

Do you remember your first?

Richard Barr's first car was a £50 investment neither he, nor the people of Norfolk, will ever forget

It was supposed to be the ultimate girl catcher – a quirky inducement to the beauties of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk (and I am not just referring to scenery).

Two reports recently highlight how little we modern motorists know about the cars we drive. According to a study by oil company Castrol, 17 per cent of women and 6 per cent of men do not even know how to open a bonnet. In addition, a survey by Britannia Rescue revealed that 98 per cent of motorists do not know what all the buttons and lights on their dashboards mean. That has never been a problem for me. Here's how.

It cost £50 – then my life savings (actually now too but that is a story for another day). I had been looking for one for weeks. They seemed rather cool and were a good antidote to the Ford Populars and Triumph Heralds that my peers were driving.

The voice on the other end of the telephone sounded as though it has been honed through many Norfolk storms, smooth as a pebble, soft as sand. He explained that it was in good running order. They had used it as a run around for years and had decided to upgrade. "That'll dew ya fine bor," he concluded.

I agreed to his price and showed up on a cliff top near Cromer a week later. At that time I knew little about cars, but all that was about to change.

At your peril

It was a shabby 1954 Land Rover. The canvas roof had been attacked by moths. Its tyres were uneven sizes. It was not quite the answer to my prayers – or for that matter a maiden's prayer – but I was sure it would do for me what my indifferent looks and poor taste in clothes had failed to do.

The rain poured down as I drove away from that cliff top. The roof leaked. The windscreen wiper was as effective as a toothbrush and the acceleration was

nought to 28 in about half an hour. I do not know how long it would have taken to reach a higher speed because it never did. Fortunately there are few hills in Norfolk because the speed dropped to 19 on the slightest incline.

As the journey progressed, so the smell of hot engine and boiling oil increased. In the last few miles it was also billowing steam from its radiator.

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Nonetheless it was mine, my first car. It rattled a bit when I drove it, and the radiator needed filling every five miles, but I was sure it would draw in the girls. I painted it bright yellow. Go faster stripes had not yet been invented but I settled for black polka dots (to complete the picture suggested at the time by a pop song: Itzy bitzy teeny weeny yellow polka dot bikini).

With the paint barely dry, my brother and I took it out on a date with two Wisbech beauties. The Yellow Peril (as it became known) made it to their homes where we collected them in their feather stoles and dangerously high-heeled shoes. It also made it to the smoky pub where we enjoyed the strains of an out-of-tune pop band. The problems started on the way home when (in an effort to show that we were not only dashing, but also knights in tarnished armour) we found a broken down car and offered to give it a tow.

The effort proved too much for the Yellow Peril, which expired after a few

hundred yards. The beautiful girls then had to help push us home.

Needless to say they reverted to the owners of Ford Populars and Triumph Heralds and we never saw them again.

Spare parts

In the meantime, major surgery was needed on the Yellow Peril including: replacing its big ends, piston rings, cylinder head and electrical control box. My savings were gone, so I had to do the work myself. It took months before the car was revived, but my efforts paid off and one spring morning, after I had spent most of the night grappling with pistons, it backfired twice and sprang to life. The engine sounded sweet, and given a fair wind, I was able to reach speeds of up to 50 miles an hour.

Alas by then it had lost its sex appeal and not long after that it was sold, still with its polka dots, for £15 to a man who wanted to use it for spare parts. It was exchanged for a grey Austin A40, a suitably dull choice for an aspiring solicitor.

When my stepdaughter recently asked me to replace a headlight bulb in her car, I willingly agreed, and would have done it except that I was completely defeated when I tried to open the bonnet. Several hours later she found me still searching for the bonnet catch.

"It's easy" she said as she swivelled the manufacturer's emblem on the front of the car to one side, inserted the ignition key and gave it a twist. Immediately it sprang open. Moral: it is now more difficult to open a bonnet than replace a cylinder head.



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