

Chapter 11 Vehicles

Aged 16, my father bought me a brand new Raleigh cycle at a cost of £16. Now I had an older friend, Jerry Gates from Ivinghoe, who was big into motorcycles. Yes, he swapped my cycle for a 250cc sidevalve BSA motorbike of great age. The machine had been involved in a crash which had damaged the frame and suspension so that to keep the machine vertical you had to lean substantially to the left: my father was not best pleased with the deal. Somehow I never fell off this machine.

The next big step was to a 500cc Rudge Whitworth of 1933 vintage. The cylinder head had four valves giving the machine exceptional acceleration. The tappets needed constant adjustment and this resulted in fingers that were permanently oil stained. I fell off this bike several times and remember going to the chemist in Tring and presenting a rashed backside where the gravel had worn through a stout overcoat, trousers and underpants.

I eventually replaced it with a more modern 250cc BSA in good condition and I never fell off this. On the other hand, turning right towards Yateley on the Camberley – Blackbushe road on a dark and wet night, an American service bus struck me from behind. I came round in the ambulance and was hospitalised for a couple of days with severe concussion. My crash helmet had a compression ring all round where I had landed on my head.

My friend Peter Cook was left some property by an Aunt. Included in her bequest was a 1937 Austin 12 Saloon car, a wonderful machine with wide running boards. It had been locked up through the war in a thatched barn; most of the thatch was badly eroded and the bodywork of the car was severely rusted. The good news was that the windows had been closed and the leather upholstery in good condition.

We knew a friendly garage proprietor, Revill, who agreed that, under his supervision we could renovate the car in one of his buildings. Peter, Derek Bowers and I lovingly took the paintwork back to bare metal and did a complete respray. As for the engine this was totally re-built: I recall Revill cleansing the engine block with a paraffin sprayer with a lighted cigarette in his mouth!

Eventually here the three of us were, aged 18-19 with a sophisticated motorcar. None of our contemporaries had anything like this so that we were ahead of the game. The arrangement was that Peter used it on Saturdays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, Derek on Sundays and Wednesdays and my turn was on Mondays and Fridays. To go to a dance at the Victoria Hall at Tring and offer a lady a lift home in your de-luxe car put you in with a distinct chance. (At a raffle at the Victoria Hall, Derek and I won a box of large Havana cigars. Naturally we both puffed away: the outcome was that we were both violently sick and neither of us ever smoked again – how lucky to win that raffle!)

A year or so later Derek took a job, which gave him the use of a rather old van. He found it practical to have a mattress in the rear. Derek was always quick. Coming down The Crong from Cholesbury to Tring he went rather too quickly and rolled it but the damage was not too severe. (Thankfully there was no lady on board on this occasion)

A new road had been built and my father decided we should drive along it in his Standard Eight. It was called the M1 at St. Albans and there was about a five-mile long stretch with no other vehicles on it. The Standard had one major fault: it had “Bowden” cable brakes. Going forward these were fine. Going backwards they just did not work. I have had countless nightmares in this vehicle with my foot jammed on a brake pedal as the car accelerated in reverse.

In business, starting with a small Austin van I progressed through some mundane cars until I acquired a Lotus Cortina. Now this was the bees knees: really fast with splendid roadholding: I took all the “Lotus” badges off and installed one proclaiming “1500” to pose as a wolf in sheep’s clothing but maybe the exhaust pipe gave me away. Whilst I owned this vehicle Vauxhall brought out a car with a powerful three litre engine and I arranged to have a test drive. I wrote it off, not realising how inferior the roadholding would be to that of the Lotus. I banged myself about somewhat and remember being in hospital unable to make conversation. I had to mentally teach myself the alphabet and gradually recovered the ability to converse. A week later I saw the manager of the Vauxhall garage to discuss the event. He wanted to know if I was going to buy one of these cars. I replied that I already had. He then indicated that it had been a bad week in that eleven cars had been damaged. Mine was the worst but one lady had “done” three. In the garage forecourt she had hit both the car in front of her and the one behind!

I had a two litre Triumph saloon, which was a superb machine and a very good towing vehicle when travelling to sailing events with Derek. Towing, you were not supposed to exceed 50 miles per hour. Our strategy for not being caught was to make sure that no cars approached from the rear, which meant a cruising speed of around 90mph. On one Bank holiday evening we were flying along for miles (still towing) overtaking heavy traffic being chased by a civilian car: it turned out to be Pat Moss the rally driver: we let her by eventually.

Later I had a couple of Triumph stags in my posing years. The first was splendid but the second was a dog. It was in this vehicle that I came close to losing my “marriage tackle” Dropping in to the car park of the Walton Road off licence the car passed over one of the prone parking prevention

posts that would be erected when the premises were closed. These posts had a diameter of about three inches and were 2'6 inches long. It appears that this particular post was damaged and not lying completely flat: in its forward motion the car caught the tube and propelled it upwards in a flash between my legs and the steering wheel – quite a shock. (If it had got me the compensation for the impairment would have to have been monumental!) In those days I would regularly give lifts to all and sundry and had many interesting conversations with the travellers. I was driving through Hemel Hempstead and went past a rather long bus queue. I could not fail to notice that half way along the line there was a stunning blonde; this caused me to drive round the block and offer the said lady a lift which, surprisingly, she accepted. I drove her home to Leverstock Green.....

In my early days of courting Margaret I received a phone call from her one morning, from her son Patrick's school, asking me to come and collect her. When I arrived she was wet. There had been much rain and the route to school included a passage beneath a railway bridge, which was prone to flood. On the previous morning a notice was displayed warning of a flood but she carried on regardless through the three inches of water. The following day the sign was still there and in she went again. This time she stalled in the middle in two feet of water, which started to fill the car. The first thing she did was to reach down into the water to apply the handbrake in case the car rolled out of the flood! Patrick aged 8, and his friends Chris and Tim were mortified. They all managed to get onto an elevated walkway and escape. As usual Margaret was in her Dynasty glamour outfit when a farmer, used to this sort of problem, came out to help. Margaret had to cling on to the back of his tractor, re-enter the car to release the brake, and be towed out. The car was a write off. It was a "Hondamatic" so would you not be surprised to hear that it became her

“Hondaquatic”. Poor Patrick’s street cred was ruined by his teacher’s question “and whose dotty mother drove into the lake?” Last year by chance at a party, we bumped into Dick Mole, a local farmer, who said to Margaret “Don’t I recognise you?” Yes this was her saviour, a full twenty years after the event.

I think I have to list Margaret’ experiences with her Jaguar saloon. It was a very handsome car in British Racing Green with lush cream upholstery. Being early off the production line it was mechanically not good and had to go back to the garage for repairs regularly. It started to run very badly again so the garage arranged to collect it. Margaret explained the problem and advised the driver not to attempt Cadsden hill but suggested he keep to the flat road and go by Chequers. He ignored that advice and went up Cadsden hill and made it to the summit. On the way down the driver following flashed him to stop and advised him that there was smoke coming from the back of the car. Seeing this he opened the passenger door to collect his papers and, in so doing, a sheet of flame shot from the rear to the front of the car. Thank goodness he was not caught by it. The Fire Brigade said it was the best car fire they had had all year. The road had to be re-surfaced and it took a year for the hedgerow to recover. The garage said they had never known this to happen before: the insurance company said it happened all the time!

Our elderly cleaner Ruby asked Margaret why I did not have a personalised number plate. Margaret replied that, before her, I did not always want my whereabouts to be advertised. It took a while for the penny to drop but when it did she exclaimed, “Oh I say” and was off to tell her neighbours.

There were two lines of traffic into the Bucks County Show as I arrived in the 320 Diesel. Half way through inspecting my tickets the young gateman let out a yell “Maserati

Quatro Porto” and was gone, handing over to a colleague. In the adjacent lane had arrived my son Chris. Quite nice to be so thoroughly outdone by the old boy.