

HALF A CENTURY (AND MORE) OF DRIVING

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April 24th 2017, marks 50 years since I got my driver's license. I've been driving for longer, of course. Back then you got your Leaner's Permit at 16 and 9 months, which came up in November of the previous year. But I'd actually started driving long before that.

I had my first driving lesson – my parents teaching me – when I was 14. I



got behind the wheel of our 1951 Ford Prefect and began the process of learning to drive. As with most learners (in manual cars) taking off was the hardest thing to master. My take-offs resembled a kangaroo that had been struck heavily from behind. My parents, as I recall, were fairly patient – frustrated, but patient. The Prefect, however, was not so forgiving. There was some sort of pin in the tail-shaft assembly

that was a kind of weakest-link in the drive-train, and the continual thump as the car bounced away caused it to break. Twice. My parents initiated a temporary solution to this problem by giving up, and having me start on a downhill slope where I could let the car start rolling and then just let the clutch out.

Once on the move though, I did okay, and was soon driving (illegally!) around the roads at Wongawilli, where we lived. In school holidays we went to stay with my grandparents at Young, and as my skills and confidence increased, my parents let me drive the last 80km of the trip. We'd turn off the highway at Bowning, just south of Yass, and then Mum (who was the driver) would stop just over the crest of the first hill. I'd get behind the wheel, let the car roll, (*I still wasn't allowed to inflict further damage to the car by taking off from a standstill!*), drop the clutch, then drive for the next 80km or so until we got to the outskirts of Young, where I would pull over and hand the driving back to Mum. I was 15 when I began doing that. I suppose Mum and Dad considered this a "back road", and fairly safe for me to drive, but it was still highly illegal!

I got a fright once. I can still see it in my mind. I was driving up a hill with a long curve to the right. I took the curve a bit too tight, and the right side of the car just crossed the centre-line. At that moment a policeman on a motorbike came down the hill. He nodded his head vigorously to the right, indicating me to get back on my own side. I of course promptly did so, and he kept going. But had he decided to pull this wayward driver over, we would've all been in big trouble! I was very careful after that.

My father, who was blind and on a disability pension, tried to get a special allowance for me to get my license early, so I could drive him around. The RTA (or whatever it was back then) declined: after all, my mother was there to drive whenever required. Thanks for trying anyway, Dad!

I got my L-plates on the 20th December 1966. By then the Prefect had been replaced by a near-new Morris Major Elite. (*I should tell you the story of how we came to get that, one day*). So now I could drive legally!



The first long drive I did was to Young. I don't think I drove all the way, but I did drive most of it. On this occasion though, we had decided to go the long way: up the Blue Mountains, through Bathurst, Orange, and Cowra. It added about 150km to the trip. And it rained. Back then the L-plates were made from cardboard, and they were very

soggy by the time we got to Young.

Along the way we had a minor accident when someone ran into the back of us while we were stopped at road-works. There was no damage done, but Dad thought we should report it to the police. Now, Mum was a very shy person, so she stayed in the car while Dad and I went into the police station. Remember I said Dad was blind: but he didn't look it. He didn't wear dark glasses and his eyes appeared normal: and he walked very confidently while Mum or I steered him by holding his arm. Thus we presented ourselves in the police station with me holding onto Dad's arm. The policeman seemed a bit suspicious of this, but became much more so when I told him I was the driver. "Why are you holding onto him?" He demanded. (*I'm sure he suspected I was so drunk I couldn't stand up!*). I explained the reason; but then of course he wanted to know who the licensed driver was? (*Surely this suspicious-looking young L-plater wasn't being supervised by a blind man?!*). I told him it was my Mum. "Where is she?" He demanded. "She's out in the car." I replied. He didn't bother checking: he just took the details, shook his head, and sent us on our way.

After turning 17 in February, I was ready to go for my license. I don't know when I did my first test, but it took me three goes before I passed. On the first attempt I failed doing a right-turn at an intersection. The "diamond turn" as it was called, had just come in then. Most people reading this would probably remember how, prior to this, you had to drive around the centre of the intersection, which was usually marked by a yellow dome referred to as a "silent cop". The diamond-turn allowed you to turn on the right of the silent-cop rather than go around it. The trouble was, I completed the turn by driving to the right of the centre of the road I was turning into. "What are you doing?!" the police testing-office yelled. "I'm doing a diamond-turn." I replied. "You're on the wrong side of the road!!!" He screamed. I knew at that point I'd probably failed.

The second time I had a very strict testing officer, the infamous Mr. Windsor. I was confident though. After all, I'd been driving for nearly 3 years by this stage – and I'd got those pesky right-hand turns sorted out. This time I was failed on left-hand turns! Experience had taught me to be smooth in corners by taking a wide entry, tight at the apex, then a wide exit. So that was what I did when doing left-hand turns into side-streets. Mr. Windsor didn't like that. I was supposed to stay close to the left of the road, turn sharply, and complete the turn

in a position close to the side of the road I had turned into. I was angry! “I’m supposed to drive along next to the gutter, turn as sharp as I can, and come out driving along the gutter of the road I turn into? No-one drives like that!!” Well, I don’t suppose he wanted me to drive in the gutter exactly, but taking a classic racing-line into side-streets wasn’t the approved method either!

On my third attempt I got a more kindly testing policeman. And I drove according to proper road rules and procedures. At one point during my test a car performed a rather unsafe right-turn in front of us. “Follow that car!” the policeman instructed. I dutifully turned left into the street (*following the correct line rather than a racing line!*), and followed the car. The driver must’ve seen the policeman in the passenger seat, because he soon pulled over. The policeman got out and proceeded to give the driver a lecture about his driving. “You’ve been driving for years, and this young bloke drives better than you!” I heard him say. Yes!!! This time I think I’ve got it!! So on the 24th of April 1967, I was handed my license, along with my plastic red P-plates to attach to the car.

It wasn’t long afterwards that I got my first car; a 1961 Goggomobil. Sadly, I only had that a short time before I crashed it. I wasn’t hurt (only a few bumps and bruises), but the car suffered some damage. It was repairable, but my parents must have thought it wasn’t a safe car for their young son to be driving

around in, so the then unregistered car was sold and replaced by a 1954 Morris Minor.

This is a picture of the Morris on the left, with P-plate proudly attached, on its first big trip – driving into Young for the summer holidays with my grandparents. This time, though, I could drive the whole trip on my own, and do it legally!



AND LONG BEFORE THAT

My parents started driving to Young in the late 1940s. My grandparents lived in Wollongong at that stage, but my mother had other relatives living at



Monteagle, a small village about 16km out of Young. Those early trips were made in a 1925 Morris Cowley that officially belonged to my paternal grandmother. This photo was taken at Young in the mid 1950s, on one of those early trips. The people are, my grandmother, my father, and the little bloke is me! My mother took the photo.