

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



April 2020





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The Newsletter of the North Down Advanced Motorists Group (Group 8199)

Helping to Improve the Standard of Driving and Riding on the Roads in
Northern Ireland and the advancement of road safety

April 2020 <http://www.amni.org.uk/groups/northdown/> Vol 23.4

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New Members and test passes

In view of the current Covid-19 lockdown we have no new members or test passes to report this month.

March Cover Picture

I expected more to get this one as many will have visited this popular location, but we had only one correct answer. The location is James Street in Westport looking towards the Octagon. Congratulations to Norman Shearer.

The cover for this issue was picked to reflect what many roads are like at the moment - almost deserted. Can you identify where it is? No prizes, just the satisfaction of good observation and, of course, a mention in the Road Observer.

Covid-19 update

The next regular section in The Road Observer is normally “Dates for your Diary”. However, with the current lockdown it is not clear when we will be back up and running again. The advice from IAM RoadSmart is that all Group activities are suspended until further notice. Driving and riding tests and assessments are also suspended until further notice.

The position is being kept under review by the Committee and we will keep you updated as and when advice from the Government and IAM RoadSmart is revised. The Group Committee is continuing to meet using video-conferencing.

Issues to be aware of during lockdown

Social Distancing

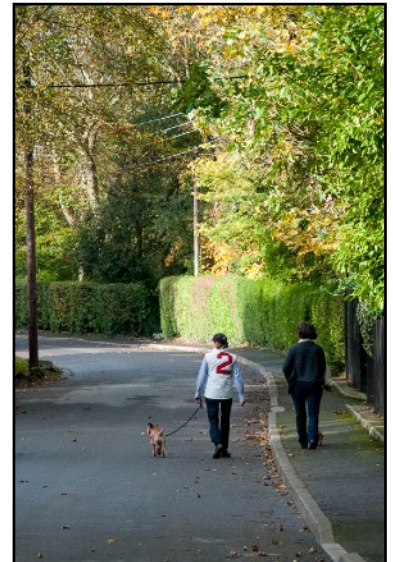
Many people are walking or cycling as a form of regular exercise and although the roads are much less busy than normal, if you are out driving or riding you need to be aware that you are likely to encounter greater numbers of pedestrians and cyclists.

Pedestrians

Many roads have narrow footpaths and maintaining 2m social distancing means that in order to pass others on the footpath it may be necessary for some pedestrians to step out onto the road. You need to be aware that this could suddenly happen in front of you.

Cyclists

Expect to see many more cyclists on the roads at all times and remember that a cyclist may pull out to provide social distancing space from pedestrians. Also, expect to see family groups out cycling together. These may include young children whose cycling skills have not been fully developed. For example, an inexperienced child cyclist may turn the handlebars when they look round so expect them to wobble. Give them time and plenty of space.



Maintaining your car during lockdown

During the current lockdown, with all but essential travel banned, it is easy to forget about your car. It is not often it will sit for such a long period without being used, aside perhaps for a yearly rest in an airport parking facility while you head off on your holidays. Most of the time, it's likely used on a regular if not daily basis, travelling to and from work, the shops and visiting friends and family. So how will your car survive during weeks of inactivity, while we all stay home and stay safe?

The important thing here is not to worry – your health and that of the people around you is paramount. If you can keep well, the car will still be there when we get out of the other side of this situation. Above all else, take notice of government advice and stay indoors wherever possible.

However, if you do feel you need to check your car – and if you can safely access it while maintaining your two metre distance from other people - Richard Gladman, Head of Driving and Riding Standards at IAM RoadSmart, has these useful tips on how to help ensure your vehicle remains in good condition while it is not being used:

Tyres

Check your tyre pressures and make sure they are at the recommended settings. A tyre that is partially deflated will put extra stress on the sidewall and may cause lasting damage if left that way for an extended period. If you have space, roll the car forward or backwards slightly to change the area where the stress on the sidewall is greatest. Keeping the pressure right will mean you are ready to go as soon as restrictions are lifted.



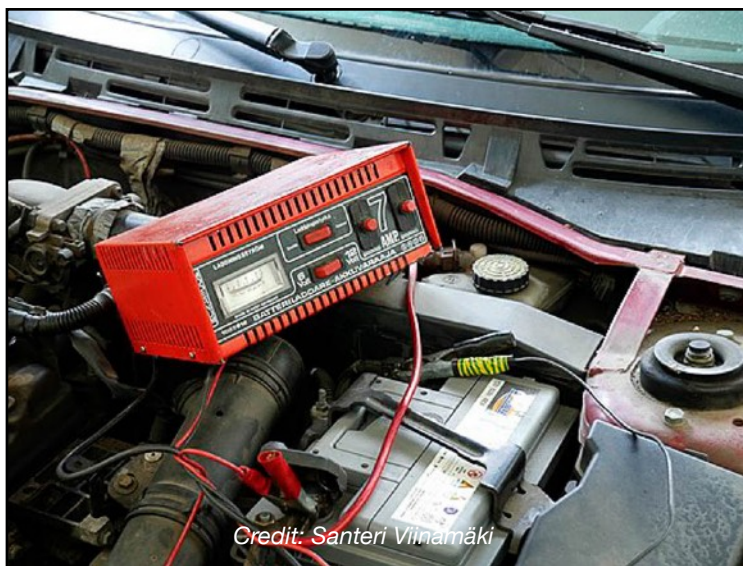
Handbrake

If left for a long period of time a handbrake can stick on. To avoid this, sit in the car, apply the footbrake to ensure no movement and release the handbrake. If possible, move the car slightly before re-applying the brake, just to vary the part of the drum or disc where the pads are gripping.

Battery

A modern car battery which is in good condition should stand up well to periods of inactivity and a modern car will shut down most systems if it detects inactivity for a long period of time. There may however be a small drain due to an alarm system. It is also possible to lose some charge if the terminals are dirty or corroded, so make sure they are clean if you're able.

To compensate for any power drainage over time, try connecting a maintenance charger which will charge and discharge the battery as necessary. These are available for home delivery from a range of online retailers. Any cheap modern charger will also do the trick. Switch it on every couple of weeks until the battery is fully charged.



Credit: Santeri Vilnamäki

If you do not have access to a power socket, there are some solar devices available that will do the same job without the need for mains power. Again, these are available for delivery from online retailers. As a last resort, if you are worried, you can start the car up and allow it to run stationary for 15 minutes or so every couple of weeks. This is not ideal and certainly not good for the environment, but if you do need to do it, make sure all electrical systems are switched off before you start. If they are on you will likely drain more power than you put in. Be careful if your car is a diesel when doing this, as slow running can harm your diesel particulate filter. So you may need to increase the revs slightly to prevent this - but be mindful of your neighbours, after all, they are trapped in too!

Richard Gladman said: "It is vital that we follow government advice and travel only when it's essential. If you can safely do these few precautionary checks while still keeping social distance, they will help make the transition to normality easier when the restrictions are relaxed. If you are not able to do them, a family member or friend can do them on your behalf, but only if they can do so without breaching the terms of the lockdown."

MOT

Currently all MOT tests in NI are suspended (for Covid-19 reasons). For the latest information click on this link:

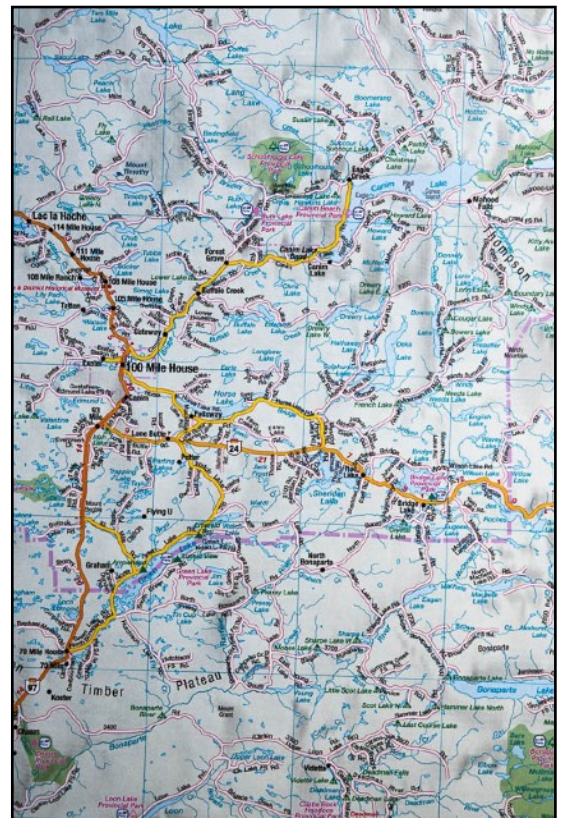
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-motoring>.



What3words

Before sat-navs and Google maps, the adventurous motorist had to have some sense of direction and basic map-reading skills, which we have attempted to keep alive in the group with an almost annual table-top rally and navigation run. The table-top rally is a map-reading exercise conducted in the boathouse, so there is minimal risk of actually getting lost. The navigation run has taken a variety of forms over the years, but the current favourite is “let’s meet for ice-cream at xxxx, get there whatever way you like.”

Some driving aids fall short of my own ability and are therefore a distraction and not an aid in my estimation – I’m thinking here of the gear choice indicator on my wife’s Hyundai which suggested “change down” when it encountered a hill, then immediately said “change up” even though it had just acknowledged the car couldn’t pull the higher gear. And I’m also thinking of my French colleague who instructs gear changes from the passenger seat with no appreciation of how under-powered a rental Kia Sportage actually is. Like rev-counters and parking sensors, sat-nav is a driver aid which I use to enhance my drive, without necessarily relying on it fully.



Prior to COVID-19 lockdown, I travelled regularly with work and have driven a lot of rental cars in a several countries. A lot of the newer cars don’t have inbuilt sat-nav per se, but instead use Apple CarPlay or Google Android Drive, which allows you to plug in your own phone and get navigation instructions via the dashboard. The benefits include the fact that it’s your own phone so you already know how to use it, and it’s real-time so the maps are absolutely up to date, and they’re aware of traffic congestion because of the motion (or lack of motion) of thousands of mobile phones in the vehicles all around.

My late father-in-law once gave me quite a severe telling off because his son had taken him to the wrong destination via sat-nav, and this was evidently my fault because I work with computers, albeit in an unrelated industry. I was able to establish that my brother-in-law had entered the destination

incorrectly, so the sat-nav took them very accurately and efficiently to the requested location and had not malfunctioned in any way. This brings me rather circuitously to a relatively recent innovation in the mobile mapping area which I would like to introduce you to. We are all familiar with post codes, which are a unique identifier, often covering a few dozen premises. The street address is a precise address within the post code area, and we usually program the sat-nav with street address and / or post code. That's all well and good, but what if you end up somewhere which maybe doesn't even have a postal address? Just imagine your car has broken down in the middle of nowhere and you need to tell the recovery services where you are. If you're ex-military or a geography teacher you might be able to give a six figure grid reference, but that assumes you have the Ordnance Survey maps in the car, and a torch, because let's face it, nobody's car ever breaks down in daylight. Should this ever happen to you, you will thank me for introducing you to what3words.

So, what is what3words, and how do I use it? Well, I'm glad you asked.

The organisation what3words has mapped the entire world into a grid of 3m squares, each one addressable by a unique combination of three words. This is not just a novelty. It has been adopted by several countries as the official address system. It is recognised by the emergency services, and the NI Air Ambulance Service recently attended a road traffic collision which they located quickly as it had been reported using what3words on a remote stretch of the Movilla Road – maybe not quite the middle of nowhere, but certainly close enough for a good look! I understand it is even recognised by the Royal Mail, but I have yet to test that.

The website <https://www.what3words.com> will show your precise location. However, it is available as an app for iPhone and Android, which is where it could be really invaluable. Next time you don't know exactly where you are, you'll probably have your phone in your pocket, so if you've got battery and signal all is not lost. Sometimes the location indicator is amusing or ironic – for example, late last year I was on an Icelandic coach tour, and the coach broke down. As already indicated, this inevitably happened during the hours of darkness, in the middle of nowhere, and nobody had a map or a torch. Now Iceland has relatively few roads, so we weren't actually lost, but I thought it was a bit ironic that we ran to a stop at *unilateral.offroad.forethought*. And on a recent work trip, both Google Maps and Garmin took me to *buns.maps.sorry*, when they should have directed me to *rusty.dusty.tower*.



“That sounds like fun”, I hear you say. It certainly is, so let’s not stop just yet.

This fun part is probably easier on a PC or tablet than a phone. If you use what3words to locate nests.salads.duck, then drag the Google Street View man to that square and have a look around (you may have to rotate the viewpoint), you’ll find yourself on Belfast Laganside next to the Beacon of Hope – you may recognise her as Nuala with the Hula.

So, no prizes for this quiz, I’m afraid. All the answers are animal related.

1. large.vibrate.notice
2. tester.flows.agent
3. played.basket.cheer
4. oldest.lows.bond
5. grows.harmonica.vowing
6. surgeon.consented.suspicious
7. fires.chase.pint
8. elsewhere.glades.hiss
9. decompose.legal.hunter
- 10.hiking.snake.foster

Please send your answers to David by email to xgrlaser@outlook.com

Thanks to our Chairman David for this article and quiz.

And finally.....

“If everything comes your way, you are in the wrong lane.” - unknown

“You can’t fix stupid.” - unknown

“I couldn’t find the sports car of my dreams, so I built it myself.” — **Ferdinand Porsche**

**The views expressed in the “Road Observer” are not necessarily those of the Editor,
the North Down Advanced Motorists Group or IAM RoadSmart**