

Performance Road Driving Instruction

Back in the heady days of 1974, at the tender age of 18, I dropped out from my first year as a Mechanical Engineering student at Imperial College, chosen originally for the simple reason that my then hero Keith Duckworth was an alumnus. I had fortuitously blagged a job in the Marketing Department at BMW UK in Chiswick (then called BMW Concessionaires GB), and the world of work looked much more appealing than the life of a student.

BMW were kind, or maybe foolish, enough to provide me with a brand-new BMW 2002 as a company car which unfortunately sustained damage on no less than three occasions in six months. The first two times I wasn't even in the car, but on the third I was, and I collided at about 10 mph with a pedestrian who ran without looking straight out into the Chiswick High Road in front of me. Although seemingly not badly hurt, he was mildly concussed and thus removed from the scene in an ambulance complete with blues and twos.

This near-disaster was observed from a window of the head office by the then boss of BMW, one Anton Hille, who was less than impressed. Hille had a kind heart, despite his gruff manner, and instead of firing me he sent me off to do both the IAM test and the BSM High Performance Course (HPC). At the time the HPC was run by that doyen of performance road driving instructors, John Miles, who wrote several excellent books on the subject. The course encompassed a trip to Brands Hatch and the opportunity to drive some hot machinery by the standard of the day, including a Ferrari 246 Dino which regrettably because of my height I didn't fit into.

These events kindled a lifetime interest in fast road driving which endures today, over 40 years later and with more than a million road miles under my belt in or on all kinds of machinery. I wouldn't claim to be the world's best road driver and am keenly aware of my various shortcomings, not least impatience; I've had the occasional fender-bender and picked up more than a few speeding points over the intervening period, but I haven't had an accident I couldn't drive away from or collided with any more pedestrians. I still drive over 20,000 miles a year, ride 5,000 more on a motorcycle and bicycle about 1,000, so I also see the roads from all sorts of user perspectives.

Fast forward more than 25 years from 1974 to the late 1990's and as the publisher of *Circuit Driver* magazine and the *Autosport Circuit Guide* I had the opportunity to undergo a day's training with Bernard Aubry, then driving consultant to Porsche Cars Great Britain and a freelance driving consultant in his own right, under the banner of 'Bernard Aubry's Masterclass'. Previously to that he was also the first ever civilian driving instructor at the Sussex Police Driving School, before becoming involved with John Lyon and the High Performance Course.

Bernard, who will doubtless be remembered by many, was then the unchallenged headmaster of roadcraft instruction and during our day together he diplomatically pointed out a number of bad habits I'd acquired over time. Bernard is a delightful gentleman who has an almost uncanny ability to predict the behaviour of the car in front. His running commentaries were supremely illuminating and his techniques have informed my thought processes while driving on the road ever since.

But Bernard Aubry, although fortunately very much still with us, has retired to spend more time on his allotment and his position at the top of the driver coaching greasy pole was therefore vacant. So who might be the go-to instructor now? Step forward Rob Colbourn, a self-confessed poacher turned gamekeeper since he started his working life as a 'white van man', driving upwards of 80,000 miles per year and taking all the driving short-cuts that go with that territory. Rob got into performance driving tuition the hard way, and he has worked his way up as protégé of Bernard Aubry and carries his legacy forward. More than fifteen years further on, I've got the chance to spend a day with Rob so he can help me polish up my driving.

The day in question dawned bright and sunny, and we chose a route that took in a variety of road types and traffic conditions. From my home in Oxfordshire, we went north on fast 'A' roads that I know well towards Warwick, thence on the M42 / A42, stopping for lunch in the café adjoining the excellent Donington Park Grand Prix Collection, and taking a look round the museum while we were there. We returned via Leicester, Coventry, Banbury and the M40. On the 'A' roads, brisk acceleration and thus overtaking ability is key to making the most of opportunities and racking up safe but decent progress. On the dual carriageways and motorways the performance dynamic is less crucial, but it's still helpful to be able to go forward promptly when the occasion requires it. I drove my Alpina D4, which, while specifically not a Porsche 911, has similar on-road performance and is, additionally, understated in a way most Porsches would struggle to achieve.

The prevailing view amongst UK drivers seems to be that all you ever need to do is pass the test, and experience will do the rest. This approach wouldn't be acceptable for pilots, and nor should it be for the roads. One only has to drive a few miles on, say, the M25 in peak hour to understand why the traffic thereon is all-too-frequently disrupted by unnecessary collisions. Such a journey also illustrates why performance road driving is a discipline quite unlike track work. Although there are some overlaps (smoothness, balance and line selection being three) the priorities are different, since safety is top of the list and making fast and inconspicuous progress, while important, is secondary. Nevertheless, if one applies some science, those two requirements are not mutually exclusive.

Rob's style, just like Bernard's, is consensual and not overly prescriptive, exemplifying the benefits of coaching over instruction. Rob has a favourite Bruce Lee quote: 'obey your principles without being bound by them'. First he helped me correct my sloppy hand positioning, improving (and lightening) my all-important steering input. Then he moved on to my bad habit of 'target fixation', evidenced on the 'A' roads by driving too close to the car in front. It is astonishing how much more relaxing it is to insert more space in front, and then a little more still, without compromising those all-important overtaking opportunities.

Rob also reminded me of the classic Aubry technique of subtly communicating a message to a following driver to ensure they don't encroach on your carefully constructed bubble of safety space. Although I wasn't expecting it, and maybe we were lucky with the mid-day traffic, this technique held good on the dual carriageways and motorways too. In a fascinating paradox, in being less proximate to your nearest neighbours on the road, it's possible to engage with them more and influence or even control their decisions and

behaviour, to the safety benefit of all. It takes one almost into the realm of Derren Brown, and it really works.

Other techniques, including concentration, observation, anticipation, planning, balance, steering input and car control are all dealt with in Rob's relaxed and informative style. Honest self-analysis is discussed, and encouraged, to ensure that one optimises one's use of road-space under all the different traffic and weather conditions one might encounter. So Rob is very much the spiritual successor to Bernard Aubry, and re-reading what I wrote about Bernard for *Circuit Driver* fifteen years ago, I'm struck by how much of what he imparted then still holds good, and also how Rob has moved the game on to take account of the more crowded roads of the 21st century.

If you've invested tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of pounds in a performance car, doesn't it make sense to spend a fraction of that on some coaching to ensure that you get the best out of it? And if someone close to you is a regular road user, even just on the school run, why not send them too? My son spent a day in his Audi R8 with Rob and came back home a much more sanguine driver. My daughter, who seems to have inherited my impatience, is next on the list for the Colbourn treatment. Although she only drives a Golf she has already managed to be speed-trapped at over 100 mph - I have no doubt at all that Rob will sort her out.

After a day with Rob Colbourn, even experienced drivers will find they get a great deal more satisfaction from their driving, though ironically they may travel a shade slower in the process. Those less confident, or confident but less experienced, will learn an enormous amount from Rob, all of which will make them safer, happier and more relaxed on the road. I couldn't rate or recommend his techniques more highly.

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