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The car that launched a voyage of discovery through the dutiful stations of British bureaucracy

Cars: A Rant

By Andy Ross

What does your car represent to you? Mobility, freedom, a nice big shopping trolley, perhaps even a few thrills, or instead bother, frustration, endless expense, and fifty shades of misery? In Germany you might go for thrills and so on, but we British drivers are more perverse.

Face it, driving here is no fun. Lurching over potholes and speed bumps and crazy quilts of patches on patches, as the queue in front stops and starts just often enough to keep poor sods with manual gearboxes doing wild workouts on the clutch pedal and gear stick, until a space opens up and Top Gear speed-

sters in a hurry can gun their motors for just long enough to be caught on candid camera before they hit the brakes, sucks, to use a phrase.

The patient driver may finally get to where he or she wanted to go. But then the parking ticket machine demands coins you don't have for a time period you don't know you'll want in payment for a narrow space in a sorry corner to park your ride, leaving it neatly labelled with a ticket that tells every lurking chancer how long he has to inspect the stuff you left on the back seat. It's pitiful.

To me, this is British masochism at its most refined. Forget sex games with horsewhips and handcuffs. Motoring is where Britons

today get to feel perverse pride in toughing out pain and misery that would make lesser breeds weep in despair. The whole institution of motoring has become an exercise in tolerating the accumulated dregs of decades of penny-pinching neglect and Dunkirk-spirit muddling through, and moreover having the backbone to overcome all the attendant difficulties with a smile and a whistle, as Lord Baden-Powell, hero of Mafeking, advised boy scouts to do.

I say this as a veteran of German autobahns. For a quarter of a century I lived in Germany, and returned to the humble delights of living in Poole in June this year. I had lived in the Heidelberg area, which is provincial, even picturesque, and moderately prosperous. But what I recall with special longing was the road system. Long straight boulevards, often wide enough for dual carriageways, with crash barriers for the fast stretches and flyovers with gently curved ramps for the junctions, and nary a pothole in sight, all made for a relaxed and stress-free experience, every day. And the famous autobahn stretches without speed limits allowed the racer types to let off steam in relative safety. The whole system was a joy to use.

Even parking was good. The Parkhaus system was computerised. As I drove around town, street signs told me how many free places there were in the next multi-deck P-house at that moment. Once in one, with a ticket to take away, I could return when I wanted to pay a machine for the time I'd used by inserting any combination of coins or notes. The machines gave change. It all seemed obvious and natural.

So you can imagine my misery. Worse, I compounded it wilfully. I decided to bring my German car with me and register it here. Big mistake! In previous years, on holidays, I drove across and learned to be patient with car parks where I couldn't just lean out the window to lift the entry or exit barriers. To avoid dazzling other drivers, I accessorised the car during the tunnel crossing with little stickers on the computerised xenon head-

lamps, which were high-tech units that on dipped beam lit the right side more brightly.

Now I had to do a proper job and replace the headlamps with left-leaning modules. And the law said I had to replace the speedometer with one that read in miles per hour, good British Imperial units, not those funny units that Napoleon made fashionable on the continent. The car was a BMW, and the new hardware was not cheap. No one in the BMW design department had thought about the travails of a stubborn fool from England who chose to adapt his Beemer to drive on the wrong side of the road. So it wasn't just a pair of light bulbs or an instrument dial I had to replace, but the whole Beeming lot.

If that were all, I'd write to BMW and call it quits. In fact I did. I suggested they boldly open up a new world where citizens of the European Union could drive back and forth across the channel at whim and adapt their cars for right or left with the flip of a switch. I even outlined a technical implementation. But despite my carefully crafted German composition, in which I casually revealed a fine grasp of both the technical and legal issues, the intrepid young research and development engineers in Munich fobbed me off with an artfully formulated no. They had better things to do than fiddle about with their highly optimised headlight geometry for the sake of a few British drivers who were too poor or too miserly to buy a new car when they changed their country of residence.

That was not all by a long way. The British bureaucracy has devious tricks in store for bone-headed customers like me who choose to import foreign vehicles into the Sceptred Isles. When I explained my naive wish to the counter clerk at the cheerless local DVLA office, after being forced to park a serious walk in the rain away and then sitting meekly in line for his attention with a numbered ticket in my hand before perching in front of a glass cut-out evidently designed to hold back angry customers, his face lit up with devilish glee as he told me, "You'll have a few forms to fill out, then."

The application form he handed me was a shocker. It had about fifty highly technical questions, including such details as the minimum and maximum width of each axle in millimetres, the emission level of carbon dioxide, as well as of nitrous oxide and hydrocarbons, in grams per kilometre, and the engine number. Relax, he said, most of the information is on the European certificate of conformity that came with the vehicle when I bought it. Indeed, I soon found most of it was.

But the engine number was not. As a holy innocent on the finer points of car mechanics, I didn't know where to find the engine number under the bonnet, so I went and asked my local BMW dealer. He pulled a long face: "Hmm, we may have to take the engine out to read it." I performed a distinctly unholy Basil Fawlty impersonation, protesting the iniquity of a system that recorded chassis numbers but not engine numbers on the forms and then asked for the engine number anyway, when the local dealer with all his generously configured computer hardware couldn't find it, and he went away to check. "No, just the intake manifold," he said (or something just as technical) and hazarded a dizzying price. Back at home, I called my old German dealer. A minute later, he read out the engine number to me from his computer screen. BMW dealers in dynamic, modern Germany are efficiently networked, but not in dozy old England, it seems.

That form was just the start. There was something called NOVA to do with HM Revenue and Customs, which had to be done online. I admit I'm a bit of a pro with online business processes, having worked for over a decade at SAP headquarters in Germany, but the HMRC pages explaining NOVA had me baffled. The process required an online VAT registration, which I was warned would take a while for a new user. I was advised to go to an accountant. I did, and paid the bill, to watch a real pro NOVA the car in minutes.

Naturally the British authorities refuse to recognise German technical car inspection certificates, even for checks conducted with

full Teutonic rigour only weeks earlier, so I had to get an MOT certificate, for a price. Meanwhile, my new British insurance company (my German insurance company didn't have a UK affiliate) was sending me pained letters issuing cover notes for longer and longer as I still struggled to get a British registration number for the car.

There was another hurdle to clear. Brussels or no Brussels, the European certificate of conformity is evidently not enough for British bureaucrats, who may find it hard to read off the right data from forms speckled with the clumsy formulations that decorate German bureaucratic language, and they require in addition a certificate of recognition from the Vehicle Certification Agency. So I duly obtained one, paying the requisite administration fee with a weary sigh.

Finally, I bundled my papers and mailed the whole lot to Swansea. The online process spits out forms for the applicant to print but does not obviate the need for mailing paper back and forth to complete a ritual that was evidently frozen in stone before computer workflows were more than a gleam in the eye of the system architects at SAP, let alone the classics-trained Whitehall mandarins.

Again I was offered a golden opportunity to enact my pained Basil Fawlty impersonation when a week or so later a letter came back from Swansea rejecting my application.

Again I paid a visit to the local DVLA office. I explained how I'd conformed to the letter of the law, and imbibed deeply of its spirit, and the wise old desk clerk said there'd evidently been a mistake. He asked me to return after the weekend. I did, and the registration was complete. Miraculously, as it now seemed, I had a number and a tax disc.

But imagine my predicament if the local DVLA office had not existed. It's due to close later this year, as part of an economy drive that will leverage online synergies to downsize the organisation. The bean counters in Whitehall have found a new wrinkle to compound the masochistic despair of the average British

citizen, as offices providing essential services are closed, unemployment numbers pushed higher, and the quality of public service allowed to deteriorate yet further.

So here I am, two months later and many pounds sterling lighter, with a left hand drive car that's street legal in the UK but would require another mechanical kafuffle and bureaucratic nightmare to become street legal once more in Germany. This is where European integration, or lack of it, hits the tarmac.

Advanced in years as I am, I recall clearly the days some forty years ago when Britons debated the wisdom of making the switch nationwide from driving on the left to driving on the right. Australia and Sweden made the switch, and never looked back. I've driven to Sweden from Germany a few times, and the border crossing was as seamless as driving to any other German neighbour. There was even a big new bridge between Denmark and Sweden to keep the traffic flowing smoothly. But we hardy islanders kept our old tradition of driving on the left, accompanied among the great nations now only by Japan, host to another famously insular breed of diehards. And we refused to build a bridge to France. What, let the next invading army simply drive in? Perish the thought!

Returning to the big question, how do cars fit into our lifestyle? The answer for most of us is that they're pretty much indispensable. Try meeting a working family's transport needs for a while with buses and trains and you'll probably agree. Cars are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.

So why don't we get real about fitting them in smoothly? Politicians still wax eloquent about banning cars, imposing more restrictions, hitting motorists where it hurts, scrimping on road repairs, bemoaning oil imports and climate change, imposing congestion charges and installing cameras and speed bumps, as if the greatest invention since the wheel were an epidemic as horrific as the Black Death.

In Germany they got it right. Modernise the car industry, make cars safer and cleaner and more reliable and less thirsty with each new model generation, build roads fit for purpose and keep on improving them, and solve the parking problem with German thoroughness.

Britain once had an empire. We can solve big problems. So let's get a grip on this car thing and raise our game in a sector that could really put the country back on the industrial map again. If the Germans can do it, we can too. And while we're at it, let's make sure that chaps like me can move back and forth in Europe without ranting like a maniac.



Andy Ross is an oldster, holder of four degrees, author of six books and lots of papers as well as a fascinating blog, and owner of an ageing car. These are his tokens of an active life of mind.