

HOLIDAYS! a reflection from the past by Rob Rattenbury

Well, we have done the trip to family to Wellington for Christmas dinner and pressies from the big guy. We drove down on Christmas Eve, making good time but I was concerned at what I saw coming the other way from about Levin south, a continuous line of cars barely moving, heading north out of Wellington. I had good reason for concern. Coming home on Boxing Day it took us nearly an hour to get from north of Peka-peka to the pedestrian crossing in Otaki. It is amazing there is anyone left in Wellington. Roll on Transmission Gully and the new motorways to north of Levin.

It was a relief to drive through Marybank and turn right into Putiki, back home, a feeling of calm descends. I promise myself I am never going back to Wellington but know that we will make the trek again in a month or so, the price of being a close family with still one kid living away from Whanganui, the one with our lovely daughter-in-law and gorgeous grandkids.

The traffic was not always like this. The road toll was hovering around the mid-500s in the late 1960s and the speed limit on the open road was 55 mph (90 km/h). The population of the country was about 2.5 million and there were far fewer cars on the road then. It was not unusual for families not to own a car, walking, using bicycles, taxis and buses to get around. New cars were a rarity where I grew up as cars could not be purchased by private owners unless they had “overseas funds”, a bank account in the UK usually. The only people who had new cars were Government staff driving departmental cars, the local doctor, taxi drivers, the odd business owner and the lucky holder of the coveted “overseas funds”.

Most cars were purchased second hand and were years old. They were of English or American make with the odd Citroen thrown in. No Japanese vehicles at all, not popular with a population recently at war with that country although there were Volkswagens aplenty for some reason. The English cars were mostly underpowered Morris and Austins, Prefects, Anglias, Vauxhalls, Populars, Standards, Hillmans and Humbers. The American cars were big, usually V8 powered, right hand drive although there were quite a few left hand drive cars around. They were all fins and chrome and sharp edges.

There were still many very old cars on the road, I remember Model A Fords for some reason. Holden was cornering the market with its Chevrolet inspired rugged cars and utes, ideal for New Zealand's then rough roads. Many country roads were still unsealed so the mechanical toll on cars was significant in rural areas. Ford was competing well with its English models, the Zephyrs and Zodiacs and the under-powered Consul and, in the early 1960s, with the new American inspired Falcon.



I was 7 when we got our first car in 1959, a 1947 Morris 10, black in colour like most of the model. It had bucket seats in the front, a four on the floor gear shift, four cylinders and 1100 cc of raw power with a staggering top speed of 62 mph. Any slight hill required a change down to third gear and weekly maintenance was required by my father to keep the old hearse on the road.

We would travel as a family in this car all over the lower North Island, great expeditions involving weeks of planning, purchasing of fan belts, radiator hoses, spare tubes for the tyres and doing a fresh oil change. Dad would clean the spark plugs, check the timing and test the tyre pressures. A half-gallon jar of water would reside in the boot in case of boil overs. Mum would prepare scones, ham, pickled pork and salad sandwiches, cordial bottles and thermos flasks in the day prior to departure. There would be cake-tins of food to load amongst the spare parts in the boot. No stopping at roadside cafes and restaurants in those days, there were not that many anyway. We stopped at roadside rest places with other families and had picnic lunches. On the day of departure myself and two sisters would be bunged in the back seat with Mum and Dad in the front with my baby brother on Mum's lap. No seat belts of course. Off we would go, travelling at a sedate 45 to 50 mph with all the other old cars on the road. The biggest challenge on any road trip was the car getting up over hills. No passing lanes back then, we all travelled at the pace of the slowest oldest car. We visited Urenui in Taranaki a lot to see my Uncle and Aunt. This was an all-day 220 mile (350 km) trip one way from our home in Wellington with frequent stops for the car to cool down on the tops of hills and for cups of tea and sandwiches and cake at various rest stops.

Upon arrival and before departure for home Dad would check all the bits he had already checked before we left home, top up the radiator. Mum and Aunty would prepare another 100 or so ham and salad sandwiches, a couple of dozen scones and several thermos flasks of tea for the journey home.

There was always an expectation, not voiced but felt, of imminent breakdown on these journeys. Cars were not as reliable back then as now but most drivers had at least rudimentary mechanical knowledge and there was service stations in every village and hamlet in those days with a mechanic who was always willing to help. Most boys grew up learning how to carry out routine maintenance and even big mechanical jobs on these old cars. Not possible now of course with the great advances in computer technology.

In about 1963 we upgraded to a 1952 Morris Oxford, grey in colour like many others, four cylinder, four on the tree gear shift, 1477 cc of English muscle and a top speed of 70 m.p.h. It had bench seats which were handy by then as my baby brother could now sit between my parents and the rest of us had a bit more room in the back to fight and otherwise annoy each other. We still had no seatbelts but Dad was not a speedy driver anyway so no worries there. Long trips were still a mission in catering and logistics though.



I do not remember cars travelling at high speed at all but, as the high road toll attests, there were many very bad accidents usually due to drink and/or road conditions. Cars had no safety measures at all in those days other than drum brakes and the skills of the driver.

I learnt to drive and sat my driving license in the old Morris Oxford. It stayed in the family for many years and just kept on going. Dad reconditioned the motor at one stage and repainted it grey but it survived in the family into the mid-1970s. In those days families tended to keep cars for long periods or sell the cars to other family members so we always saw the same cars when we met at family gatherings.

Sixty years later cars have come a long way, as have then roads thankfully. The road toll is lower than when our population was half what it is now. Cafes and restaurants abound providing roadside eating without the need for picnic hampers. Cars just don't break down that often. Drink driving is now a social taboo and using seatbelts but not using cellphones is compulsory.

I still miss those days though and I would love to be able to service my own car as I used to up until the 1980s. I don't even open the bonnet now.

Happy New Year to you all.

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