

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

# CARS

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

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# CARS

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For some, cars are giant, shiny badges of machismo or material success.

For others, they have become an everyday adjunct to life, as necessary as dental work but slightly more fun.

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## START ENGINES

**W**hether you regard them as expressions of your libido or extensions of your overdraft, cars are hard to ignore.

They're the subject of politics, lust, envy, aspiration and necessity. They're symbols of liberation and progress that stop you getting where you want to go as their numbers have multiplied like super-viruses and clogged up the roads.

Cars are the result of genius, megalomania, vanity and insanity, and have the capacity to both fascinate and bore. Visit one of Britain's few remaining pubs and in the corner of the bar will be a man with a brown nylon tie and his own tankard who knows everything about the Triumph Herald. Go to the car park of your local supermarket after it's shut and you'll find spotty boys in hoodies and saggy-arsed jeans who wish Jeremy Clarkson was their dad. They'll have memorised the top speed of every Lamborghini built since 1998, but have to content themselves with wheel-spinning a 12-year-old, wheezing, 1000cc Vauxhall Corsa until one of its drive shafts snap or they collect a shopping trolley as a bonnet mascot. Or both.

Car bluffing starts early, and the high cost of motoring is hardly a disincentive to drive. If you're under 25, then your first car will cost many times more than the car's worth to insure for a year, sadly not because miserable, middle-aged insurers are jealous of your youth and vitality but because they reckon (with some justification) that you're an adrenalin-addled nutter who will wrap it round a Bentley at the first opportunity.

But this won't put you off car ownership. Quite the contrary. It will make the prospect of getting behind the wheel of your own car even more alluring. And you will remember that seminal moment for the rest of your life. Indeed, you can still recall those looks of admiring envy from other car owners when you first screeched to a halt onto that garage forecourt, narrowly missing the tiers of wilting flowers and charcoal briquettes, as you casually stepped out of your wheezing, smoke-belching runabout and struck a noble pose of devil-may-care insouciance.

With the myopia of youth, you will have failed to notice that your audience's lips were collectively mouthing the word 'tosser', but no matter. You were finally there, you had joined the brother/sisterhood of car owners, and the road of freedom stretched out ahead of you with all its shimmering promise of limitless adventure.

For some, cars are giant, shiny badges of machismo or material success. For others, they have become an everyday adjunct to life, as necessary as dental work but slightly more fun.

Then there are car enthusiasts, for whom anything with a wheel at each corner is utterly fascinating. They can tell you the split-second speed with which a Porsche sequential transmission changes gear, or the flammability of the fibreglass used to make a Reliant Robin and how long it will take to burn one to the ground.

These people can be found at racetracks, bars, used-car lots, playgrounds and online, discussing head-spinning motoring minutiae that excludes those who aren't in the know. And that is where this short but definitive guide comes in. It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about cars, and to equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods designed to ensure that you will be accepted as a car aficionado of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will provide you with the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, before reading it, you didn't know the difference between a gudgeon pin and a big end, or Infinitely Variable Transmission (IVT) and a little known TV programme called *Top Gear*.



The first speeding ticket was issued to one Walter Arnold for driving at 8mph in a 2mph zone. If that law still stood today, you could get nicked for jogging.

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# THE WHEELS OF TIME

**Y**ou can't profess to be an expert on cars unless you have some grasp of their history. So sit down, relax and slip into neutral. Here's a short timeline of the evolution of the motor car.

## **1885 – THE BIRTH OF THE PETROL-POWERED AUTOMOBILE**

The first really recognisable petrol car was revealed in 1885 by a German engineer called Karl Benz. With his walrus moustache and prominent ears, Benz looked as if he'd stepped from a cartoon in an early issue of *Punch* magazine. His car was a tricycle with solid tyres, one wheel at the front and a thumping engine under the seat. It looked like the progeny of a pram and a pony and trap, but without the pony.

Benz was one of a number of engineers working on horseless carriages, but his design was the first one that really worked properly.

To prove that there's never anything new, a Frenchman, Étienne Lenoir, had already made the Hippomobile, a

giant, hydrogen gas-powered three-wheeler way back in 1860. It looked a bit like a cattle-feeding trough on wheels but was a very early precursor to the fuel-cell cars that today's carmakers are spending billions trying to perfect to replace diesel- and petrol-engined vehicles, since the only thing they emit is water vapour. The Hippomobile wasn't ideal transport for people in a hurry, taking almost three hours to cover 11 miles – although that would be considered a good rate of progress in London today.

Another French inventor, Gustave Trouvé, had come up with a three-wheeled electric tricycle in 1881, having already thought up ideas for telephones, microphones and what was probably the first outboard motor for a boat (most of which, with the possible exception of the outboard, remained unfulfilled).

So why did the world end up with petrol rather than gas or electric cars? Well, the technology developed more quickly for internal combustion power and got progressively better. The infrastructure for fixing and fuelling these cars was established, but, to start with, finding fuel really limited the usability of early cars – though chemists did often sell it, alongside prophylactics and hair cream ('Going somewhere nice for the weekend, sir?'). In addition, early automobiles didn't need to carry hefty batteries filled with acid, could be refuelled quickly and didn't require hours of charging – a problem that true electric cars still have today.

Mind you, both electric and steam cars held the first land-speed world records, with the French Jeantaud electric car

achieving an eye-watering 39.24mph in 1898. The following year, the company managed almost 66mph, and in 1902 a steam car called the Gardner-Serpollet 'Easter Egg' reached 75mph, which must have been terrifying, although nowhere near as buttock-clenchingly petrifying as the 127.659mph managed by Fred Marriott in the Stanley Rocket steam car on Daytona Beach, USA, in 1906.

Why would any sane person wedge himself into a confined space shared with a furnace and a lot of boiling water, and hurtle down a beach at over 100mph? Fred's explanation is unrecorded, but he managed to survive another 50 years, dying at the age of 83 in 1956.



Why would any sane person wedge himself into a confined space shared with a furnace and a lot of boiling water, and hurtle down a beach at over 100mph?

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Early road cars could only be afforded by the rich and privileged classes. They cost a fortune to buy and maintain, with costly things like solid rubber tyres lasting only a few hundred miles.

Pneumatic, inflatable tyres had been around since 1846 but only really became practical in 1887, thanks to a lustrously bearded Scottish chap called John Boyd

Dunlop, who improved the design so that his sickly son could cycle in comfort. A lot of British bicycle makers were based in the Midlands, which explains why many car producers set up in that part of the world (because the skills and materials were near at hand), although early car-making workshops sprang up all over the place.

## **1896 – THE FIRST SPEEDING TICKET**

Road cars were legally able to go faster as they no longer needed someone walking in front of them carrying a red flag, and could achieve speeds of 12mph without being caught out by early speed daguerreotype cameras (actually, that last bit's made up). But the following year, the first headlights appeared along with various types of audible warning, namely, a klaxon or horn. Continental motorists have never looked back because, as everyone knows, they love blowing their horns for no discernible reason.

Despite this, the first speeding ticket was issued to one Walter Arnold for driving at 8mph in a 2mph zone. If that law still stood today, you could get nicked for jogging.

1896 was also the year that cars started killing people. The first victim in Britain was Bridget Driscoll of Croydon, who was mown down in the grounds of Crystal Palace by a demonstration automobile travelling at a reckless 4mph (although a terrified passenger said it could have been as much as 8mph).

## **1906 – ROAD TRAFFIC LAW AND INSTITUTIONS**

By 1906 the AA had arrived in the UK; followed swiftly by

car insurance (not mandatory until later), number plates, vehicle registration, driving licences (although still no driving test), road signs, the first Rolls-Royce and, in the USA, the first filling station.

## **1907 – THE LAUNCH OF THE FORD MODEL T**

When Henry Ford launched his Model T, nicknamed ‘Tin Lizzie’, most cars were recognisably car-shaped, with an engine at the front – unless they were Hillman Imps or Volkswagen Beetles, which hadn’t yet been invented.

An important piece of a bluffer’s impress-your-friends Model T-related trivia is that in 1921 it was possibly the first car to be offered with a child seat, even if the ‘seat’ was little more than a bit of sackcloth with a drawstring.

Ford, who later became famous for his mix of philanthropy and ruthlessness (he had a private army to sort out industrial disputes), had a knack for taking engineering ideas and making them work properly, and he came up with moving assembly lines from observing automated meat-packing plants in Chicago. State firmly that this was not only the end of the beginning but also the beginning of the end for car workers in the UK.

Mind you, if anyone tells you that Ford invented the mass-production process with the Model T, you can smugly point to the 1902 Oldsmobile Curved Dash, which looked more like a wheeled musical box than a car but was definitely the first mass-produced automobile.

Ford hugely sped up and brought down the cost of car production. He could make more cars for less money and

the Model T, to use that tired old cliché, put America on wheels, with its original price falling from \$850 to \$260 by the mid-1920s.

Ford was obsessed with the materials his cars were made from and started using vanadium steel, which was strong, light and flexible, and helped make the Model T as tough as old boots. It needed to be, given the extremes of temperature in the USA and the often awful dirt roads with which its high ground clearance coped admirably.

To a lesser extent this applied in the UK, where tarmac was a luxury many roads didn't have, so fast-moving cars enveloped their occupants and pedestrians with Mr Toad-like swirls of dust and muck. Many occupants of cars wisely opted to wear special protective clothes and headwear.

Most cars eventually acquired things like roofs and glass windows, but it was still necessary to climb outside to get them going with a crank handle; electric starters didn't arrive until 1912.

## **1914 – THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the industrialised world discovered industrialised warfare – in which motor vehicles played their part. And when that finished four years later, the US car giants were even better at making stuff because they'd had a lot of practice supporting the war effort. Even though they came to it late (as usual).

In Europe, things were tougher. Infrastructure and economies suffered lasting damage but countless entrepreneurs in the UK, France, Italy and Germany nonetheless

all had a go at making cheap, affordable vehicles.

## **1922 – THE APPEARANCE OF THE AUSTIN 7**

By 1920 it was estimated that there were nearly 9 million cars and trucks in the USA and nearly 100,000 in the UK, some of them with electric rather than kerosene lights – so there was less excuse for running over people in the dark. Two years later, a Birmingham-based carmaker called Herbert Austin launched his own version of a car for the masses. Called the Austin 7, it cost £165 and was so successful that versions were built in France, and in Germany, where it was called the Dixi and was assembled by a company that would soon be known as BMW.

## **1927 – THE UNUSUAL DEMISE OF ISADORA DUNCAN**

If people weren't by now aware of the perils associated with the motor car, as well as its undoubted pleasures, the well-documented garrotting of celebrated dancer Isadora Duncan in Nice, France, was a warning to car occupants everywhere not to let their scarves get tangled up in the rear wheels while wearing them, especially when the car is moving at some speed. Her death wasn't the only vehicle-related tragedy she experienced. Her two children drowned in 1913 when the car they were travelling in plunged over a bridge and into the Seine in Paris, and Duncan herself was seriously injured in car accidents in 1913 and 1924.

## **1928 – THE MORRIS MINOR**

Morris Motors Limited successfully launched a rival to the Austin 7, called the Minor, which could be bought brand new for £100. Not to be confused with the later model of the same name designed by Alec Issigonis, 86,318 of them were sold before production finished in the early 1930s.

## **1930s – THE ADVENT OF HYDRAULIC BRAKES AND STEEL PANELS**

By the late 1930s, with the Second World War looming, many cars were now fitted with hydraulic brakes that were marginally more effective than the rods and cables that drivers had been accustomed to relying on. This was the decade when the car really came of age. Roads got better, and the cars more reliable and safe, although they were often cold because heaters were still a luxury.

During the 1930s, traditional coach-working skills were still being used in car production, with wood and canvas still present in many car bodies. But these were gradually giving way to pressed steel panels, thanks to an American engineering genius called Edward Budd, whose foresight made cars lighter, stronger, safer and rounder, allowing car builders to create new automobile designs in the 1930s with a lot of sweeping art deco curves.

In 1934 Budd's ideas influenced the Citroën Traction Avant, a car famously favoured by Inspector Maigret, which, instead of having its body bolted onto a separate chassis frame like a carriage, had a welded structure that was all one piece (just like most modern cars), so it was

lighter, lower, potentially stronger and ultimately cheaper to build.

It also had front-wheel drive – again, like many cars today – getting rid of all the gubbins that connected the engine to the back wheels and freeing up space in the cabin so that there was more room. In addition, being pulled round corners by its front wheels, rather than pushed by the back ones, helped with its roadholding.

Citroën wanted the Traction Avant – so named because of its front-wheel drive – to be convenient and easy to handle, and tried to do away with the clutch pedal, although without success. In fact, Citroën wanted the car to appeal to people who didn't particularly care about cars, especially women.

State confidently, with an air of *je ne sais quoi*, that the Traction Avant was a brilliant piece of industrial design.