

# Criminal class

Attending a speed awareness course brings home to **Richard Barr** the need for drivers to be trained to be more aware of the unforeseen



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**T**here were 19 of us. We had shown up at a building on an industrial estate on the edge of the city. It was 9am and we were all on time – in fact so early that we had mostly arrived before the man with the key to let us in. Avoiding all eye contact, we huddled near a table that had on it what might have been coffee in tall stainless steel containers, aware of only one thing about each other: we had all committed an offence – and the same one.

A few weeks earlier I was travelling back late one evening. Norwich has a challenging ring road with plenty of junctions and changes of speed limit. I am no saint but I try to obey the law and I have had a points-free driving licence now for a dozen or more years. But suddenly there were two blinding flashes in my rear view mirror.

Soon after that I received an official envelope from the local council, informing me that my

car had been spotted racing recklessly at 36 mph in a 30 mph area, and asking me to say who was driving. Resisting the impulse to name Chris Huhne, I confessed, hoping that if I did the decent thing they would write back and say that all was forgiven.

But they did not. Instead they gave me three choices: to pay a fixed penalty of £100, to go to court, or to attend a speed awareness course. I and my fellow criminals chose the last option.

We were shown into a windowless room and instructed to sit at tables with black cloths on them. Our tutors were Kevin and Lance, both qualified driving instructors. Despite the sombre décor it was made clear to us that we were not there to be punished and no one was going to ask us what we did wrong.

What followed gradually grabbed my attention, even if the gorilla did not (more on that later). Some of the statistics I knew, such as that breaking the speed limit or travelling too fast accounts for nearly a quarter of all fatal accidents, or that stopping times double on wet roads. Others I did not: in this country one child a week is killed on the roads and road accidents are the number one killer of young people.

It was a course about speed, and the effects of speed were highlighted. Braking distances increase exponentially, so it will take your car nearly twice as long to stop at 40 mph as it does at 30. More significantly, if you are driving at 80 mph on a motorway and have to brake, you will still be

going at 39 mph (fast enough to kill) by the time someone who was travelling at the speed limit (70) had stopped.

We were also given lessons on being observant and how to read the road. There were videos of urban journeys and country roads. We had to identify what speed limit applied to each (not always straightforward). Even though I consider myself to be a reasonably good defensive driver, I still missed many of the hazards that were shown.



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The course was held a few weeks before the crowdfunded case in which Gail Purcell was acquitted of driving in central London without due care and attention after hitting Michael Mason on his bicycle and causing his death. In an interview to the police, she is reported as saying that he came from nowhere and that it was 'like he came from the sky'.

Hold that thought while I

return you to the gorilla. We were shown a brief video of a group of people throwing a ball to each other. Our task was to count the number of times the ball had been touched. We all conscientiously counted the 'hits'. Not one of the 19 of us spotted anything odd about the video – until we were shown: for several seconds a gorilla (or presumably someone dressed as one) stood in the centre of the picture and even had the ball bounced off him a few times – unseen by all.

It is received wisdom that motorists looking for one thing on the roads may fail entirely to observe something they do not expect to see. That does not excuse or exonerate anyone who hits the back of a properly lit cycle, but it certainly highlights the need for drivers to be trained to be more aware of the unforeseen. If none of us could see a gorilla in plain view when we were looking for something else, there is a strong case for ramming home the need to focus on the unexpected when driving, especially when there are many distractions both inside and outside the car.

On the drive home I followed another piece of advice to enhance driving skills: I gave out loud a running commentary on my driving. So absorbed was I in being observant that I very nearly missed that fact that I had arrived home, and I had to brake very hard to avoid hitting the garden gate. Now that would have been an embarrassing end to my criminal career. **SJ**