

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



January 2026





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The Newsletter of the North Down Advanced Motorists Group (Group 8199)
Helping to Improve the Standard of Driving on the Roads in Northern Ireland and the
advancement of road safety

January 2026

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Group Contact: Tel No 07760 578444

Email: secretaryndam@gmail.com

Test passes

Congratulations this month to car member

Ana McCrea

who achieved a F1RST pass with a score of 1 in every category.

Good luck and safe driving or riding to any Associates approaching their test.

Cover picture

The September cover picture was Greyabbey looking in the direction of Portaferry with the corner of Greyabbey Primary School to the left of the picture. Congratulations to Bruce Steele, Leah Taylor, David McFall, David Harcourt, Ralph Magee, James O'Brien, Ivan Greenfield, Michael Gould, Billy Hirst and John Seawright. Clearly it was far too easy!

Do you know where this month's picture was taken? It's another local one to ease you into the New Year - a roundabout with 5 entrances/exits. There is a prize to aim for as well as the satisfaction of good observation and, of course, getting a mention in the next Road Observer. The prize is a year's Group membership to the Member who gets the greatest number of correct answers in the year to October 2026. Submit your answers to: leslie.ashe.LA@googlemail.com

Dates for your diary

In addition to the regular STAC nights for car Associates and the regular bike runs (notified by email to bike members and also on Facebook) we have a varied programme for the Group Nights.

3 February	STAC 1
10 February	Group Night - Programme change* - presentation by Stephen Davison road racing photographer and journalist.
24 February	STAC 2
3 March	STAC 3
10 March	Group Night - Guy Thomson "The Northern Isles"
24 March	STAC 4
31 March	STAC 5
7 April	No Meeting - Easter Tuesday
14 April	Group Night - TBA

All meetings will take place in the Boathouse at Groomsport Harbour car park unless otherwise stated.

* The Road Traffic Policing talk is being re-scheduled for later in the year.

STAC - Short Term Associate Course. Car Associate Members should ensure that you are familiar with the relevant section of the "Associate Handbook" before each STAC night so that you can get the most benefit from the theory session as well as your observed drive. **And remember to bring your logbook with you.**

From F1RST to Masters – A recent personal perspective and experience

"So exactly what is the "Masters " programme and why should any Advanced Driver or Motorcyclist consider it?" This is a question frequently put to our National Observers and a question that many find difficult to articulate.

Yes, we all probably have heard that the IAM RoadSmart Masters achievement is one of the highest civilian driving or riding qualification available, but what does it entail?



How does it compare in standard and requirements from the IAM RoadSmart Advanced Driving (ADC) or Advanced Riding Course (ARC) ? If I'm already an Advanced Driver/Rider, what can I do better or benefit from?"

Rather than me, the editor, trying to recycle information from the IAM RoadSmart website, lets hear, first hand, from our local member Gareth, who recently embarked on the Master's journey:

From F1RST to Masters – A very recent personal experience

When I achieved a F1RST in my IAM Advanced Car Driving test, I felt relief at the result. However, during the debrief I also felt annoyed with myself and that I should have done better, especially when hearing things I hadn't considered or even realised. Minor or not, those points still land hard when you're self-critical.

My examiner clearly picked up on my disappointment and responded with, "*The perfect driver hasn't been born yet.*" Determined to show that I had taken his advice on board and keen to demonstrate improvement, I asked what I could do next. His suggestion was Masters. Initially, that felt like a daunting leap rather than a logical next step.

Spoiler alert: Having now completed the Car Masters course, I can confidently say that for me it was not daunting at all. It was thoroughly enjoyable and exceptionally rewarding. The difference between Advanced and Masters was night and day... in a very good way 😊

One of the biggest improvements was in interpreting hazards much earlier, which in turn leads to safer driving. Masters refined how I scan well into the distance and deliberately check far ahead to the left and right for clues such as road deviations, junction layouts, changing priorities and emerging risks, from all around.

On one drive, my Masters mentor asked what I could see ahead. I was concentrating on the road and replied, "*The road appears to bend slightly to the left.*" What I failed to notice, however, were the roofs of houses visible above the tree line. I was then asked what the presence of houses might indicate. I mentioned hazards associated with built-up areas, but failed to anticipate one crucial element.

As we navigated the sweeping left-hand bend, the road ahead appeared clear. I then applied the brakes rather abruptly. The reason? To slow in time for the fast approaching 30mph speed-limit signs. In that moment, I realised there was no excuse. It came down to poor observation, lack of anticipation and inadequate planning — OAP.

Some might say this is common sense, and that someone achieving a F1RST should naturally have observed, anticipated and planned correctly. Yet I hadn't.

Straight away, with guidance from my Masters mentor on visual clues, I began paying far more attention to road markings, surface conditions and the hierarchy of risk, and using that information far more effectively. Being mentored alongside reading *Roadcraft* proved to be a powerful combination.

My 360-degree observation improved drastically. Corners began to feel more controlled and better balanced as I refined my use of the limit point, matched it accurately to my speed, and made more effective use of the gears and my vehicle's ability. Early on, I was told that Masters driving is not about economy. It is about making the best use of the vehicle's performance to adapt to conditions, make best progress, manage hazards and maintain the best vehicle balance, stability and control.

That understanding transformed my driving. It improved not just acceleration, but balance through bends and the ability to slow the car smoothly and decisively. For the first time, I genuinely felt in control of the vehicle at all times, while still making great progress.

Refining these skills increased my confidence, while also making me more self-critical as I aimed for consistency and near-perfection. One moment really stood out: my wife commented on how smooth the cornering felt. That, for me, was the biggest compliment. The reason? OAP — but now with added finesse that only came through Masters sessions.

The part I feared most going into Masters was the commentary drive, but it turned out to be one of the most valuable elements of the process. Commentary doesn't just demonstrate what you observe; it allows you to explain *why* you are taking certain actions. More importantly, it enables

your mentor to identify what you *don't* see, creating valuable opportunities for discussion and learning.

Talking through scenarios and hearing my mentor's perspective gave me a huge amount of insight. On reflection, there were many occasions where my actions, while perhaps acceptable at F1RST level, were not the safest option when viewed through a Masters lens. Even learning one new thing can make you safer — but I can confidently say you will learn far more than that.

Masters has undoubtedly improved my time to react, by sharpening my observations and developing much stronger interpretation skills.

For anyone considering Masters, I would say, it isn't about proving how good you already are. It's about discovering just how much better you can become.

Editor: Gareth completed Masters with a Distinction and a 'full house' of 1's on his test report. Fantastic job Gareth and we expect to see you as a Master's mentor next!

Hopefully this has given you a further perspective on the Masters Course. If anyone is interesting in exploring Masters as their next riding or driving challenge, please speak directly to any one of the qualified Masters within our group for both motorcycle and car: Don or Guy on the motorcycle side and Gareth, David or Colin on the car side. I know they will be delighted to help you with all aspects of Masters.

Also see the IAM RoadSmart website: [IAM RoadSmart Masters](#) | [IAM RoadSmart](#)

Many thanks to Gareth for sharing his experience.

New Year's Day bike run

New Year's Day saw the NDAM advanced bikers roll out for an informal short-to-medium winter run. What better way to start 2026 than cold fingers, filthy bikes, and excellent banter?

We kicked off from McDonald's in Ards, heading over the Craigantlet Hills and sweeping down towards Holywood. From there it was along past Sydenham, up the M2 to Mallusk, then across to the Seven Mile Straight via Lyle Road, before turning right towards Nutts Corner.

A serious diesel spill on Long Rig Road made itself known instantly—you could smell it the moment we turned off the Seven Mile Straight. Thankfully, the rain had pushed most of it to the edges, but it still demanded full concentration. Water was running across the road in places, politely redistributing diesel just to keep things intriguing, while nearside car wheels helpfully flicked some back onto the crown of the road.



Winter riding reminder: smooth, steady, and no heroics. Consider this your public service announcement.

At the roundabout, we took the Dundrod Road to join the UGP circuit at Quarterlands Corner. One lap later, we peeled back onto the Dundrod Road, headed for Antrim, and crossed Nutts Corner Roundabout—still upright, still smiling.

A welcome caffeine stop followed at Tim Hortons on the Ballymena Road at Junction One. Hot coffee never works harder than on New Year's Day.

True to New Year's Day tradition, most of us wanted to be home early to face family, food, and sofas. We headed back past Antrim Animal Sanctuary, down through Templepatrick, and along the Antrim line towards Belfast (that is what it's called... right? Asking for a friend). (Editor who used to live in that part of the world - yes it is called the Antrim Line)

Back home, reality hit. The bikes were absolutely minging—possibly the dirtiest they've ever been, but they'll be scrubbed, polished, and ready for the next run, because that's how we roll.

From all of us at North Down Advanced Motorists—
Happy New Year, ride smart, ride smooth, and here's to many more miles in 2026.

(And yes, diesel still smells awful.)

Snow and ice

We have had one cold snap so far and the winter has some way to go. Here are some useful tips for anyone heading out on an essential journey:

- If you do have to head out in the snow, before setting off make sure you have cleared your windows, mirrors lights and number plates. Also, if there is a lot of snow remember to clear it off the roof. If you have to brake the snow on the roof can slide forward on to the windscreen. Imagine the snow in the picture landing on the windscreen instead of sliding off the back. Use the heater settings to remove mist and condensation. Avoid using hot water to pour over your windscreen as it's likely that it will freeze up again or crack.
- Keep an eye on your tyres. The legal minimum tread depth is 1.6mm – but for safe travel, you should not let the depth go below 3mm. Whatever you do, avoid travelling with worn tyres as this will increase the likelihood of your car skidding. If you can use them, all season or cross-climate tyres and winter tyres do offer a grip advantage. In the pictures below the tyres on the Yaris were worn down to the tread limit markers.



- If you're driving a manual vehicle, avoid using high revs and set off gently in second gear. This will improve control and reduce the risk of your wheels spinning. If you're driving an automatic vehicle, select the 'winter' mode (if there is one), which will automatically lockout first gear and reduce the risk of wheel spin. If you have "efficiency" mode choosing this will soften the accelerator input and reduce (not eliminate) wheel spin. If unsure, refer to your handbook for more advice.
- If your car loses grip you should take your foot off the accelerator and point the front wheels in the direction you want them to go. All steering and braking inputs must be as gentle as possible in icy conditions. Front-wheel-drive vehicles are generally better in icy conditions, but if your car is a rear-wheel-drive always take it extra slow and steady when changing direction.



All season tyres got your editor up and down this steep hill without any problems



- On the road, drive smoothly and anticipate well ahead. Increase the distance between you and the vehicle in front, especially in slippery conditions. The Highway Code suggests doubling the distance in the wet and up to 10 times in snow and ice. The same applies for when you're approaching a junction or a sharp bend. Drive or ride at a steady speed that allows you to stop well within the available distance. Brake early and lightly; remember ABS does not shorten stopping distances—it simply helps maintain steering control. Avoid sudden steering movements, as these can easily unsettle the car.

In very heavy snow, you should avoid driving or riding if at all possible. Even when the snow stops and frost thaws, ice will stay around areas that are shaded or that are exposed to wind-chill. Consider how you drive and ride through these micro-climates and be prepared to slow down if you need to. Remember in extreme conditions minor routes may not have been visited by the gritting lorry." For information about gritting see <https://www.trafficwatchni.com/twni/winter-news>

In Scotland they show the progress of gritting lorries on trunk roads on a map together with the amusing names given to the lorries (Creedence Clear-Road Survival is my favourite) <https://www.traffic.gov.scot/gritter-tracker>. Fat chance of getting the equivalent here.

In short, driving in snow and ice demands patience, preparation, and caution. By maintaining a well-equipped vehicle, adapting your speed and following distance, and staying alert, you can navigate winter roads with confidence and safety.

January official bike run

Proof that grim forecasts lie and back roads don't need passports

Saturday 18 January, a group of NDAM motorcyclists set off on a county-wide wander that somehow never strayed more than a handful of miles from our starting point in Ards. Advanced riding, local knowledge, and the art of maximising fun per mile; we're efficient like that.

Despite a weather forecast that suggested biblical misery, eight brave souls turned up and were rewarded with two very short, very light showers, barely enough to justify the Gore-Tex smugness.

We rolled through Comber, Lisbane, and Ballygowan, out towards Saintfield, before heading for Carryduff via the Temple Crossroads (now a roundabout—progress!). The plan was to continue on to Moneyreagh, but that road had other ideas. Even a pushbike would've filed a formal complaint. 😂 Cue a swift about-turn and Plan B, executed with military precision.

Back down the Saintfield Road, right up Cairnshill Road, and onto Manse Road, where Lagan College was clearly hosting something resembling a small motor show. There were cars everywhere, on both sides of the road, and in places, optimistically parked.



Onwards to Upper Braniel, Gilnahirk, and over Peartree Hill. With building work cluttering the Dundonald–Comber Road, we sensibly diverted down New Line, avoiding road muck—or “brown ice”, as one of our more experienced riders ominously calls it. Skipping around Dundonald and onto Dunlady Road, we turned left then right onto Ballymoney Road, followed by a neat right-left at the Bangor to Belfast Road.

A pleasant glide through Helen's Bay delivered us neatly to Crawfordsburn Country Park and the Woodlands Café, the real destination, obviously. We were mostly dry... although the café tables were wet even under cover. A thorough and highly scientific test of waterproof bike gear was therefore conducted.

The food was excellent. The company was even better. Everyone then peeled off for a short hop home to Bangor.

Despite being only 10–12 miles away from home, we managed to have a thoroughly entertaining 75–85 minute ride. A couple of riders noted some slippery patches, likely oil or diesel; it's always something to watch for. Pro tip: if the road starts looking like a unicorn sneezed on it, that rainbow sheen is not festive. It's a warning.

Huge thanks to the volunteers who led from the front and swept from the rear. Quiet professionalism, as ever.

We hope to see everyone on 1st February, and maybe we'll finally get the run we missed earlier this month.

And finally.....

Colin spotted this and has asked for suggestions as to the nature of the lorry's business:

