

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



November 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

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<https://www.facebook.com/NorthDownGroupIAM>

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New Members and test passes

With the ongoing restrictions due to Covid-19 we have no new members and no test passes to report.

September Cover Picture

The location was the Newtownards Road in Bangor looking towards Bangor with the spire of the Abbey Church visible. The picture was taken in the early days of the first lockdown when there was little or no traffic on the roads.

Congratulations to Norman Shearer, Ivan Greenfield and Bill Moore. Good to see a driver amongst those identifying it correctly.

This month's cover is a bit less frequented. Can you identify this month's cover? No prizes, just the satisfaction of good observation and, of course, a mention in the Road Observer. To give you a start it is not in Ireland. The bikers may have an advantage here as it is a part of the country many are drawn to (no it's not the Isle of Man).

Dates for your diary

1 December 2019	Virtual STAC for car Associates
12 January 2021	Virtual Annual General Meeting - see below. Our guest speaker will be Becky Harcourt who will give us a presentation on "Understanding the treat of invasive non-native species in Northern Ireland"

Committee Meetings

The Committee continues to meet virtually using ZOOM and the following decisions were taken at the November meeting:

Covid latest

We are still in lockdown but at least we have the prospect of vaccines in 2021 to provide some light at the end of the tunnel. However, the vaccines will take some time to be rolled out and the Committee has decided that we will not seek to resume our usual activities in the Boathouse before Easter. We will review the position in March.

In the meantime we will continue to use ZOOM for virtual STAC meetings for car Associates and Observers and also possibly for Group Nights if we can arrange speakers. Details will be issued to Members in due course.

The bike side operates more on a one-to-one basis and has been doing some observed rides. However, we will have to wait to see what emerges after the current 2 week pre-Christmas lockdown ends and also whether any new restrictions are put in place and whether bike observing can recommence in the new year. Given that many bikers take their machines off the road over the worst of the winter months when there is any chance of salt on the roads, the restrictions are likely to have less of an impact on what would have been the normal level of bike observing.



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We will keep you updated as and when the situation evolves.

Annual General Meeting

The usual date for our AGM is the second Tuesday in October. However with the lockdown in place and the Boathouse being closed it was decided to postpone the AGM to see if the conditions would improve sufficiently to enable us to hold a real meeting in the Boathouse. Unfortunately we will not be back in the boathouse before Easter at the earliest and as the IAM RoadSmart rules require the AGM to be held between 12 and 18 months from the previous one we have decided to hold a virtual AGM using ZOOM on Tuesday 12 January 2021. The AGM papers and the instructions on how to join the AGM meeting will be issued early in December.

Group Subscription Renewals

As the Group is incurring little or no expenditure at present we have decided to further postpone the renewal of Group membership subscriptions until the normal renewal date of 1 April. This will be kept under review.

Basic Computer Security

The November Group night marked our first virtual Group Night meeting using ZOOM. The subject was a presentation by Chairman David Harcourt on basic computer security and a total of 16 members took part.

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In advance of the meeting David had asked for a 21 page document setting out the terms and conditions for the meeting to be circulated to Members. Did many read this? Confession: I started but gave up as it was technical and full of legal language (and in my former life I have a background in legislation!). But, as David pointed out during his talk, this was the purpose: to illustrate how we all agree to terms and conditions on things we are doing on the internet without reading the fine detail and not being aware of some of the things to which we are agreeing.

He drew attention to a recent BBC report that the combined T&Cs for popular Apps are longer than the first 3 Harry Potter novels and that a Microsoft Teams T&Cs ran to over 18,000 words and would take two and a half hours to read (assuming you could get the gist of the legal language at a first read).

In this case on page 8 bullet point 7 states “ Nobody else has read this far so don’t spoil the fun when I ask for volunteers. During the talk David referred to security that we are all familiar with: including your house keys, your car keys and banknotes. On banknote security he referred to the change from paper to plastic and how the plastic note was much more secure from forgery than paper. He asked is anyone had a £20 Ulster Bank plastic note to talk about. No-one had but I had a £10 Danske Bank plastic note which I produced. Clearly I hadn’t read all the T&Cs because if I had I would have seen:

“10.Regarding point 7 above, you accept that any items offered for illustration become the property of the presenter.

12.You accept that by reading a banknote serial number aloud in a Zoom meeting or presenting it to the camera for illustration, you immediately transfer ownership of that banknote to the presenter.

14.You accept that saying “That’s not fair” will incur a further £20 penalty, payable to the presenter”.

So David lost out on £10 but we all learned about what we might be agreeing to. Things like agreeing for your details to be given to other people and organisations.

He then got into the meat of the presentation explaining the differences between malware, worms, trojans, spyware and ransomware. There is too much information to go into here but this is a brief summary:

Malware - is bad software;

Virus - is bad software which infects every file it touches;

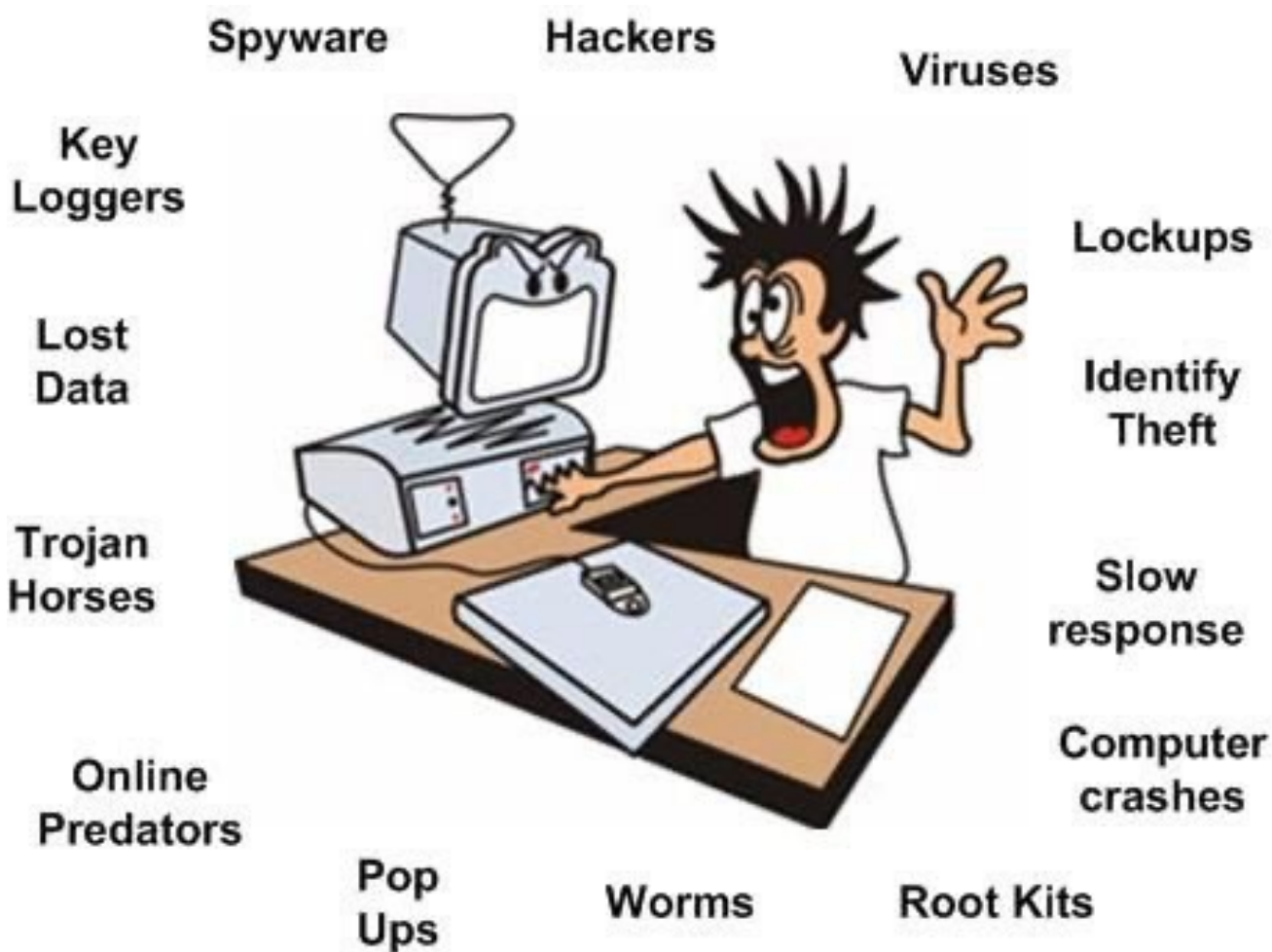
Worm - infects every computer it touches and is more difficult to detect;

Trojan - this relies on you as a user and invites you to download;

Spyware- sits on your computer and looks for 16 digit numbers (credit and debit cards);

Ransomware - encrypts the files on your computer and asks for payment if you want them back.

And it gets worse - there is blended malware which is all of the above!



Credit: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/user:D.SA12D402>

Some things to look out for:

- An email purporting to be from an organisation eg BT, Amazon etc saying there is a problem with your account/your computer and providing you with a link to their website to get it sorted. Clicking on that link will take you to a false login page so that can capture your identity and password. This is phishing. If you get one of these do not click on the links - go to the website separately to check your account.
- An email purporting to come from one of your contacts saying they are in eg Spain, have been mugged and asking you to send money - this is a scam.
- A telephone call saying that your computer has been hacked / your broadband is faulty or will be cut-off and asking you to visit a website to get it fixed.

- When you are visiting a website or making an on-line payment you check that there is a padlock shown beside the website name. The padlock does not of itself indicate that the website is secure. https:// indicates a secure connection to that website (not readable by any third party), but it does not validate the security of that website or what it does with your data. It is possible for a rogue operator to create a self-certification and appear credible and secure, but you really need a certificate to anchor back to a credible organisation. This is a tiered trust model: "you can trust me because I am trusted by Amazon / Symantec / Veritas" (other root level trust authorities exist). When looking at certificates, trace back to an organisation you trust. The big names do this very well - their entire business depends on the authentication, security and trust of their brand.

User names and passwords

These should be something you'll remember, that is not easily guessed (like your date of birth, anniversary or PIN), complex (contains combinations of upper and lower case letters, numbers and symbols) and unique. Ideally you should aim for 15 characters and omit any spaces. If when requested by a website to say open an account and to enter a password and your computer offers you a complex random password of letter, number and symbols. If your computer system can hold these as password protected this is safe to use.

General advice:

- Don't use free internet eg in a coffee shop you may have the option of free internet or internet which requires the coffee shop's internet password. Go back to the counter and ask for the password.
- Don't use old operating systems eg Windows 98.
- Always take Windows patches.
- Install and use anti-malware and anti-virus eg Norton/ Symantec, McAfee, Trend, AVG, Avast.
- It's a myth that Apple computers, iPads phones can't be attacked. As there aren't as many of them as Windows/Android devices they are less of a target but they are not immune.
- Be wary of an email - do not trust it if you are not expecting it. If an email contains a link hover your cursor over the link without clicking on it and the web address you are being asked to contact will show.



In summary:

- Be alert
- Trust no-one
- Don't open unknown attachments
- Phone a friend if you are suspicious
- Use secure connections
- Check the news for current malware
- Check scopes.com (lists malware)

And finally: back up to an external drive, the cloud or both so that if the worst happens you do not lose your data.

Many thanks to David for a very informative presentation, delivered in his usual inimitable style and which gave us lots to think about as we use our electronic devices.

Preparing the car for winter driving

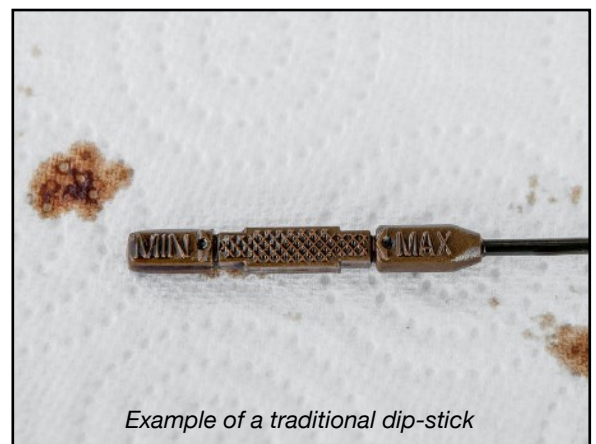
David Harcourt

With ongoing travel restrictions in place, many of us have had cars sitting in the driveway with minimal usage, and we may have unwittingly neglected some basic maintenance, so now is a good time to take a look and freshen up to be prepared for winter.

Modern cars have a lot of technology, supported by improvements in oil, fuel and tyres, which make them well suited to the UK climate without significant seasonal maintenance. Some of us remember having to adjust the air intake from its summer to winter position around this time of year so it could draw hot air from the radiator to assist the carburettor. The transition from carburettor to fuel injection pretty much eliminates the need for warm air, and in fact the car runs best on cold air, both for performance and economy. A few of us also remember running the car on different oil grades summer and winter. The seasonal oil changes have also been eliminated by improvements in oil technology, namely multigrade oils which maintain a consistent viscosity across a broad range of temperatures, and synthetic oils which degrade more slowly than the older vegetable and mineral oils. The service book may now offer intervals of up to 18000 miles, compared to maybe 6000 in the 1980s.

So, if I don't need to tinker with the oil and air settings, is there anything I should do to prepare my modern car for winter? Here are a few thoughts, in no particular order, based on my own experience. Everything we do should consider safety, and if we can do anything to reduce risk, we should certainly do it.

Oil. Assuming you've got the correct oil in the vehicle, check you've got enough of it. Most modern vehicles have an electronic dipstick, and some no longer even have the traditional wire dipstick. This



will be detailed in your handbook, but for most vehicles, the car needs to be level, fully warmed, but with the engine stopped approximately five minutes. If your vehicle doesn't have an actual dipstick, you may check the underside of the filler cap for an indication of the oil colour – light straw colour is healthy, black is degraded, normal oil is usually mid-brown, honey coloured. Check underneath the vehicle for fluid leaks. If you need to top up, do it gradually and keep checking. Too much oil will burst seals and force oil into places where oil doesn't belong, which will be expensive.

Tyres. The four patches of rubber at the corners of your car are absolutely crucial to getting you moving, keeping you in the right direction, and getting you stopped. This is true all year round but particularly so in winter. The tyres need to be the right tyres for the vehicle, with sufficient tread, in good condition, and properly inflated. Tyres are described by width (in mm), rim size (in inches), and aspect ratio (the ratio of the sidewall depth to the width), and there may be a number of options available for your car depending on model variant. However, there's a bit more to the tyre than just those dimensions. The carcass is built up of layers of rubberised cloth, which can be a rayon weave, maybe Kevlar, or steel. These will affect the strength of the tyre, both in terms of the weight it can support, and the speed at which it can travel. Therefore a tyre of a given size may be available with

different weight and speed ratings, and economising on this may degrade the handling and performance of your car, not to mention void the insurance, so it is important to ensure you've got the right parameters for your vehicle. If you've owned the car from new, it's usually best to always replace like for like, and if you bought second-hand, consult the dealer or a reputable tyre depot to make sure you're getting back to factory specification. When replacing the tyres, I would be comfortable with a good mid-range budget tyre or a branded tyre for most family cars, but for anything with a bit more performance I would always choose a big brand, usually the Original Equipment Manufacturer brand on which it left the factory. However, I would never fit low end budget tyres or part-worn imports, no matter how constrained my budget is. I am now going to go slightly against my own advice offered just a few lines above, where I recommended replacing like for like. You may recall I said usually. While you're shopping for like for like replacements (size, speed and weight), check if there is a cross-climate variant. Normal tyre rubber stiffens up at low temperature and doesn't conform so well to the small irregularities in the road surface, so it loses grip. Winter tyres have been available for years but they've never been very popular in the UK because our climate doesn't go far enough below zero to really make them worthwhile, and they're a bit softer, therefore they wear faster in summer. Cross-climate tyres are the tyre equivalent of a multigrade oil. They maintain good grip characteristics and wear resistance across our typical UK summer and winter weather extremes. If they're available for your car, they're a good choice at your next tyre change.

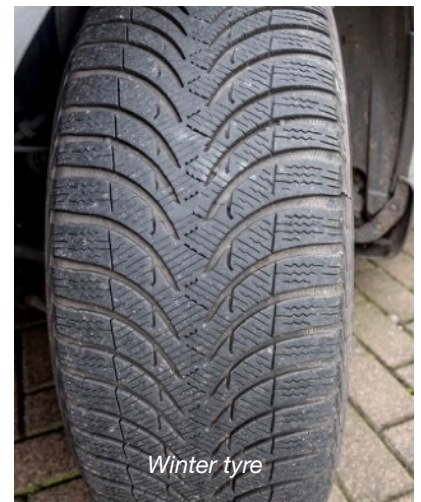
Examples of different tyre treads:



Summer tyre



Cross climate tyre



Winter tyre

Also with regard to tyre changes, most cars drive, steer and brake on the front wheels, with the weight of the engine and gearbox up front contributing to wear, so the fronts will typically wear out before the rears. While it's convenient and easy to change the fronts when they're worn, and it seems like a good idea to put all that fresh grip where it's needed, please don't. For vehicle stability, your best tyres should always be on the rear, and another parameter on the tyre is its date of manufacture. Tyres degrade in sunlight, so while the rears may show little tread wear, the rubber is UV weakened and fatigued. When you wear out your front tyres, move the older rears forward and put the fresh rubber on the rear. Those older tyres now on the front will wear out next, bring the rears forward again, and keep the best on the rear every time you change.

Having the correct tyres is only part of the equation. Check the inflation pressure regularly. A soft tyre doesn't have sufficient pressure to force the tread into firm contact with the ground, and it will distort easily on bumps and bends, so it just doesn't grip well, and it will wear out unevenly and prematurely. It may also flex excessively and generate heat, which degrades the sidewall and can contribute to a blow-out. Treat your tyres well. Avoid driving over debris and potholes which might damage them. Avoid bouncing up and down kerbs, or scrubbing the sidewall when parking. If you do hit a pothole, there is a risk that the wheel may be knocked out of alignment. This means the two front wheels are no longer pointing in the same direction, so one of them is effectively being pushed sideways as you travel forward, scrubbing off some of your valuable tread. This can be felt by hand as a slight ridge on

the block of the tread if you run your hand over the surface. Inspect your tyres for cuts, damage and embedded debris, especially if you're aware of driving over something unexpectedly, and if you have any doubts, get the wheels realigned at a tyre depot.

Winter mode. Many cars have a winter mode which dulls the throttle response and in an automatic may inhibit gear changes to make the drive smoother, and minimise any sudden changes which could cause wheels to lose traction. Be aware too of how the anti-lock braking feels underfoot. ABS rapidly pulses the brakes to almost lock the wheels and then release them, allowing you to steer and brake effectively in an emergency. In icy conditions, even moderate braking can trigger the system, and the first time you feel it, the pedal vibrates and there is a violent crunching sound. There have been instances of drivers being so startled by this that they release the brake and go on to have a collision, because what they felt underfoot felt so much like something mechanical breaking.

Cleanliness. It's difficult to keep the car clean in winter, and even when you do feel motivated, it gets covered in salt and road dirt as soon as you take it back on the road. The Highway Code states that lights, indicators and number-plates must be kept clean, so even if you can't drum up the energy for a complete car wash, a quick sponging of those components will keep you legal. Windscreens and windows must be kept clean, and screenwash jets must be functional. A thoroughly clean windscreen is also easier to de-ice before you set off. I always use a screenwash concentrate in my washbottle. In summer, it helps shift insects, and in winter it shifts salt and traffic film and is an antifreeze. A few years ago I was driving to Edinburgh a couple of weeks before Christmas, and although I had screenwash, it was too dilute for a cold Scottish night. It was around 6am as I entered roadworks. My windscreen and lights were immediately plastered with muck, so I activated wipers and wash. I was rather fortunate that the screenwash froze in the pipes before being sprayed on the windscreen, but the headlamp jets froze solid in an extended position and the lights were caked with about half an inch of solid ice. Fortunately I saw a Morrisons sign ahead and was able to limp to it and have coffee while waiting for the thaw.



When washing the car, use a soft sponge and a good car shampoo with no more than lukewarm water. Do not use washing up liquid – these are formulated to remove oily, waxy deposits, and especially if used with hot water, they will strip any finish from your car leaving you with bare paint. This may be effective if you plan to immediately hand-wax the whole car, but in an article about winter preparedness, I'm going to assume this is not the intention. If you were able to get a good coat of wax on the car in autumn, that will see it through the winter, but now is probably not the time to be starting that.

General maintenance. If your car hasn't seen much driving in recent months, the brake disks may show surface corrosion. This decreases the effectiveness of the brakes when you first use the car after an idle period, but it's not a serious problem. Taking account of the weakened brakes, go for a short drive and on a clear stretch with no-one following, brake from about 30mph a bit harder than you normally would. You'll feel the weakness in the brakes, but if you repeat this a few times, you'll quickly restore them to normal health. The handbrake may get sticky through lack of use, and you may even feel it release with a loud crack when you first move the car. Again, your short drive with enthusiastic braking should help. If you expect the car to be idle for an extended period, move it just a little on the driveway every couple of weeks so the handbrake is being applied to a different spot each time. However, if you feel or hear the handbrake dragging because it hasn't released fully, it's

best to let a mechanic take a look.

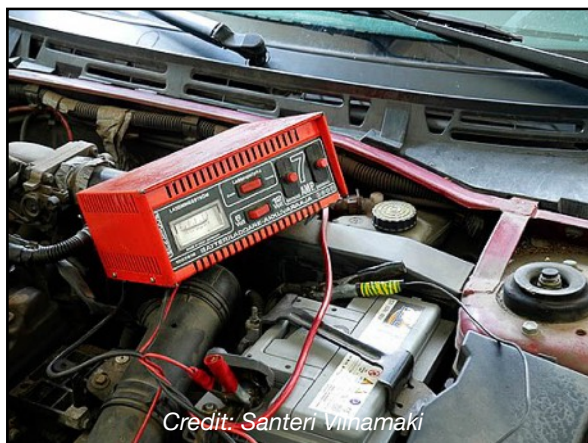
Most cars have an alternating service cycle, with a small service on the first year, and a bigger service on the second year. This does not need to be carried out by a franchised dealer, but it should be trusted to a competent mechanic. Make sure the coolant is checked and topped up. This is often referred to as water in the radiator, but there are several different types of coolant with different chemistries – the right one for your car will inhibit internal corrosion, the wrong one may actually promote it. It usually has a distinctive colour, red, yellow or green, and should be topped up via the header tank when the engine is cold.

Your mechanic may not replace a shopping list of parts at each service, but should be able to tell you approximately how much life is left in major components, such as brakes. He or she can probably do a quick pre-winter check at minimal cost if you're not comfortable doing it yourself, and advise you of any work which needs done. While driving your car, pay attention to any bumps, squeaks and rattles which might indicate failing components. Breakdowns are not fun, and especially in winter, no-one wants to be stuck on the roadside in a hail storm awaiting a recovery vehicle.

Fuel. When I was growing up, my dad ran a small fleet of lorries for his business. He had a tank of diesel, and it was prone to gelling. There were drain bottles on the fuel line of the lorry, much like the U-trap under the sink, which had to be drained regularly to remove condensation. Nonetheless, condensation in the tank would mix with the fuel and form a gel around freezing point which had the consistency of thick grease. So on a frosty morning, the fuel was too thick to pump, and the high-stakes fix was to wrap an oily rag around the fuel lines and burn it to loosen the gel. Modern diesel is higher quality, with anti-gelling agents, and the underground tanks, coupled with the throughput at an average forecourt, are less susceptible to this, so it is much less of a problem. However, it is worth noting that while all fuel comes from the same refineries, budget fuels (supermarkets) do not have the same additives that premium brands have. I am content to use supermarket fuel, but I ensure that at least every fourth tank is a premium fill from a named brand. If we were to have an extended cold spell, I would use more premium and less budget, because the additives are more important in winter.



Battery. Cold starting in winter is tougher and demands more of the battery than in summer, and at the same time the battery capacity is impaired by low temperature. In a normal year this wouldn't matter much, as most of us would have driven our cars sufficiently with a good enough mix of short



and long runs that the battery health would be pretty well assured. But 2020 has not been a normal year and many cars have only had short runs. The alarm and remote locking are constantly putting a small drain on the battery. The best way to maintain battery charge and health is to drive at least 15 minutes every couple of weeks or more frequently. Running the car in your driveway is also lockdown compliant option, though not ideal, but remember not to leave the vehicle running and unattended. We all used to have battery chargers, and they are still an option for keeping a static vehicle topped up.

My first car had a somewhat weak battery, so I learned to start it with my foot on the clutch so the starter motor was turning only the engine and not the gearbox. This is still good practice, but I have found recently that a modern car doesn't necessarily give this advanced warning of a weak battery. It just goes overnight from starting fine to blinking the dashboard lights. I have also found that with a

modern maintenance free battery, once this happens there is little chance of reviving it, even temporarily, with a battery charger.

Adverse conditions and planning. If the weather is frosty or snowy, allow significantly longer for the journey. Be prepared for low sun and dazzling sunshine – that clean windscreen and full wash bottle from earlier will pay off around now. Especially in adverse weather conditions, consider if your journey is really necessary. And is it really necessary at this time? I try to avoid travelling in peak traffic. Often, I can go 15 minutes early and have a coffee at my destination, or leave 30 minutes later and be only 10 minutes later to my destination than if I sat in traffic. Travelling in fresh snow before it is packed down by traffic can be easier. However, bear in mind that if you see a gritter travelling ahead, that grit has barely touched the ground by the time you reach it, and it only becomes effective when it is crushed and spread by traffic. If you see pedestrians struggling to remain upright, that is a good indicator that the road surface is slippery. For a really big and necessary journey, check you've got charge in your phone, fuel in your tank, coffee in your thermos, and a good range of clothing layers in case you end up stuck. Snow boots and chains are available for most vehicles, but to be honest I pack them for outright emergencies to get me home, and I would never plan a journey if I anticipated actually needing them. The same goes for my snow shovel, bag of salt and a couple of scraps of carpet which I might have to sacrifice to get moving.



Keep your car clean and in good maintenance, and it will be ready and reliable year round. You'll also get slightly better economy in winter, as the air is more dense, and the laws of thermodynamics make it more efficient for the engine to dump waste heat. Driving a little more cautiously with more modest progress may also contribute to economy, but it does detract from the enjoyment of the drive.

Drive safe.

Many thanks to David for a wealth of helpful advice.

And finally.....



Credit: Finbarr's Photo Gallery

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