

The Road Observer



The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



March 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

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Test passes

No test passes to report this month.

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

New Members

This month we welcome new motorcycle Member Shaun O'Loughlin. We hope you not only gain from being a member of our Group but will also enjoy the friendship and camaraderie of our get-togethers.

Cover picture

I thought I had found one that nobody identify. But I was wrong. David McCann was the only person to recognise the mini-roundabout exiting Crossgar heading towards Saintfield. In a way I'm not surprised. When I was doing observed drives with him in County Antrim and County Down he knew all the roads including some obscure ones!

Do you know where this month's picture was taken? This is a little bit further afield but I am sure many of you will have gone through here. 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

24 March	STAC 4
31 March	STAC 5
7 April	No Meeting - Easter Tuesday
14 April	Group Night - Car and bike run to Millbrook Lodge, Ballynahinch for tea/ coffee. Further details to follow.
28 April	STAC 6
5 May	STAC 7
12 May	Group Night - NDAM Members Celebration and Information Evening
26 May	STAC 8
2 June	Additional driving practice
9 June	Drive/ride to the Rinkha for ice-cream

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

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.**

March Group Night The Northern Isles

March saw the return of Guy Thomson, a former active group member and now our local IAM RoadSmart Examiner for cars and bikes.

In June 2025, Guy, his wife Sandra, and another couple took their two motorcycles on a tour of Orkney and Shetland. Guy explained that after watching the TV detective series Shetland and admiring the scenery, they decided they wanted to visit and see it for themselves. For anyone considering a similar trip, Guy recommended *The Motorcyclist's Guide to Scotland* by J.G. Ferguson. The following report just scratches the surface of Guy's presentation which had a wealth of detail and many pictures.

For the geographically challenged, Guy explained where the islands are located. Orkney lies about 10 miles north of the Scottish mainland, while Shetland is roughly 100 miles further north. Both Orkney and Shetland are archipelagos, consisting of a main island and several smaller islands.

Contrary to popular belief, John o' Groats is not the most northerly point of the mainland—this is actually Dunnet Head, from where Orkney can be seen across the Pentland Firth. Guy reported some traditional differences between the island



communities. Orcadians are historically associated with farming—an Orcadian is often described as a crofter who owns a fishing boat. Shetlanders, on the other hand, are traditionally linked to seafaring and fishing—a Shetlander being a fisherman who owns a croft.



Credit: NorthLink

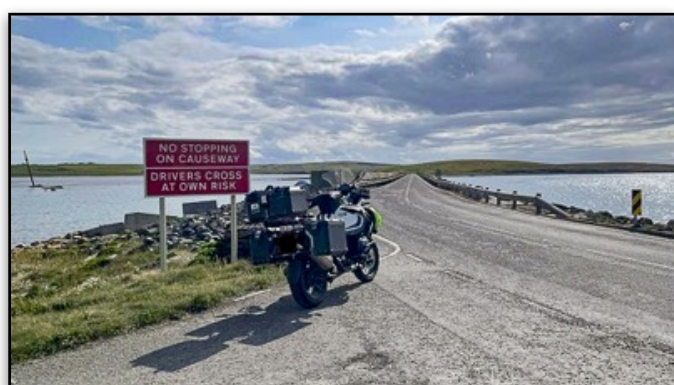
Their journey from the mainland began with the first of several ferry crossings, from Scrabster (just west of Thurso) to Stromness. The crossing takes about 90 minutes and passes the 450-foot-tall Old Man of Hoy along the way. The ferry is a reasonably large vessel operated by NorthLink Ferries—very different from a small Strangford Ferry, although some of the smaller ferries used later between islands are more comparable.

Their first stop was a three-night stay in St Margaret's Hope on Orkney Mainland. While there they visited the Scapa Flow Museum. Scapa Flow is one of the world's largest natural harbours and served as the base for the Grand Fleet during the First World War.

One of the ships associated with Scapa Flow was HMS Hampshire, an armoured cruiser that took part in the Battle of Jutland. In 1916 it sailed from Orkney carrying Lord Kitchener on a diplomatic mission to meet Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The ship struck a mine laid by a German U-boat and sank within 15 minutes. Of the 737 people on board, about 200 are believed to have escaped the sinking ship, but only 12 survived the freezing waters. The loss of Lord Kitchener was felt deeply across the country. It was also in Scapa Flow that the German High Seas Fleet was scuttled at the end of the First World War.



Scapa Flow again became an important naval base during the Second World War. In October 1939, HMS Royal Oak was attacked at night and sunk with the loss of 834 lives. A German U-boat had managed to enter Scapa Flow through one of the entrances that had not been completely blocked.



As a result, Winston Churchill ordered the construction of four causeway barriers, now known as the Churchill Barriers, to protect the entrances from the North Sea. They were built by around 1,200 Italian prisoners of war. Initially the prisoners refused to work, as it would help the war effort, but they eventually agreed when the authorities argued that the barriers would also improve communication between the islands. The causeways themselves remain important road links between the islands, although crossing them in bad weather is not advised.

One remarkable structure still standing today is the Italian Chapel, built from two Nissen huts and decorated internally with beautiful religious paintings.



Another highlight was a visit to Skara Brae, a World Heritage Site. This remarkably well-preserved Neolithic village was inhabited for around 600 years between 3100 and 2500 BC. It remained buried for nearly 4,500 years until a storm in 1850 stripped the grass from the sand dunes and revealed the settlement. The World Heritage Site includes Skara Brae and three other nearby archaeological sites.



The next stage of the trip was the overnight ferry from Kirkwall in Orkney to Lerwick in Shetland. From there they rode south to the Jarlshof Visitor Centre near Sumburgh Head. Jarlshof is an important archaeological site showing evidence of human occupation spanning more than 4,000 years. Audio guides help visitors understand the different historical layers of the site.

They also visited the Shetland Bus Memorial, which commemorates the men and women who transported agents, radio operators, and supplies to the resistance in Norway during the Second World War.

Part of the motivation for the trip was to see locations used in the filming of the TV series Shetland, and Guy showed several examples during the presentation and some of these are below for aficionados of the series. How many do you recognise?



They also visited the islands of Yell and Unst, which require smaller ferries to reach. While there they travelled to Skaw Beach, home to the most northerly inhabited house in the UK. This location also marks the northern end of National Cycle Route 1, (see picture below) which follows the entire east coast of Britain to Dover—the most southerly point on the route—some 1,695 miles away.



Guy also recounted an interesting wartime story connected with Skaw. In 1939 the ship Sea Venture was travelling from South Shields to Tromsø in Norway carrying coal when it was attacked by a German U-boat about 30 miles north-east of Unst. The crew abandoned ship in lifeboats. A British seaplane spotted them, forcing the U-boat to dive before sinking the ship with a torpedo. The seaplane landed to assist the crew and radioed the Lerwick lifeboat station. The crew rowed toward land and eventually reached Skaw Beach, where they were cared for by the residents of the northernmost house in the UK. In gratitude, the ship's lifeboat was given to the house and can still be seen today forming the roof of a shed beside it.



The return journey was an overnight ferry from Lerwick to Aberdeen, calling at Kirkwall, followed by the ride south to Cairnryan and then home. The total cost of ferry travel for a motorcycle, rider, and pillion passenger was £813, and the trip covered a total distance of 1,263 miles.



It sounded like a fascinating journey—rich in both prehistoric and more recent history, all set against the amazing scenery of the Northern Isles. While the trip sounded wonderful, it is probably more affordable to do by motorcycle than by car.

Our thanks to Guy for an absolutely fascinating presentation.

Fuel saving

Fuel saving measures are important for motorists in the UK because fuel prices are rising and may remain high as a result of the war in Iran. Reducing fuel consumption also helps lower carbon emissions and protect the environment. Here are some tips which may help you.

- One important fuel saving measure is **driving smoothly**. Avoiding rapid acceleration and harsh braking helps the engine work more efficiently and reduces the amount of fuel used.
- Motorists should **maintain a steady speed** whenever possible. Driving at a constant speed, especially on motorways, helps improve fuel efficiency compared to frequently speeding up and slowing down.
- **Observing speed limits** also helps save fuel. Vehicles tend to use more fuel at higher speeds, particularly above 60–70 mph, so driving within limits improves efficiency.
- **Reducing unnecessary idling** is another useful measure. If a vehicle is stationary for a long time, such as waiting in traffic or outside a building, turning off the engine can prevent fuel from being wasted.
- Regular **vehicle maintenance** is essential. Servicing the engine, replacing air filters, and ensuring the vehicle is in good condition can improve fuel efficiency.
- Keeping **tyres properly inflated** is important. Under-inflated tyres create more rolling resistance, which forces the engine to work harder and use more fuel.
- Motorists should also **remove excess weight** from their vehicles. Carrying heavy items in the boot or back seats increases fuel consumption because the engine must work harder.
- **Reducing aerodynamic drag** can also save fuel. Removing roof racks, roof boxes, or bike carriers when they are not in use helps improve fuel efficiency.
- **Read the road well ahead** to anticipate traffic lights, roundabouts, junctions etc.
- Planning journeys carefully can reduce fuel use. **Combining several short trips into one longer journey** prevents repeated engine warm-ups, which typically use more fuel.
- Using **higher gears when appropriate** helps the engine run more efficiently. Driving in a gear that is too low can waste fuel.
- Motorists can also use **satellite navigation or route-planning apps** to avoid congestion and choose the most fuel-efficient route.
- **Walk** to the local shop instead of taking the car.
- If you commute to work, **car share or take public transport** if it is available.
- **Consider your use of air-con**. It does use extra fuel but balance that against keeping your windows clear in winter and avoiding overheating when the sun shines. Remember driving with windows open also uses more fuel.

