

Trouble in Provence

or What to do after a Road Accident

Trouble in Provence



Chapter 1

I watched the green Renault van in my rear view mirror. It described a gentle roll six foot in the air before bouncing onto the road behind me and spinning off the wing of the car behind. Two seconds earlier it had been coming diagonally across the road towards me, brakes locked, out of control and just beginning to spin - one second later it had struck the front wing and wheel of my car and set off on its aerial journey to the scrap yard.

Not that my car seemed in much better shape - the initial boom of contact had given way to what could only be compared to a tin tray clattering down a wooden stairway coupled with a shaking that would do credit to a Martini. A quick glance to my left showed no visible damage to the passenger compartment of the car, and of greater importance, no injury to my wife sitting beside me. I brought the car gently to a stop at the side of the road and switched off the engine. "Are you OK" received a shaken but positive reply and I got out of the car and walked back towards the green Renault lying ominously quietly on its side in the centre of the road.

One of the perils of being a doctor on holiday in France - even a retired doctor, but with training in trauma and resuscitation, is an obligation to help others in need - regardless of what he had done to my car, my holiday and my coronary arteries. I gave a fleeting thought to dragging the emergency kit - oxygen, IV fluids, resuscitation equipment out of the boot but suppressed it initially in favour of a quick assessment of the wreck.

The van was well wrecked, lying on its side and the potential for injury to the occupants high, but as I approached a head on a scrawny neck peered out of the side window on the top of the car, for all the world like the head and neck of a disturbed Galapagos tortoise rudely awoken. No blood of note, not in obvious pain, but clearly shocked.

An enterprising Frenchman had already wrenched open the remains of the bonnet and was busily and happily ripping leads off the battery and everything else in sight and petrol was beginning to drip gently onto the warm road surface. With an acrobatic heave the driver launched himself out of the wreck and we peered into the cavern of the vehicle. Lying sideways on the lower door was a second person.

"Ca va" was greeted by a response and a tinkling of glass as the woman tried to stand. Several moments of struggle and a middle aged woman was standing in the centre of the wreck. Well, at least there was no blood, no injury to any major limb, but perhaps the faintest tinge of blueness round her lips. A quick check of her pulse showed a rate of 80, regular and now that

she was leaning against the roof the blueness was already fading. In the distance I could hear the faint sound of the sirens on the approaching emergency services vehicles.

The Sapeurs-Pompiers removed the roof of the Renault in a flash - the woman walked free and into the ambulance and the Brigadier of the Gendarmerie Nationale took charge. It is amazing how swiftly need takes over in foreign languages and within moments I was discussing with him how the other driver had attempted to "double" a "vehicle stationery, parfaitement situé pour faire un tour à gauche et avec les clignants gauche allumé" and how he had "appliqué ses freins trop tard et avait glissé dans ma voie et m'a se huerte". The other witnesses and physical evidence appeared to convince him of the truth. The driver and passenger of the Renault were already on their way to the hospital for a check-up and the Brigadier decreed that all interested parties should report to the Gendarmerie in Mirepoix at 2-o'clock that afternoon.

Chapter 2

I looked at my car. It was certainly going nowhere on its own. The left front wing and door were damaged and the left front wheel was at ninety degrees to the other three. The local breakdown truck arrived and with the car safely behind, my wife in the truck's passenger seat and me balanced on the engine we returned slowly to Mirepoix.

Now is the hour to see how good AA 5 Star and my insurers are!!! It took a long time to get through to the AA France service, explained eventually by both the high demand and the fact that the thunderstorms of the previous day meant that the computers were "down". All the information was duly noted in the old fashioned way with paper and pencil and we waited further developments.

At 1220 the garage proprietor suggested apologetically that he was going home for his lunch - perhaps we would like to go to the nearby restaurant and he would return just before two-o'clock and drive us to the Gendarmerie - "when in France etc" so we walked through the rain to a leisurely lunch.

At two-o'clock precisely we presented ourselves at the Gendarmerie - as I walked through the door I realised that I had left my driving licence locked in the strong box in the boot of the car!!! A very quick question revealed that it would be required and occasioned for my wife a high speed, siren accompanied, trip through centre of the town in the company of the youngest, and most handsome Gendarme!

I had drawn a sketch map of the accident at the scene and paced out the distances, all of which were accepted without question by not only the Gendarmerie but also the other parties and used as a basic plan to complete the "Constat de l'amiable", the International Road traffic accident report. I was content with the form which both I and the other driver signed and within an hour we were back at the garage, once again transported by the gendarme, but this time at a more sedate pace.

Nothing from the AA. The afternoon dragged on. Several phone calls later I was aware that someone sharing my surname had a Saab in the South of France with a burnt out clutch. He lives in Hampshire and given time I am sure I would have discovered his home address, his family details and his preference in wine. If he reads this I am the man from Derby with the damaged Peugeot 605 who prefers Rose wine from Mont Ventoux - he probably knows even more about me!!!

The knowledge that we were from Derby sparked interest from the wife of the garage proprietor, "When I was at school I had a pen friend in Derby" she said wistfully, "but it was a long time ago" The world is very small!!

At six-o'clock I phoned the AA again, time was passing and we were still 100 miles from our caravan, with night approaching. I think the computers must have been back on line because the response was much sharper. "We will fix a taxi - but can you pay for it and reclaim it later?".

The taxi ride was awful - the driver excellent but the thunderstorms had returned and we travelled back along the Toulouse-Narbonne autoroute - I closed my eyes and tried to sleep!! Mostly 130kph, occasionally 160kph my wife told me later, though he did slow down a bit when he couldn't see anything.

We arrived back at our campsite - a naturist site - and asked the driver to take us right up to the caravan, "Même les naturistes portent des vêtements en temps de pluie" I told him.

I was of course wrong!! - but we were home.

A digression

We came late to Naturism. Children of the post war boom, we missed the wilder excesses of the sixties and by the seventies were settled into middle class, middle England respectability.

By the late seventies we were holidaying in France - tentatively topless but certainly not naturist!!

The next holiday saw us on the Aquitaine coast, clothes were not regarded as necessary but by now our children were at the age when they were uncomfortable with no clothes. We however became "holiday naturists".

My mind goes back - the beach which we were on was under the watchful eye of the Gendarmerie, not to insist on clothes but because of the danger of the sea. I have this wonderful remembrance.

I had been dozing, my wife swimming with the children when I was shaken awake by my 10 year old son.

"Dad, Dad " he said "Mum's in trouble with the Gendarmes!!"

I sat up, sure enough my wife was standing in the centre of the beach, stark naked being given a good dressing down by one of the Gendarmes. I considered whether I should intervene. Fate saved me. With further gesticulation and force the conversation came to an end and my wife walked slowly towards me.

"What was all that about?" I asked, " I thought that naturism was tolerated on this beach"

"Not that" she said " he doesn't give a damn about clothes but I think I have just been given a severe reprimand for allowing the kids to swim in an area which he considers unsafe!!!"



Chapter 3

"Help, I'm trapped in the South of France with my wife and a caravan but no car!!! - and I can't get home!!!" Ok. I realise that this is not a crisis of earthshaking proportions, in fact if I analyse this carefully, is there a problem at all? " I am in the South of France ", no problem, "with my wife", no problem, "with my caravan", no problem, "I can't get home", who cares?, "with no car, problem!!! I need a car.

Two days later the AA had found a car with a tow bar, so we were mobile, two days later we moved the caravan from Languedoc-Rouissillion to Provence. It was no fun!! My car, a heavy diesel with stabilisers copes well with French autoroutes, the unstable Nissan Primera without stabilisers was all over the road, even at 40mph. We were glad to reach Belezy.

As we approached the campsite my mobile telephone rang!! "What now?!!!" "This is Central Control, your burglar alarm has been activated, the police are on their way to your house, how soon can you attend?" I suppressed an urge to burst into hysterical laughter and gave a

studied response. " I am 1000 miles away in the South of France, could you notify the alternate keyholders please?"

"Are you unable to attend?" the tinny voice queried.

"That's correct, please notify your alternate keyholders" I replied slightly less calmly.

"Oh -OK" he said and rang off.

This holiday is definitely becoming a problem! We booked into the site, positioned the caravan, poured the tea and I phoned my neighbour, the alternate key holder. "The house is fine, no signs of entry and the technician has reset the alarm". Scratch one problem.

I picked up the phone again and dialled a colleague. "Hi, we are both fine but we have just had a road accident in the South of France" was followed by the usual, "Are you sure you're both Ok " etc etc. "Can you do me a favour?" I asked, "If I send you a fairly long e-mail message would you print it out and forward it to my insurers by post? ".

"No problem" he said.

My wife does not approve, and certainly does not understand why I bring my mobile phone and computer on holiday with me!! She does now. The mobile phone bill is rising by the minute - but then of course that is exactly what it does!!. All those who need to know now know and a preliminary accident report has winged its way by e-mail to my insurer. Time to relax.

A week later I am still relaxed. Belezy is our favourite campsite, one we return to time and again. Nestled at the foot of Mount Ventoux in northern Provence, the lavender scented air is clear, the wine acceptable and the ambience gentle. The rhythm of the days is tranquil and the weather serene.

I have made a lot more phone calls. To the AA to confirm a change of hire care to one that should pull our caravan, to my insurers who have, at last, had my car inspected and have decreed that it is to be returned to the UK for repair - but who knows when!

The peace of the day is broken once again by my mobile phone, "?". "This is Central Control, your burglar alarm has been activated, the police are on their way to your house, how soon can you attend?"

I suggest calmly and gently that they may wish to notify the alternate keyholder!!!

I phone home, my neighbour answers, the house is fine!! One phone call to the owner of the company that service my alarm to ensure that everything will be fully checked out and I pick up my towel, leave my phone behind and stroll off slowly for today's massage.



Chapter 4

My mind wanders, I should have realised right at the start that this was to be no ordinary idyllic holiday.

The holiday began badly. We left the ferry at Santander in northern Spain, the entire August filled ferry spewing its cars, its caravans, motor caravans and motorcycles onto the congested dockside and out into the main street of the town. The large clearly visible sign said (in Spanish) Way Out with a large arrow pointing to the left. The armed, authoritative, Spanish policeman would brook no argument; all the traffic from the ferry was to go to the right. Nobody in their right mind is going to start an argument with a Spanish policeman in the middle of a traffic jam, in the centre of the town, on the first day of their holiday.

We went to the right.

"First turn left, then left, then left, then right " I said to my wife " and we shall be back on route". The theory is unassailable, in practice it took us back through the centre of old Santander, a town I should like to re-visit one day - on foot!

I understand paranoia - that unassailable belief that the entire world has conspired together to make one's life unbearable but why has every single person in Santander parked his car so that the gap down the centre of every narrow street is only six inches wider than my caravan!!!

One hour, several narrow back streets and miles of even narrower Spanish secondary roads later we reach the autoroute.

Don't get me wrong, I love my wife dearly, we've been married nearly thirty years, but a navigator for the Long Range Desert Group, she isn't. I have tried to explain that, with the exception of Rome, all other roads run in two directions; simply, the way you want to go and the wrong way!!!

The road we are on at present, which should be running along the coast in sight of the sea, is climbing steadily south into the mountains in the centre of Spain. Is this the moment to ask if we are on the right road?

It takes a while to turn the car and caravan combination round but soon we are heading north and descending onto the coastal plain.

The delay at the Franco-Spanish border was fairly brief and I heaved a sigh of relief as the more familiar and welcoming French road signs replaced those of Spain. An hours drive and we arrived at our campsite at Arnaochout.

That first week on the Aquitaine coast was restful. The site, larger than I expected, spread through the pine trees on the sand dunes with the beach in easy reach and the pools even closer. Time to relax.

Our only excursion that week was without incident. A visit to Lourdes followed by a brief trip up into the central Pyrennes. What is it about the French psyche that makes every Frenchman determined to ride his bicycle to the top of every mountain in France - and why do I never see any cyclists coming down the mountains???

At the end of the week we folded our tents, metaphorically, and moved our caravan to Lanquedoc-Rouisillon. A quiet site, well shaded by the side of one of the etangs, shallow sea water filled lakes that lie between the Camargue and Perpignan.

Our excursion that week took us to Carcassone, a "spectacle" of jousting and swordfights in the wards of the ramparts and the next day to our own personal destiny and joust with a small, green Renault van.



Chapter 5

I had always wanted to visit Nimes - the Roman architecture, the Arena, the ambience. From my seat I could see the tourists walking on the upper tiers of the Arena. The French have a breathtaking disregard for safety rails or barriers and I could see no evidence of any protection for the tourists other than their own natural caution.

Sadly it was not pleasure that had me sitting in the splendidly positioned but sparsely appointed Europcar office. Following our encounter with the Renault the AA had arranged a taxi to our camp site , and after two days provided us with a hire car complete with tow bar. The Nissan Primera had proved an unsuitable towcar and our journey from the Pyrennes to Provence a nightmare. Far from towing the caravan, the van appeared to be in total control of the car and despite travelling increasingly slowly the stability of the combination was nonexistent.

A phone call to the AA had been kindly received and confirmed that a larger vehicle was required. Large hire cars with towbars in the South of France in August are as rare as hens teeth but the AA assured me that one would be found.

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"Hey wait a minute - We've been here before!!"



Chapter 6

I really am a very patient man - which is probably just as well, but with one week of the holiday left the AA called back. "No problem, You can pick up a Renault Laguna the day before you travel home. Where would you like to collect it?"

I declined the offer of the centre of Lyon, even though that would have been on the way home and we agreed to collect the car from Nimes. A slightly complex manoeuvre which would involve us in driving the Primera 60 miles south, picking up the Laguna, driving ten miles north and dropping off the Primera before returning to the campsite, packing up the van and setting off home.

Which brings me back to Nimes. We arrived at two in the afternoon on the day before our journey home and walked into the office.

"Nous sommes ici pour prendre la Laguna avec crochet" My French is improving by the minute, elicited a gallic shrug and "Il n'y a pas de véhicule de location avec crochet"

Now we are in real trouble!

Several fairly frantic phone calls later, and adequate time to admire the tourist legs on top of the Arena, and we have an agreement. There will be a car, "avec crochet" "le matin"

Ten miles north - explain that we are not returning the Primera today, but that we will back in the morning " avec caravan" and we rush back to pack.

Next morning we leave early, tow the caravan 50 miles south and leave it by the roadside outside the garage to which we must return with the Primera and hot foot it into the centre of Nimes. My wife does drive, but does not relish the thought of driving out through the centre of Nimes. I decide this is not a good time to tell her that I don't much fancy the idea of picking up a unfamiliar car and driving it straight out of the Europcar depot either.

As we walk into the depot an attractive French girl is handing over the keys of a Laguna with "crochet", things are looking up.



Chapter 7

"I see, I can't take the car on the ferry. I must hand it back at Caen and pick up another car in Portsmouth. Will there be someone there to collect the car at midnight tomorrow?"

I seem to have caused another problem. More frantic phone calls.

"Take the car on the ferry, but you must hand it in at Portsmouth at 6 30 in the morning on Wednesday and change it for a UK car."

The phone calls have delayed us - it's going to be a close run thing to get the Primera back by twelve o'clock and from 12 to 2 in Languedoc lunch is sacrosanct. We weave our way out of Nimes and hammer down the motorway at high speed. Is there an upper speed limit?

The Primera is returned, undamaged, but dust covered and smelling very warm at 11.55!

Now to hook up the caravan and see what the stability of the combination is like - there is all of three hundred yards to find out before we shall be on the Autoroute!

It's a lot better and the day passes without incident. By two o'clock we are past Avignon and Orange, Lyon is on the horizon and we shall meet our deadline tonight in Beaune.

Beaune is important. We always stay one night in Beaune going South and going North. We eat in the same restaurant and return time and time again. Against my better judgement I will reveal the name. The Relais de Madelaine in the Place Madelaine and the chef, Claude Neaux. Dinner as usual was perfect

We returned to our hotel to discover our caravan leaning drunkenly to one side. One tyre totally deflated. I am doing nothing tonight - things will look better in the morning.

It looked just as bad in the morning. Spare wheel, jack, tools all ok - but all to no avail. I grunted, I sweated but the van just would not move. My wife arrived. "Stop" she said, "are you sure that you should be doing that after two heart attacks and a bypass?" ([A personal account of myocardial infarction and coronary bypass](#))

Sweaty, short of breath and with chest pain - I knew damn well I shouldn' t

"Phone the local equivalent of ATS" she said

Back into the hotel. "Is there a tyre depot near here" I asked plaintively

"Just round the corner"

It's amazing how simple a professional can make a job look. But the deflated tyre needs replacing. A good excuse to spend an extra two hours shopping in Beaune.

He trip from Beaune to Caen was uneventful, the ferry on time and the crossing calm. We left the ferry terminal at Portsmouth and set out to find the Europcar depot - it took us nearly an hour. When we arrived the depot manager was waiting for us. "I waited for you on the quayside" he said, "Where were you?"

Half past 6 in the morning is a bad time at Portsmouth, a P&O ferry and the Brittany Ferries boat arrive at the same time - and at the end of August it is chaos - on more than one occasion I have noticed that the cars from the Brittany Ferries service are guided out through the freight terminal, which had been our good fortune that morning.

Another hire car with a tow bar - and I can't help noticing that on each occasion the tow bar on each car has looked very new. No marks, no grease, new scratch marks on the securing bolts - it looks to me as if each car has had the tow bar fitted the night before!!

But who cares - the AA have come up trumps and the final leg of the journey from Portsmouth to Derby lies ahead. We complete it without incident. Home at last or nearly so.



Chapter 8

As we pass Gaydon - a flashback. Four months earlier, at Easter, on our way South to Provence fate had struck again. It was late March, we were on our way to Portsmouth and night was falling. I turned on the car side lights. I glanced in my mirror, the caravan was in total blackness. We pulled in to the next lay-by and checked the connection - no problem with the

connection, but no van lights, no side lights, no rear lights, no number plate lights, but the stop lights and hazard warning lights were working. No right hand rear light on the car either. It got colder and began to rain.

I love my car, but what perverse French design guru decreed that the fuse box should be on the underside of the glove compartment on the passenger side? The only method of access is to lie over the door sill upside down with your trousers in the ditch- and the rain with the water trickling slowly UP your back. Tempers began to fray.

I pulled out the fuse, in the dark it was clearly blown, I replaced it, nothing happened.

Half an hour passed with no significant progress. We drove to the nearest service area and tried again. Time passed.

Now I'm not proud of the decision, but the choices were stark, miss the ferry or not.

We drove from Gaydon to Portsmouth. On the open road I used the hazard flashers, through the towns, under the streetlights, we ran without lights. I felt sure I should be stopped by the police and rehearsed my story. For the open road and motorway, "The lights have just failed, I'm using the hazard warning lights to get to a place of safety". For towns " Have they? I hadn't noticed. I'll pull off and sort it out"

We reached Portsmouth without incident. Tired, frustrated and bad tempered, but without incident.

I fixed the lights in Beaune 24 hrs later. A simple short circuit in one of the caravan lights - and the fuse - I had been changing the wrong one. Upside down, in the dark, cold and wet, I had been reading the plan of the fuses upside down. Five from the top, not five from the bottom!



Chapter 9

It is now November. My car is still in France. The hire car bill is mounting to astronomical level. "La voiture est presque prête".

I've already booked the ferries for next year, the first trip is only five months away - it had better be "prête"

[The Saga Continues](#)



Chapter Ten

It took 120 days to get the car mended. But the day arrived when I received a phone call from France. "La voiture anglaise, elle est prête!"

I phoned the insurance company - they had no information! I told them that the car was ready and asked what arrangements they had made to recover the vehicle.

After 4 months even my cool was wearing thin. "I will collect it on Friday". Now that put the cat amongst the pigeons. "We'll call you back"

"We have spoken to the Recovery company - they can't bring back your car - it isn't broken!!!!"

"Ok, I will fetch it!"

"There is no reason why you can't fetch it - but we can only pay what we would have paid the recovery firm". A green light.

One hour on the computer and telephone and I have a reservation from Gatwick to Toulouse, hotels booked at Gatwick and Mirepoix, and the ferry booked to come home. There is a train from Derby to Gatwick (change at Bedford) and all is arranged. Pick up the train tickets next day and travel the day after.

It's quite un-nerving setting off with only a train ticket - all the rest of the travel arrangements are to be collected en route, but with my suitcase, phone and computer I'm on my way.

OK - so choosing to travel from Derby railway station at three o'clock on a Saturday with Derby playing at home to West Ham may not have been the most intelligent thing to do - particularly since I needed to return the hire car first, and that meant crossing the football traffic twice. I still think the route I would have chosen was better than the one my wife used, but I arrived in time for the train but the farewell to my wife was perhaps a little cool!

A Midland Mainline Weekend First ticket ensured a comfortable and pleasant journey to Bedford. Thameslink provided the first excitement of the journey. We sat at Hendon for half an hour. A bus had run into the railway bridge south of Mill Hill Broadway and the bridge must be inspected and passed fit for traffic before we could proceed. Is this an omen for the future?

I arrived at Gatwick, picked up my ticket and found the hotel. Time for dinner and an early night. Up with the lark tomorrow and see what the day brings.



Chapter Eleven

At 6am my phone and the hotel alarm call system burst into life, I stabbed buttons to try to turn them off but only succeeded in turning on the television. The new BBC 24 hour news service echoed round the room. I think I woke my neighbours - no - I know I woke my neighbours.

The transfer to the airport, and the flight, were both free of incident. By 1100 I was in Toulouse and by 2.30pm in [Mirepoix](#).

The town was as attractive as I had remembered and the light dusting of snow on the high Pyrenees to the south gave a Christmas festive air. I strolled round the village in the warmish December sunshine. By 3.00 o'clock I was standing outside the garage looking at my car.

It must have been all of 18 inches from the spot where I had left it 4 months before, but it looked beautiful. All the scars of the accident had been smoothed away and it looked fine. Tomorrow we shall see how it drives!

Back to the hotel and a quick snooze - I think a celebratory dinner is called for tonight.

I should have remembered that Monday is Market day in Mirepoix - or perhaps I did.

Somewhere between the Salmon in leek sauce and the Duck a l'orange I lost a filling - why should it happen now?

Phone home and fix an appointment with the dentist as soon as I am home - the hole in my tooth feels enormous.

Up early Monday morning and down to the garage, a very heavy frost and the car looks like a wedding cake. The formalities are very brief and I am on my way. First things first, a gentle run round the town to check out the car then a walk round the market.

A knob falls off the central heating control - I hope that isn't an omen! That can wait till I get home. I park the car. "I don't believe it!!" The car in front has UK registration!!

For the first time I check carefully inside the passenger door - there's a little rust on the hinge mountings - that can wait till I get home too!

Next to check out a campsite for next year. The narrow road winds endlessly up the mountain. There is a particular sadness to deserted campsites out of season, but the location is fine and the facilities look OK - I shall book it when I get home.

All these thoughts of home have the inevitable outcome and soon I am wending my way towards the autoroute. A brief pause at [Carcassonne](#) - quiet and deserted and to my mind more enjoyable in the second week in December than in August and then I am really on my way home.

A couple of miles of cautious driving to check out the car and all seems well.

Twenty kilometres out of Narbonne, at 90 miles an hour I have a bird-strike - toughened windscreens are wonderful! I remove the remains - no obvious damage and away again.

One of the pleasures of being quite alone is the ability to follow a whim. I had intended to travel up the Rhone valley through Lyon and Baune, but at Beziers I decide to turn left up into the Massif Central. A good choice - no traffic and [beautiful scenery](#). I relax.



Chapter Twelve

The light fades, I turn on the lights. It does not take long to realise that I have a problem. No dipped headlights. Well I can manage on fogs and main. I press on to Clermont Ferrand.

Up with the lark and find the nearest Peugeot dealer. The showroom is across the road from my hotel. It takes me 15 minutes to get there!!

After an hour and much head scratching the verdict is delivered - a cable fault somewhere, it can be sorted out next week!!

I decline. I sit in the car and phone my own dealer in Burton. We arrange for me to deliver the car to him directly from the ferry.

I set out for Orleans. The road is open and free of traffic. The slight shake on the steering (at 80 miles an hour) which I had complained about in July before the accident appears to have been cured. I increase the speed cautiously - in part through some concern over the repairs - more in concern over the Gendarmes.

There is absolutely no shake at 90, 95, 100 or 105mph. My concern of the Gendarmerie wins out and I slow to a legal 85 (or so)

The Montpellier-Orleans autoroute (out of season) and where complete, is wonderful, smooth surface, gentle bends and no traffic, would that all roads were like this. Orleans appears quite early.

Time for shopping and an early night.



Chapter Thirteen

Define paranoia - no look it up yourself - I've got it, I know what it is, and I've got it.

The shopping trip was unhelpful. I don't have:- a) a present from this trip and b) a Christmas present for "she who must be obeyed"!

Worse still, when I returned to the car - No side lights, no fog lights, no numberplate lights! I begin to recall all the science fiction stories and films of my childhood - electrical failure in motor cars usually preceded the scene where the hero was abducted by aliens. Good job I'm no hero.

I ponder, and then drive back to my hotel with the hazard warning lights on. The Police de Ville ignore me. I walk back to the centre commercial and buy a torch. Why bother! There are a lot of wires and I'm a retired doctor! I turn off the torch, revise the plan for tomorrow - early start - not much site seeing and shopping and get to the ferry before the sun sets.

Time for dinner. I had resolved to be good, but I feel another bottle of wine coming on. Then early bed.

Up with the lark and round the town - get the shopping done. My mobile phone rings.

"Hi, this is Paul, can we start the bathroom conversion tomorrow?" I point out that I am in the middle of Orleans and that next week might be more appropriate!!

Much to my surprise the next two days were - relatively uneventful - apart from driving with no lights and I arrived home in Derby without any further incident.



Chapter Fourteen

My local Peugeot Dealer fixed the lights, and the passenger seat belt. Did I mention that we discovered that the passenger seat belt was jammed solid following the accident? I didn't think so - but now -131 days after the accident, the car is restored to me and appears fine.

There is still the small matter of 131 days car hire and the recovery cost to be claimed back from the other party, but that aside all is well. I send all the bills off to my insurers.

My mobile phone rings. It is my insurance company. There is a degree of confusion over who is handling the un-insured loss aspect of the accident. For the first time since August 11th I loose my cool!

Some frantic phone calls later the Legal Expenses insurers have reopened the file and propose to instruct solicitors. I await the response

Five days later, on Christmas Eve 1997 I drove to Llanberis to collect my son. It was a foul day, dipped headlights and careful driving the order of the day.

As I passed through Stoke on Trent I became aware of a strange odour. I dismissed it as a hot kiln smell from the Potteries - but it was still with me at Alsager. I turned off the dipped headlights - the smell went away. I switched on the dipped headlights. They failed. I fiddled

with the electric automatic headlight adjuster - the lights came on and the smell returned. I turned off the headlights and ran on fog lights.

The weather improved a little. As I ran up the M6 the traffic thickened, then bunched, then stopped. I crawled past a police car, its red lights and "Accident Ahead" lights flashing in the rain.

I took the next slip road off the motorway and headed west on minor roads. The weather worsened.

I picked up my son and headed out of the village and up the Llanberis pass. The weather worsened - real hill walker weather. The rain filled streams running down the hill tumbled over the rocks to meet the rising wind coming up the valley lifting the spume vertically and blowing it back up the hill.

We passed the Pen-y-Pass Youth Hostel and dropped into the relative calm of the lee of the hill and down to the Pen-y-gurd Hotel.

The wind increased in force. I turned on the headlights. No dipped headlights - the smell returned. I touched the headlight adjuster, and snatched my finger away. It was hot! I turned off the lights. The smell disappeared and - feeling cautiously - the switch cooled down. I resolved to leave the lights off.



Chapter Fifteen

We paused in Betws-y-Coed. A mistake really, the wind increased. For those who don't recall Christmas Eve 1997 the wind in North Wales gusted at over 80 miles an hour. The car rocked in the wind, my son recalled an incident some 15 years before when a tree blew down in front of me.

As we turned round the next corner a tree about fifty yards ahead leaned and fell slowly across the road. Like one of Fred Dibner's chimneys it collapsed across the road, its rotten trunk shattering into hundreds of small pieces in front of the car.

It seemed to me that this was not a good place to be - if one tree here is rotten and falling, could there be more? I drove cautiously round the remains of the tree.

In the dark, with the weather worsening we picked our way through the fallen branches and passed one more fallen tree before arriving safely home

I parked the car in the garage, locked the door, and sat down to our Christmas Eve dinner and another bottle of wine. Back to the Peugeot Dealer as soon as he opens after Christmas!!



Chapter Sixteen

The car went back to the Dealer on 29 December 1997 - they found three more loose connections but needed to order a new headlight leveller switch - so back home with partial

lights (and no hot smell) but a more pronounced noise which sounded as if was coming from the front suspension. Back to the Garage on 31 Dec 1997.

The switch which arrived was not the correct one! Worse still a detailed inspection of the suspension had found no fault - but had revealed that the front near side wing had not been correctly secured after the accident and needed to be removed and refitted!!

Rapid phone call to my insurers. They require an estimate. The garage will provide one next week, then a technical examination by the insurers engineer and then, we hope, a further repair.

New Year's Day 1998 dawns with the car in our garage and still not right. Day number 144 and counting!!



Chapter Seventeen

Monday January 12th 1998. Day 155

Paranoia:-

"Mental derangement; spec. chronic mental unsoundness characterized by delusions or hallucinations, esp. of grandeur, persecution, etc." *Oxford English Dictionary*

I told you I was being persecuted

The garage fitted the new headlight level adjuster switch. They turned on the headlights and the switch burnt out!!

That was the third switch - it was also the last switch available in the UK. Put it on back order and wait for supply from France! I was tempted to offer to drive over to the Peugeot factory in Mulhouse in France to collect it, but common sense won out, in any case I need to meet the examiner from the insurance company tomorrow to sort out refitting the wing.

"The new switch should be in in about ten days"

Tuesday - the examiner agreed the refitting of the wing - the garage can't do it until 28 January 1998 - that will be day 170.

Wednesday 21 January 1998, a letter from my insurance company. I had asked them to cancel one insurance policy on my very old Peugeot 305 which had finally expired. My son arrived home just before Christmas on the back of an AA Relay vehicle - again - and my patience with him and the 305 had finally snapped. The insurers cancelled all my motor policies. Urgent, frantic and slightly tetchy phone calls reinstated them. Why does it happen to me - and why did the insurance company send the letter to my son's address in Wales that he left two month age ???

The 605 is having a new switch installed today. The garage ordered two "just in case" I think my paranoia is infectious.



Chapter Eighteen

The lights are fixed!

Wednesday 28 January 1998 - day 170 - dawned bright and cold. A letter from the insurers covering the uninsured loss aspects of the claim, they have appointed solicitors to handle the claim, I should communicate with the solicitor in future! I shall wait events. Four months car hire and a contribution to the costs involved recovering the vehicle don't come cheap. I am a pessimist!

I drive the car to the dealer to have the wing refitted. "The insurers haven't authorised the work yet" Ho-Hum

"Do it anyway" is my response.

I phone the insurers. "Ask the garage to send the invoice to us"

I tell the garage - they ask for the phone number of the insurer - is it possible that they do not believe me??

Friday 30 December. The wing is fixed!!

Saturday 31 December 1998. The garage send the invoice for the re--fitting of the wing to me. I write to the insurers and send them a copy of the invoice.

Thursday 5 February 1998. The statement from the garage arrives for payment. I phone the insurers. They do not know if I should pay it or let them pay it - they promise to phone back. In passing they say that they have paid the invoices for December - I wish they had told me sooner - in the absence of any information I paid the garage on 10 January 1998, They promise to phone back. No one phones back. I phone the garage. "Ho-Hum, the insurance company say that they have paid Decembers account as well as me. Have you been paid twice?

The computer is unable to provide the information. "We will call you back" Why does my phone never ring?!!

Friday 6 February 1998. Day 179. The phone did not ring. I called the garage. They can find no evidence so far of being paid twice. I called the insurers - they had not been able to check the file yet. I pay the fourth bill since my return to the UK. I do hope they are going to reimburse me!!

Did I say that re-fitting the wing had not cured the nasty clunk from the area of the nearside wheel? I didn't think so!!

Another long technical discussion with the garage - we decide that it might be a problem with the engine mounting - or perhaps the rather fancy, - and complicated automatic self adjusting front suspension. That sounds expensive!!

The car is booked back into the garage on 12 February 1998. I tell the insurer. That will be Day number 185 and still counting. Car still not fixed, uninsured losses not agreed, four UK re-repair bills paid and not reimbursed and several hundred pounds out of pocket with no hope of reimbursement.

Just in case you started this story as long ago as I did - a simple accident in France, not my fault, the other party admitted he crossed on to my side of the road and hit me, agreed by the police, fully comprehensively insured and with full AA 5 star cover and after 6 months a car not properly repaired and seriously, I mean seriously, out of pocket!!!!

10 February 1998 A cheque from my insurance company settling the invoices for December! Since I must be completely honest, the situation as of today regarding the repairs to the vehicle is that I owe the insurers £6.00!! But of course the car goes back to the garage on Thursday for further repairs.

12 February 1998. A letter from the company handling the un-insured loss aspect of the accident, - they appear to have appointed a second firm of solicitors to act. This seems like overkill so I phone to query the letter. They will investigate and get back to me

Friday 13 February 1998. You guessed!! The car is not repaired. Not the suspension, not the engine mounting, the hot money now is on a more fundamental problem with the bodywork repair - something to do with the new wing not being bonded correctly to the A frame - perhaps the A frame not pulled forward far enough - don't ask me, I'm not an engineer. The Manager of the bodyshop promises to talk to the insurance assessor and get back to me!!

The uninsured loss saga. After three months of confusion when everyone except the French office of my insurers thought that the French office was handling the claim, they said they were not!! The legal claims insurers reopened the file and appointed a solicitor to handle the claim. I sent him all the details.

He does not handle foreign claims. The company have appointed another solicitor - his name sounds French!!

DAY 186 and waiting

Wednesday 18 February 1998. Day 192. A full independent inspection by the Automobile Association. The result - the front near-side sub frame is set back by approximately 3/8th of an inch, this in turn means that the radius arm on that side is forced up against the body shell causing most of the problem - probably!! The inspector is a bit suspicious of the suspension!! The car is already booked into the garage next Tuesday. Could we be nearing the end of the saga?

Tuesday February 24th 1998 Day 198. The written report from the AA arrives. The car is back at the dealers - I have a temporary hire car - saga not over yet!

A letter arrives from the new solicitor requesting details of the claim and all the appropriate invoices. I send off all the details and photocopies of all of the primary documents. I'm getting canny, after all he is the fifth person who has requested this information. I begin to despair of seeing any restitution!

Thursday 5 March 1998 Day 207. The car is still with the dealer - sitting waiting to go on the jig - no progress at all. I cannot say that I am enjoying driving a Nissan Micra!!

A new problem has arisen. It's springtime and thoughts are turning towards holidays in France. I need to get my caravan out of secure storage and serviced, but to do that I need my car. Security is very good at the storage depot and unless I turn up with my car and the letter of authority they will not let me out again with the caravan. Call me a pessimist if you must but I spend fifteen minutes on the phone arranging a second letter of authority so I can collect the van with another car.

207 days since the accident - only 30 to go until we return to France for our next the visit. The ferry is paid, the camp site booked, the car had better be right.

13 March 1998 A RED LETTER DAY

DAY 215

I have been driving a Nissan Micra for the last 18 days - it's not a patch on my 605, but I only expected to have it for 48 hrs.

BUT, today my car came back - it appears to be repaired, the geometry has been re-aligned and the front near side suspension has been rebuilt. The noise has gone and all seems well!!!!

I write to the insurers - they have docked my no claim discount until this matter is resolved - I think it is time for them to resolve it!!

The un-insured loss is still outstanding but the solicitor is working on it!!



Chapter Nineteen

Well, the car pulled the caravan all the way back to the South of France and home again with no problems - well that's not quite true - the weather was awful with rain, wind, hail, and snow - not a pleasant holiday but the car was fine!!

We got back and the very next day I "brushed " the new wing against my neighbour's gate post. Only a small problem but back to the garage to have a small, and I mean small, dent pulled out. I didn't even swear!

Wednesday 22 April 1998. A letter from the solicitor - he is pessimistic about recovering the car hire costs. He feels sure that the French Insurers will blame my insurers for the length of time taken over the repairs. Everyone appears to be blaming everyone else - no one wants to accept responsibility and who is going to left holding the baby - and major costs ?- you guessed it!!!!

I felt quite sorry for the very helpful girl at Customer Relations at my insurers - but I am beginning to get annoyed. Seven months without my car, more than £2500.00 pounds out of pocket and NOT MY FAULT.

I have written to my insurers - invoked their complaints procedure, time limited their response and made it clear that referral to Insurance Ombudsman is close. Watch this space. Perhaps Watchdog might find this cautionary tale useful in the run up to the 1998 holiday season!!

The little dent has been taken out of the wing

One crumb of comfort. My No Claims Discount has been re-instated. My insurers have apologised for the delay in effecting the repairs! I send my insurers £6.00!!



Chapter Twenty

27 April 1998 1830. A phone call from the Departmental Manager at my motor insurers. He is very, very apologetic - and admits the delays are unacceptable and accepts responsibility. We agree that I will ask my solicitor to contact him. I am given an assurance that I will recover all of my un-insured losses. It looks as if Watchdog and the Ombudsman may not be required!!!

29 May 1998 Day 292. I have had no reply the solicitor following the letter which I wrote to him on 28th April and which was received by him and signed for on the 30th. I asked him to contact the Departmental Manager at my insurers to discuss the matter. It is clear that they have not done so!!! I got a long story about how the French insurers have not replied yet - and when they do they will not meet the claim. Since my letter to the solicitor made it clear that this was to be agreed between my insurers and the French I am beginning to become a little cross!

One ray of hope for my insurers - this is clearly not their fault.

I do begin to wonder if anyone ever reads letters that are sent to them!! They certainly never reply.

I speak to the Departmental Manager at my insurers - He has agreed that if the solicitor does not contact him early next week he will phone them.

1 July 1998 Day 325 Well, the Departmental Manager sent me a copy of his letter to the Solicitor and phoned me! Then the solicitor phoned me and wrote to me - just to tell me that he is getting no response from the French Insurers!!

I have offered to go and bang on some French doors!!!

16 July 1998 Day 341. I write to the solicitor to ask if he has had a reply to letter which he sent to the French Insurers in April. I send a copy to my Insurers.

17 July A fax and phone call from my Insurers - they are becoming as concerned by the lack of action as me. They have sent a fax to the solicitor asking for information. We agree that they will contact the Legal Expense Insurers who are instructing the solicitor and see if they can speed thing up. I promise to drive very carefully when we return to France - and the exact site of the accident in two weeks time. Shame we shall be short of spending money!!

22 July A letter from the solicitor dated 22 July 1998 which should have contained a copy of the fax which he had sent to my insurers- but didn't - arrived after we had left on holiday on the 28th of July. Do the Post Office hate me as well!!!

6 September 1998 YEAR 2 . Day 392

It's been a while since I brought this saga up to date. We have been back to France, 10 days on the Atlantic Coast, a week in Ariege - a mere ten miles from the site of last years accident, visited the accident site and completed the trip so untimely interrupted by the green Renault van last year and spent 10 days at the foot of Mount Ventoux in northern Provence. A splendid holiday, and in the fullness of time a fuller report with a link.

But back to business. The solicitor seems pessimistic that we will get anything out of the French. Over the last six months he has written two letters and made a handful of phone call with no reply at all as yet. I could wish that he was exhibiting rather more aggression. The French insurers have a Web site with a great deal of information including an email address for complaints and a named photograph of their Chairman and CEO. I have therefore written a personal letter to their Chairman and lodged a formal complaint via email. I have told both my solicitor and legal expenses insurers what I have done (after the event)

To my surprise, following my formal complaint to my insurers, the relationship between their departmental manager, his assistant and myself has flourished. They are as frustrated by the lack of progress as I am. Following a very cordial conversation on 4 September they have agreed to meet the costs of recovering the car and the additional inspection costs. I consider their action very fair. Once the solicitor has recovered the excess and a proportion of the car hire costs my insurers will consider the shortfall and we will discuss the way forward.

The only remaining items are the excess and the car hire cost. We await some action from the French!!

11 September 1998. Day 398.

A reply by email from the qualite/complaints department of the French insurers. They have received my email and it is being looked into! I should expect a formal reply " **within a few days**".

I Wait

19 September 1998 Day 406

Formal response from the Office of the President of the French Insurers.(In French) . He has directed the correspondent to chase the appropriate Direction which she has done

"immediatement" and she will use her best endeavours to provide me with a response as rapidly as possible. (My French continues to improve!!)

I now also have the phone and fax numbers of the Head Office and a Direct Line number into the Customer Relations Department.

I Wait

28 September 1998 Day 415 BUT ONLY 3 WEEKS SINCE I WROTE TO CHAIRMAN OF THE FRENCH INSURERS

**A formal offer from the French Insurers
The offer is reasonable and I will accept**

Is the end in sight?

To celebrate the occasion I write formal replies to both the Chairman of the French Insurers and the Qualite/Complaints department - and I am so overcome - I reply in French. I told you that my French was improving!!

I also phone my Solicitor - he is out of the office and no-one has opened the mail yet. I inform his assistant and ask them to accept the offer when they find it.

I Wait

7 October 1998 Day 424 A phone call from my solicitor (who has clearly returned to the office) to say that they have finally received an offer from the French Insurers. I loose my cool and tell him quite sharply that I KNOW, The French Insurers KNOW, his assistant KNOWS and (now that he has read the note on the file) HE KNOWS and he also now knows that everyone KNOWS, He promises to settle!

20 October 1998 Day 437. A cheque arrives from the French Insurers via my solicitor. Hooray.

A letter from the solicitor accompanies the cheque. It is brief and to the point and contains only two salient facts - the date of the accident and the size of the cheque. Both facts are wrong. I ask my solicitor to issue an amended letter with the correct information!!

I am still slightly out of pocket but I have written to my insurers who have agreed that once the sum from the French is known they will look at the file again. The end could really be very close now!!

30 October 1998 Day 447 A fax and a cheque from my insurers. The saga is effectively at a end (apart from the letter from the solicitor). I write a formal letter of thanks to the Claims Manager at my insurers - her friendly and helpful assistance over the last six months has kept me sane - and a formal letter to the Customer Relations department at my insurers to tell them that the matter is now closed.

FINIS!!

[But the story goes on](#)



1999

Chapter 21

The car finally came to stop at a petrol pump on the Paris to Caen autoroute. We had left Provence the previous day and travelled up the autoroute to Beaune when we had spent the night.

Dinner had been an interesting affair. The evening was warm and mild and we decided to eat outside. We had barely sat down at our table when the heavens opened and the wind blew. All of the diners rushed indoors and we ate our meal to the accompaniment of a rain storm.

The next day was even more exciting.

On the road from Dijon and the car began to overheat. We drove very slowly for the next 20 miles and twice had to refill the radiator. At Chatillon sur Seine the friendly French Peugeot agent repaired a hose and we continued on our way.

As we drove round Paris on the Francillienne Autoroute, it was obvious that the car was losing power. We crawled up several hills to the dismay of the other traffic and the car went slower and slower. At the toll booth on the autoroute the car barely moved at all but after several minutes we had once more reached 70 miles an hour.

The engine got hotter and hotter. We finally pulled into a petrol station and filled the car. That was the end of the line!

Nothing would persuade the car to move further forward (although it would move backwards) . We un-hitched the caravan and pushed it into the front of the restaurant and reversed the car beside it. We went for a cup of coffee. On our return I phoned the AA. The telephonist was very kind and very helpful, she cancelled our ferry, made provisional arrangements for us to be on the ferry the following afternoon and an hour later a breakdown truck arrived, put the car on the back , the caravan behind and drove us to his yard.

We slept quite well in his yard and although he had said he would be back at nine o'clock he was only half an hour late. The mechanic opened the bonnet - gave a cursory look inside and said with a Gallic shrug " boîte de transmission automatique!!" and slammed the bonnet. I took that to mean that the automatic transmission had failed!! He phoned the AA and after quite considerable discussion it was agreed that he would take us to the ferry.

We were towed onto the car deck . Nothing is ever simple. We had a brief discussion with the docker who would pull the car onto the boat. He was concerned that the brakes might not work if the engine was not on. " Not a problem" I said, "the engine runs - it's just that the car won't". He was not convinced. We agreed that he would start to tow us and I would test the brakes. The brakes were fine! The tow rope parted with a very satisfying crack and whipped over the head of the driver in the cab of the towing vehicle. " Les freins vont bien" I shouted to him - as if he did not know!! He went away and came back with a hawser worthy of the QE II.

We were towed off again at Portsmouth and after a short wait another breakdown truck picked us up and took us home. AA Relay is amazing - with the car on the back of the truck and the caravan behind we stormed up the M1. If the truth be known faster than I would have dared pulled my caravan, but then a 7.5tonne tow vehicle must make a difference!!!

We arrived at 14 hours late.

Next day the car was back at our local dealer - if you have followed this saga from the start you will know it has spent quite a lot of time there in the last two years. Their mechanic opened the bonnet gave an English shrug and said " Looks as if the automatic transmission has gone!" " We will need to order one from France!". "They could have put one on the truck yesterday" I muttered gently - but then that really would have been too simple, wouldn't it!!!

The car is back on the road - running well, no longer overheating, the new gearbox is fantastic and I have booked all the ferries for next year. The car is going to France at least four times next year, the replacement which was planned for early next year has been put back a bit - new automatic gear boxes don't come cheap!!

Chapter 22

Easter Millennium Year

The saga continues.

The gearbox on the car was finally replaced. Winter passed slowly, but with the advent of Spring thoughts turned towards the next holiday. The caravan was sent in for service.

The van remained with the agent for a week. The telephone rang, "Your van is ready, but there is a problem with the fridge and the axle. "Okay fix it".

Life was a little hectic, and I was unable to collect the van the next week. A week later I arrived at the caravan agent. I paid in the bill and was about to leave when I asked, "what did you do to the axle?"

"Axle, Axle?", was the response.

I know that this is going to be a problem. We walk out and look at the caravan. There is a distinct lean to one side. I run my hand over the wheel arch. "Do you think that I can drive this caravan to the south of France in five days time?"

The service manager scratched his head, and reluctantly, like dragging teeth from a crocodile grunted a very quiet "No".

"Well, we travel to France next Friday with a caravan, you will have to have this one fixed by then". A look of horror spread over his face, "We can't do anything about it today he said but I'll phone on Monday to find out what the delivery is on an axle and the cost". I went home and told the wife.

"I think it would be a smart to move to look at new caravan is tomorrow", I said. So we did.

Monday morning, the new axle will take eight weeks and cost £1,000!!

We move over to the sales department. "We will buy that caravan there, but it must be prepared and delivered by Thursday!" The sales assistant was quite flustered, "I don't know what trade in we can give you for your old van", she said.

"Work out the trade in that you would have given me and deduct the cost and fitting of the axle" I said.

Once the facts were clear the rest of the process was reasonably quick. Indeed the caravan was prepared and ready by Wednesday. I collected in the caravan replaced all our equipment from the old caravan and arranged to have a new lockable tow bar head fitted.

We were ready to roll by Friday. (In fact we did not leave till Saturday)

In the handbook it advises a short trip to see if everything is satisfactory, a run of about five miles and a check. Ah well, what it is going to get it is 700 miles and we will see what we will see at the end of that time.

The good news. The car with its new gearbox behaved beautifully the engine ran sweetly the engine did not overheat and all was well. And, surprise surprise, at the end of 700 miles the caravan was still with us an all complete



Chapter 23

We went to France at Whitsun - nothing happened

**"They didn't think much to the Ocean
The waves, they were fiddlin' and small
There was no wrecks and nobody drowned
Fact, nothing to laugh at, at all."**

ALBERT AND THE LION by Marriott Edgar

But the summer, ah well, that was different!



Chapter 24

My mobile phone rang. We had just turned off the Autoroute at the most southerly point of our summer holiday, the turn at Tarbes in the foothills of the Pyrenees (a sense of déjà vu here) on our way to Lourdes. It was my brother-in-law. My mother-in-law had been resident in a nursing home for some years and had appeared frail but not seriously ill when we had left the UK a couple of weeks earlier - but had now clearly taken a turn for the worse. We sat in a layby to consider the options. We were 250 miles away from our caravan, night was closing in and we had a hotel booked for the night. We decided to press on and review the options overnight.

Over the evening we decided to return to the UK starting the following morning. The day started well we covered the 250 miles to Avignon at the highest permitted speed and by lunch time were approaching the town. "Lets call at the railway station and check train times" I said.

The helpdesk was wonderful, we explained that we wished to travel to London today to be told that there was a train in 20 minutes - or another in two and half hours. We opted for the train at 4.00o'clock and ran out of the station, back to the car and drove at high speed back to the caravan. The fridge was emptied, the food consigned to the dustbin, the electrics and water disconnected, my wife's suitcase packed and we began the journey back to Avignon.

Remember my paranoia? Why, why, oh why did the French decided this day of all days to dig up the main road through Carpentras? Time slipped away. The gentle trip back to the station became a race against time. With minutes and seconds slipping away we pulled into the station forecourt and my wife plus baggage leapt out of the car. I roared into the station car park. First Floor, Second Floor, Tyres squealing on the up ramp corners, Third Floor, Fourth Floor, you get the idea. On the Fifth Floor I parked the car with scant regard for clearance on either side, jumped out, locked the door and ran for the lift. Out into the forecourt, find my wife grab the bags and run for the train. (four minutes to go).

"Got the tickets?" I gasped. "In your bag" She said. "Got the bag?" I gasped. "No" She said

Revise that earlier statement. My wife plus baggage (but not my bag) leapt out of the car.

Drop the bags, "Wait here" (three minutes and counting) and I turn and run at high speed back into the car park. Now I know I shouldn't have been running on the roadway in the carpark, I realise that the time constraint had confused me, I know the French drive on the wrong side of the road, but did he have to be coming so fast!! I very nearly got out of the way - he very nearly managed to stop, but I rolled off his bonnet and down the side of his car. To my shame I did not stop. I rolled, bounced, came up smelling of roses and kept going.

Up to the car, grab the bag, run back down to the station forecourt, keeping carefully to the marked pedestrian footways , grab the bags, down the subway and onto the train. Or very

nearly onto the train. "Ce Train, est il le TGV pour Paris" elicited a Gallic shrug and a noncommittal "Non".

We waited on the platform. The TGV sailed majestically, and slowly into the station 5 minutes late!!

My exertions had warmed me up nicely and I sweated all the way to Paris. Our routing called for a change of railway station in Paris from the Gare de Lyon to the Gare du Nord. At Avignon they had explained that one hour was adequate for the transfer even allowing for the fact that we would be required to check in for Eurostar 30 minutes before departure.

The TGV continued to sail majestically, and occasionally slowly through central France and arrived in the Gare de Lyon 20 minutes late. We ran off the train, down the platform and up to the taxi rank. Thankfully, unlike St Pancras, there was no queue and we hurled ourselves into the taxi at the head of the line

"Gare du Nord, s'il vous plait, a haute vitesse" I gasp

The taxi ride was neither majestic, or slow, and we arrived in time!

On the Eurostar I phoned my son. " Meet us at Waterloo at 23.15 with the car" I told him, "You are going home (he lives in south London) on the train" My wife expanded the explanation. He's a good boy! Not only was he there, the car was waiting, full of diesel and his girl friend had reminded him to put a flask of coffee and a couple of KitKats in the car! We were home just after one o'clock in the morning.

Chapter 25

My wife is home, my mother-in-law has improved a little - but my caravan is still in the south of France, and worse than that my car is sitting in a French station carpark and the central locking system on the car is decidedly unstable. I should have mentioned it before, but there were more pressing matters.

Up until the phone call our holiday in France had been, taking everything into consideration, not bad. We had visited friends on the way south, travelled slowly and enjoyed a relaxed journey. We had visited my cousin on holiday on the Riviera, and also spent a magical day visiting the Isles d'Hyeres off the Riviera coast. The only fly in the ointment had been an irritating habit which the car had developed.

For no apparent reason the car had developed a mind of it's own with regard to the central locking system. The car would lock, but after an indeterminate period, and entirely of it's own volition, it would unlock the doors. It remained immobilised, and the alarm continued to function. This was guaranteed to scare the life out of any opportunistic sneak thief and had already caught me out on a number of occasions!!

So there was some urgency in me getting back to Avignon to rescue the car.

It's surprisingly easy. Book the Eurostar / TGV tickets in the UK. Pick them up at Waterloo, make sure you are routed through Lille and at Lille, while you wait for the TGV upgrade your ticket to first class (it's amazingly cheap).

Avignon was still there, although whilst we were away a French truck driver had taken a large chunk out of the famous bridge, dancing either on or under the Pont d'Avignon is not advised whilst trucks are running, and miracle of miracles, the car was still there, and still locked.

I drove slowly up the caravan, opened the van, opened a bottle of wine, sat in the sunshine and relaxed.

Chapter 26

All I have to do is ensure the van is clean, all the food is cleared away, and everything is left neat and tidy because I am coming back again in a month to take the van home.

A leisurely drive home on my own, wind in my hair, soft music on the radio and not a care in the world. I drove up the high valley of the Ardeche, up into the Massif Central, open road, no traffic - bliss.

I slept in Montlucon on the night of 28 August 2000. I mention this in passing because it was August Bank Holiday in England, a date which has no particular significance in France, except, except, it's a jolly good time to disrupt the holiday plans of "perfidious Albion"

I pointed my car towards the coast, the soft music on the radio has been replaced by a sombre news reporter giving information about "démonstrations à propos du prix d'essence" and that "les pêcheurs ont bloqué les ports de plaisance et les ports de croisement". My French is good enough, I may have a problem. Still, plenty of time in hand, so press on!

As I approach Oistreham from Caen I see a large black smoke cloud lying over the port. Now I know I have a problem. I drive into the port, concrete blocks are laid across the entrance to the ferry terminal, over the blocks straw has been scattered and set alight, dense black smoke billows into the air.

There is an air of unreality. The ferry passengers are sitting in their cars all over the town, a moderate force of the gendarmes are standing, legs apart, arms folded with watching the fires and the smoke. No-one is trying to put out the flames. In the far distance I can hear the sound of a siren - if it the Sapeurs/Pompiers the fire will have died of its own volition long before they arrive!

I park my car on the pavement and in the fullness of time a fire engine inches down the road. This is not really my concern - the passengers on the dockside - and the passengers who have not yet been permitted to leave the ferry were all due here at 4.00pm about two hours ago. My ferry is not due to dock for another four hours. Did I mention that this was in fact the day before the "formal" strikes and blockades started? Could this be a photo-opportunity for the Press?

I walk into the ferry office and ask how long my ferry will be delayed. "Your ferry will arrive and depart on time" I was told by a very friendly and helpful member of the terminal staff. "The demonstration will finish at 8 o'clock and then everything will be back to normal"

To my complete amazement she was completely correct. At 8.00 o'clock the demonstrators loaded their placards into their white French vans, the Sapeurs / Pompiers hosed down the road, a fork lift truck removed the concrete blocks (and placed them conveniently to hand for the next occasion when they would be required) and the gendarmes and demonstrators melted into the night.

Vehicles flooded off the ferry and into the already overcrowded town and as I enjoyed a leisurely dinner the overheated and by now excited passenger inched their way onto the boat. They left 5 hours late. And my ferry? My ferry arrived and departed exactly on time just as I had been told it would. Just occasionally some things do seem to go right!

Chapter 27

I spoke too soon!!

We live in the Trent Valley - on Tuesday November 7th in the year 2000 the river burst it's banks and flooded the village. I'm sure you remember. The worst floods for fifty years. But I'm

getting canny. I parked my car just outside the village on the high ground for safety - and someone reversed into it!!

Drivers side headlight smashed, bonnet wrinkled, glass on the road, steam out of my ears! But it's a civilised village. The perpetrator held up his hand and admitted it was his fault.

I even felt sorry for him. He had taken the day off work, spent the day in village helping the villagers with flooded houses and had returned to his Discovery and his wellies had slipped off the clutch!

I got into the car and drove home.

As I parked it on the drive my wife said "That back nearside tyre looks flat!"

She was correct. So with the rain falling steadily, the river rising inexorably I set about changing the wheel. "Must have picked up some glass as I drove away" I thought.

Next morning down to ATS to have the tyre repaired. Back at lunch time to be told " We had to fit a new tyre, the side wall of the old tyre has been split"

Now the only thing that could have done it was the accident. The car must have been pushed backwards violently enough to burst the tyre. Ata endorsed the invoice to say that the damage was compatible with the wheel having been forced violently against the kerb.

I had already contacted the insurers and a terrible sense of foreboding and deja vue is beginning to descend over me.

" Book the car in with an approved repairer and they will provide you with a courtesy car " my broker said.

" Oh no - no courtesy car", the repairer said, "You haven't paid the additional premium"

"I'm not paying for the repair" I said " the other insurers will pay"

"Sorry, no courtesy car"

Back to the broker. "Fix a hire car with the uninsured loss insurers" I said, and they sent me a claim form.

Three days later a phone call from the broker " The uninsured loss people won't play - they say you will get a courtesy car"

So change the repairer to one who would offer a courtesy car. I really didn't feel and sadness when the first repairer announced they had ordered and received the parts required for the repair - and that Peugeot would not accept them back!!

Chapter 28

So one week later I take the car to the new repairer. In the interim I washed the car, and discovered a small wrinkle in the roof which was certainly not there before the accident. I point it out to the engineer. "Couldn't possibly be anything to do with the accident" is his response

"Well I have had this car for 6 years, driven it 126 thousand miles, hand washed it more times than I can remember, and that wrinkle was not there immediately before the accident and it is now" is my response. The engineer agrees to bring it to the attention of the assessor.

Deja vue is really setting in now. " The last time the car was damaged" I murmur gently " the car was off the road for eight months and no-one believed me until the vehicle was independently assessed and finally put back on the jig".

I leave an unhappy engineer and drive away in their courtesy car.

Why do they call them courtesy cars?? My car is a top of the range Peugeot, admittedly old, but lovingly cared for, with an automatic gear box (new last year!), cruise control and air conditioning with climate control, electric central locking and radio with cassette player.

The car I have been given is a Ford Fiesta (admittedly new) with nothing except a radio, and not even wheel trims! And this is supposed to be a courtesy??

The most charitable thing I can say is that it seems to me to reflect crass discourtesy!!

I wait for information from either the repairer or the insurance company

Watch this space

Chapter 29

I got the car back on Friday 24th November 2000. One week later I was driving into town. The road from the village where we live into town follows the route of an old lane, over the railway line, over the canal, along the canal towpath and then by a leisurely and rural route towards the town. Over the last twenty years a new estate has grown up around the lane, with rows of houses, a school - and parked cars!! The road has been widened a little but the cars parked alternately on each side of the road provide chicanes for budding Formula One drivers.

I was proceeding (as they say) along the road well below the maximum permitted speed of 30 miles an hour when I saw the car coming towards me. He was moving fast and realised too late that the road was too narrow for him to pass the parked car directly in front of him without driving straight into me.

He hit the brakes. The wheels locked, smoke poured from the tyres and all I could do was sit there whispering under my breath " Please keep straight, please keep straight!!" He kept straight. Straight into the parked car ahead of him.

The contact was sudden and brutal. The parked car was shunted 12 feet backwards and the front of the offending car crumpled and bent. Glass showered onto the road from the shattered headlights of both cars and both came to rest. Nothing hit me!!

No-one was hurt - the crumple zone and seat belts worked but both cars looked very sad. The driver of the parked vehicle appeared from a disturbed breakfast and was surprisingly calm. Insurance details were exchanged and within minutes the driver of the offending and now very bent car had driven away - I rather suspect he wished to be elsewhere by the time the police arrived - I did wonder about the depth of tread on his tyres.

I resumed my interrupted journey

Chapter 30

The saga continues.

Once a month I go out to have dinner with some friends and colleagues. My neighbour is part of the group. I picked him up and drove off. "It sounds as if your rear wheel bearing has gone" he said.

I laughed, after all he's only an a highly qualified research engineer who has spent a life time investigating and curing vibration problems in aircraft engines – what does he know about car wheel bearings??

About five minutes later I picked up the second friend. He climbed into the car and settled down. Before we reached the end of his road he said " It sounds as if your wheel bearing has gone"

I phoned the garage for the next morning.

I drove the car down to them. Now even I can feel the regular click and thump – paranoia!!

As I entered the showroom I was greeted by gales of laughter from the mechanic who looks after my car

"I think the rear wheel bearing has gone" I said He laughed!.

We went for a test drive. "Your rear wheel bearing has gone", he said

I left the car with them!

I went back to collect it the next day. "The wheel bearing had gone," he said, " but it was the one on the rear near side. "

That's the tyre that was burst during the accident in November!!

It seems highly likely at the wheel bearing was damaged during the accident and that the driving over the last four months has finally caused it to fail.

It might be possible to recover the money from the insurance company but I have lost my appetite for the fight. I have notified the broker, but I have decided it isn't worth chasing the claim.

But the saga did not. I ordered a new car two months ago it was due for delivery in May.

At the end of March the garage phoned to tell me that the new car had arrived.

I agreed to collect it on 1 April. The price had already been agreed but for some reason the garage seem unwilling to offer any sensible price for the old 605!!

Mind you, I am not surprised - they know my car well.

They recall the accident in France and the protracted insurance claim.

They know I pulled the transmission out of the car a year ago – but of course it does have an almost new gear box now!

They also know about the recent accident and of course they have just replaced the rear wheel bearing.

I can understand why they do not want it.

So I shall keep it to pull the caravan to France in the spring and bring it back in the autumn. We will also use it to drive around the town

Postscript

The 605 pulled the caravan to Provence faultlessly

But the saga may go on.....!!!!

The new 607 took us to Provence at Whitsun.

It is fantastic!!!

20th April 2003.

Chapter 31

It's been some considerable time since I wrote anything about my cars

Not because nothing has happened, but because I've been very idle.

Perhaps first thing we should say concerns my 205.

I haven't written about the 205 before because there has been nothing to say.

The car ran for nearly 250,000 miles without any problems at all.

I had it for many years and they gave it to my daughter, but in the fullness of time as with everything, it came to an end.

My wife had acquired a Peugeot 206, which she enjoyed, but it was a three door vehicle and she really wanted five doors, so we agreed to sell it to my daughter and my wife purchased a new 206,

The new car is fine, it runs perfectly, but the indicators stalk did not work properly.

I told the garage and they ordered one from France. For some reason it took months for a new one to arrive but in the fullness of time the garage phoned me and told they that the replacement had arrived.

I collected the car that evening to be told by a rather shamefaced garage attendant that they had not managed to replace the item. "We put the new indicators stalk on" he said, "but as soon as we reattached the battery the horns sounded and we could not turn it off".

"We've had to put the old stalk back on and we've ordered another from France"

A month later the newly replacement stalk arrived and was successfully fitted.

Back to my new Peugeot 607.

You will recall the last comment I made about it was that it was perfect.

Well not quite.

After driving it for about six months the driver's seat became increasingly painful, much discussion with the garage and the Customer Care Department at Peugeot (much misnamed) resulted in no satisfactory solution.

I now have a large cushion on the seat, which solves the problem to a certain extent.

At the same time, I told the garage that I thought there was a problem with the air conditioning.

Over a period of more than 18 months the garage progressively replaced many of the items in the air conditioning system. With no real improvement.

The written word does not adequately convey my conversations with the garage but I will make an attempt.

I would go into the garage and explain to them that when driving the car after about 10 minutes the air conditioning would make "a clunk" and then after about a further three or four minutes a much larger "thump clunk", and then the air conditioning would cease working. I could make the air conditioning start again by fiddling with the controls.

"It sounds to me", I said "as if there is a baffle somewhere in the system that is being held open by a solenoid which is not quite strong enough and which has some sort to stop which is supposed to assist it"

Over a period of about three months the garage spoke to Peugeot Customer Care and the Peugeot Technical Department with little success.

One day when visiting the garage on an unrelated matter I asked if they spoken recently to Peugeot.

"No, but we are speaking to them again today, because we have a 406 with a very similar problem", they said.

I phoned the next day. "Any news," I asked.

"We know what the problem is" they said "there is a baffle in this air conditioning system which is not held open by the solenoid and there is a small plastic plug which is supposed to assist it. The little plug tends to break and we need to replace the trunking that contains it. It does mean taking out the dashboard and we will need the car for about three days"

The air conditioning now works perfectly

Chapter 32

About a week later I had a problem with my 605.

Driving on the motorway is fine, driving gently in the town is fine, but driving into roundabouts is a major problem.

To be strictly accurate, driving into the roundabout is not a problem, but driving away is.

Trying to depart from a roundabout results in the car slowly coughing to a standstill. Despite this I drove it for about a week. It became clear, that fuel was not reaching the engine after acceleration.

I went into the garage. "I think that there is a small leak in the fuel system allowing air to enter the fuel system", I said. As usual they laughed at me.

I left the car with them and returned home.

Three days later the garage phoned.

"It's taken quite a long time to solve the problem", they said, "but we finally sorted it out. There was a small crack in one of the fuel pipes and allowing air to into the system but we have sorted it out now."!!!

The 605 is now getting quite elderly, so we decided to have a towbar put on the 607.

After a couple of days it became apparent that every time the car started it was accompanied by a quite enormous noise.

I went into the garage "ever since you fitted the towbar, there is in enormous noise when the car starts" I said, " I recognise the sound!! I think that in fitting the towbar you have removed and replaced the exhaust pipe and one of the exhaust mountings is fitted incorrectly"

They laughed at me again.

Later that day the garage phoned. "We sorted out the problem. One of the mounting points for the exhaust pipe had not been refitted after we fitted the towbar" they said.

By now it was approaching Easter and we were about to travel to Provence with the caravan again.

We decided that we would use the 605, and I arranged to take it to the garage for to be serviced. My wife was also concerned that the driver's door was getting much more difficult to close.

I could close it, by using great force but she was finding it increasingly difficult. I asked the garage to look at it. At the same time I said "I think the air conditioning is on the blink".

They laughed at me again. "It's very difficult to see if the air conditioning is working in the winter" they said.

"Humour me", I said. "Re-gas the system and see if it works any better."

The garage phoned me later that day.

"We've re-gassed the system and the air conditioning is fine now" they said, "but we looked at the door, and the top hinge has come away completely from the frame. We have booked it in to the body shop tomorrow and they will weld it back on".!!!!

The 605 pulled the caravan to Provence without a problem.

Chapter 33

6 February 2006

My Peugeot 605 was new in 1993; it finally reached the end of its life in 2005 so I thought I should mark the event by at least describing its final days.

Towards the end it became obvious that the major problem was developing. Increasingly, on starting the car in the morning it was reluctant for the engine to turn over, whilst the initial mile or mile and a half of each journey was accompanied by what can only be described as an almost steam engine type pall of smoke following the car down the road.

The reluctance to start became more pronounced, and investigation revealed that it was probably due to hydrolock –the diagnosis almost certainly a failed cylinder head gasket and advice from the garage that it would cost at least £400 to replace it and when the head was off and the new gasket on the problem would not necessarily be solved .

The problem became more and more pronounced and eventually with much regret the car was taken down to the local scrapyard where it ended its life.

But back to the 607, almost as soon as the 605 had finally been scrapped the cruise control on the 607 failed. Not entirely but intermittently. From time to time the cruise control refused to be selected and more worryingly from time to time it would just drop out of cruise control.

Frequent trips to the garage, and repeated explanation of the problem and multiple attempted solutions were unsuccessful. I became accustomed to the somewhat quirky driving conditions.

About four months after the problem commenced we had to attend the funeral of a friend. We left the crematorium and drove the hotel where the wake was to be held. When we got out of the car there was a considerable smell of hot brakes and the discs were quite clearly very very warm.

I drove gingerly down to the garage and left the car with them. The diagnosis - the brake servo had failed allowing the brakes to be applied without any real pressure on the brake pedal.

Three days later the car was repaired and returned and a miracle, the cruise control was now fully functional.

I returned the garage and suggested that they submit a defect report showing that early signs of brake servo failure on a Peugeot 607 were probably indicated by intermittent faults on the cruise control.

Both the brakes and the cruise control have functioned perfectly since that date.

It is now the spring of 2006 and the 607 with 68,000 miles on the clock appears to be running perfectly.

17 December 2007

“ 'Tis the season to be jolly “ Ho Ho

Out to a party tonight – parked the car outside the house we were visiting - closed the door and CRASH.

I thought someone had driven into our car – but no other vehicle in sight!!!

Examination of the car showed that the drivers widow had disappeared – no broken glass – not a thing to be seen – but no window. Closer investigation revealed that the window had disappeared into the door

Posh car – electric window so no alternative but drive home very cold and swop the car for my wifes Peugeot 206!!!

Down to the garage on Monday and a complete new window mechanism on Tuesday.

The car is repaired – the wallet is empty

Happy Christmas

