

Learning to Drive

I was taught the rudiments of driving by a grocery delivery boy called Jack who worked for Alfie Taylor, the manager of the shop owned by my retired grandfather. "Jack is a big lig," my mother would say, adding "but mostly harmless". He would drive Alfie's dilapidated Standard 8 car to deliver boxes of groceries that wouldn't fit in the carrier of his messenger boy's bike.

After the early death of my father, Mum took my sister and me to live in the house above her father's shop. Jack taught me to drive when I was 15 years old. Lessons began in the garage yard behind the shop so I was limited to first gear and reverse there.

Becoming more ambitious I moved out on to the Gilnahirk road with Jack beside me at first. Policemen didn't go to Cherryvalley often in the 1950's so there was little chance of apprehension. Soon I became more daring; on Saturday afternoons, the shop was closed so Alfie went in his modern A30 to his country home. He was a careless man; typically he would leave the old car in one of the old lock-up garages behind the shop where he jammed a piece of wood into the hasp instead of using a padlock. The old Standard 8 needed a key to turn on the ignition and a pull on a knob then started the engine. The car-key was flat; no serrations like most cars; the ignition could be switched on with a nail file or small screwdriver; the doors didn't lock after years of neglect. This car was begging to be borrowed!

I started with short runs on my own but inevitably the word got out and boys appeared from everywhere in this backwater, most of them I'd never seen before. Suggestions were made that someone in my position couldn't possibly refuse so I took the car out for longer runs on the main road with lots of volunteer passengers on board.

A deterrent was the fact that the car was left at weekends with very little petrol in the tank. I managed to overcome this by getting a little petrol from each of the two pumps on the forecourt of the closed shop, simply by draining the drops left in the curve of the hoses. There were no locks to stop the nozzles being removed from their holders.

One day I was careering around Cherryvalley with the car full of boys but almost empty of petrol, the drooping running-boards touching the kerb if I occasionally swerved; suddenly there was smoke in the car, it was on fire! One of the boys had been fiddling with something beneath the dashboard. I jammed on the brakes and everyone bailed out whilst I bashed out the fire with the nearest thing to hand; Alfie's old cloth cap.

It proved some sort of point that, when Alfie returned each Monday morning, he never mentioned the completely empty petrol tank or the smell of smoke in his old cap, in the last case. He must have guessed it was me borrowing his car! My driving experience was self-curtailed after that, just as well I think! As soon as I reached the legal age of 17, I paid 7 shillings and 6 pence to the G.P.O. and bought myself a driving licence; no tests required then. After that Alfie would lend me his A30 sometimes but not at weekends!

Years later when I'd forgotten all about this, I met a bloke at a party and as we chatted about our past, I mentioned "Cherryvalley". He suddenly recalled an incident he had witnessed whilst walking along the footpath on Kingsway Park one day. An overloaded car, seeming to be very close to the ground, was weaving along the road towards him but it stopped abruptly; the doors burst open and there was a sudden evacuation from it. A cloud of smoke appeared from inside, following the evacuees out! He said he didn't realise how many people could fit into a Standard 8. I wondered afterwards if he was pulling my leg, perhaps he had been one of my unknown passengers!

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