and not worth one point, let alone asking for the same information in two different ways. Another double pointer related to the archaic hand signals, with one question asking you to identify the signal for turning left and another showing you the same options and asking you to pick which one meant slowing down. Effectively if you knew (or guessed) one answer, then you automatically knew the other; equally if you got one wrong, you were then penalised twice. As Ben said, if only somebody could come up with a lighting system that told other drivers of your intentions... Yes, he failed his practice test with 38 correct answers out of 50!

