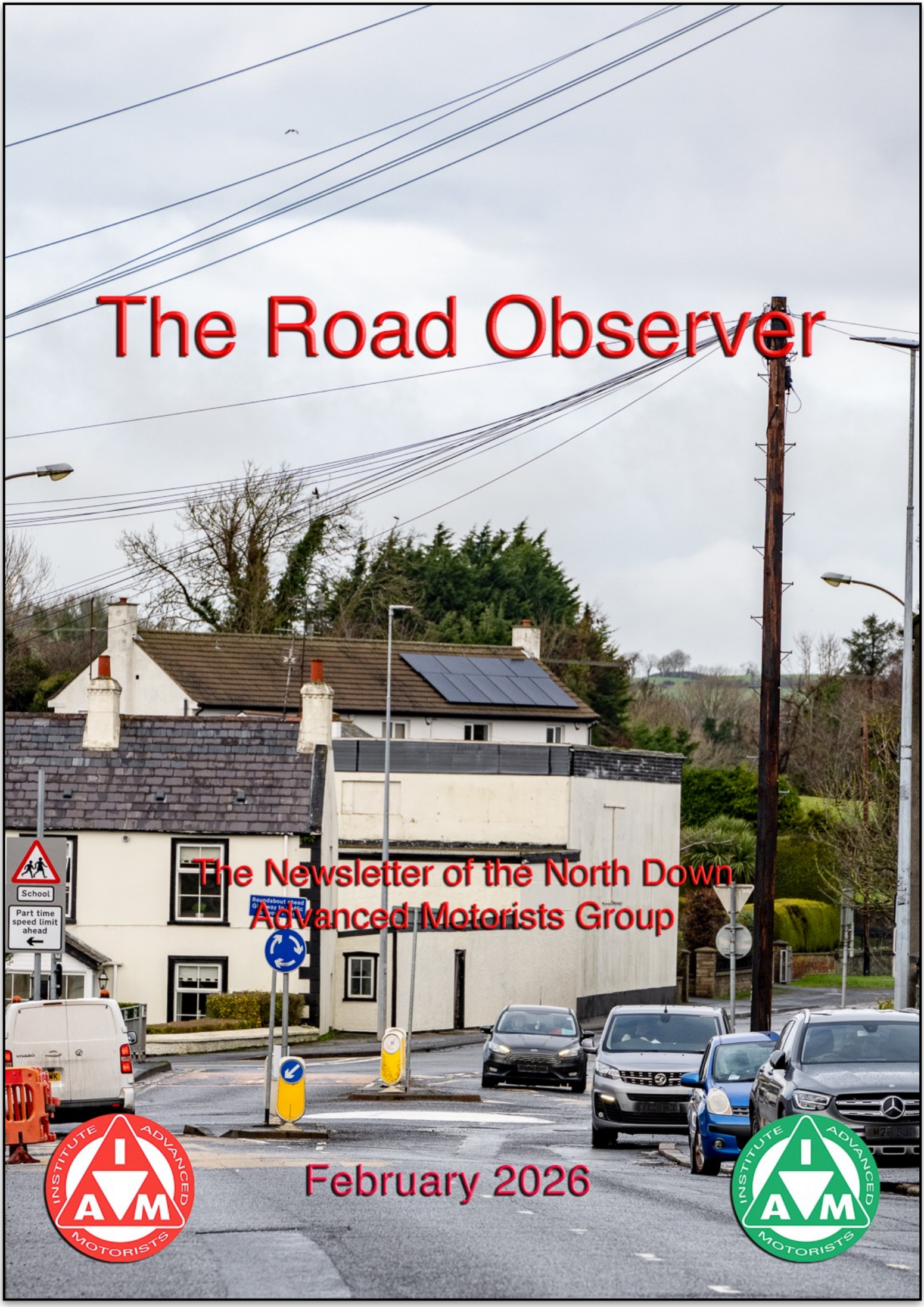

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down Advanced Motorists Group

February 2026

The Road Observer

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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https://www.facebook.com/NorthDownGroupIAM

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Test passes

Congratulations this month to

Leah Taylor

on successfully completing the National Observer Assessment.

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

New Members

This month we welcome new car members Adam McComiskey and Thomas Wilkinson. 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

The January cover picture was of the roundabout at the junction of Glen Road, Maxwell Road, Bryansburn Road, Brunswick Road and Grange Road in Bangor. Congratulations to David Harcourt, John Seawright, David McFall, Ralph Magee, Mark Patterson, Don McQuillan, Billy Hirst, James O'Brien, Joyce Cairns, Norman Shearer and Ivan Greenfield.

Apologies to Norman Shearer who got missed off the list of correct answers to the January cover competition.

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 multiple times. 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 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 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.**

February Group Night - Stephen Davison

Our February Group Night was a presentation by motorcycle racing photographer and journalist Stephen Davidson. He is the road racing correspondent of Motor Cycle News and has written a number of books on road racing.

We asked him to give us a presentation about his time as a motorcycle road-racing photographer and it was a bit of a surprise to see the opening picture which was of a hooded person about to throw a petrol bomb. He use this and a couple of other images as an introduction to his photographic career.

He started out as a photographer with a local newspaper - the East Antrim Times. As a trial he was set out to cover events like a swimming gala or a Women’s Institute meeting. The Editor thought that his pictures in his first couple of rolls of film were good enough for him to continue. He went to a filing cabinet to get another 2 rolls of film to cover his next assignments. Having completed this he did the same again and when he went to the cabinet to get another two he found that the cabinet was locked. He was told that 2 rolls of film should do him for a week!

He then moved to the Ballymena Times and eventually to Pacemaker Press which is the oldest photographic agency in Northern Ireland. He is currently a partner, managing director and senior photographer at the agency. Pacemaker has the largest archive of pictures from the troubles and 10

years of pictures from the early years were donated to the Linenhall Library whose archive represents the troubles from both sides. Stephen illustrated this with pictures taken of the same riot from each side explaining that local knowledge of the side streets enabled him to safely move from one to the other.

His main photographic interest is in motorcycle road racing and his talk was heavily focussed on the Dunlop road racing dynasty - brothers Joey and Robert and Robert's sons William and Michael who have dominated the sport for many years. Over this time Stephen go to know the family well and gave him unique opportunities to photograph them. Despite their many successes, the sport has not been kind to the family. Joey fatally crashed in 2000 at a race in Estonia during a rainstorm where he was thought to have aquaplaned off the road.

In 2008 Robert was killed in a tragic accident in a practice session for the North West 200. Just two days after his death, his two sons, William and Michael, decided to participate in the same 250cc race that Robert had been due to compete in. The race organisers said that they were in no fit state to race but the brothers took to the grid, and in front of the assembled crowds the track officials were powerless. William's bike failed him before the starting flag but Michael won the race. In 2018 William was killed in an accident on the Skerries 100 race.

Tribute to Joey Dunlop at the Isle of Man TT

Stephen's talk was illustrated by many pictures which showed some of the personal lives of the Dunlops. As well as straightforward pictures of races, he was always looking for something a bit different. Examples included a rider clipping a hedge on the inside of a bend, another of a rider an inch from a stone wall on the inside of a bend and many of bikes in the air. A particularly interesting one was of Joey Dunlop exiting a blind right hand bend in the TT on his 48th birthday. Stephen had done his reconnaissance and identified a good location. On top of the bank was a hazard sign for elderly people!

Part of the back story was that when he got settled in position a race marshal in high-viz clothing appeared beside the sign. Stephen asked if he could get down low so that he didn't appear in the shot distracting from the focus of the picture. When Joey was approaching the bend the marshal stood up with a thumbs-up gesture to let Stephen know it was Joey and then dropped down out of the shot. This ensured that Stephen got a sharp image.

He always liked to have people in the background together with wider shots showing the normal roads on which the races took place rather than the featureless wide open spaces at racetracks such as Silverstone or in Dubai. Others included bikes in the mud in the paddock on a particularly wet day, the location of spectators to get a good view of the racing, the Dunlops working on their bikes during race days and chilling between races.

As indicated above Stephen is the author of several books about motorcycle racing and he confessed that his love was for racing on minor roads. He is currently working on a book about Irish Road Racing which he hopes will be published in time for Christmas this year - a must present for our road racing enthusiasts.

With a larger than usual contingent from the motorcycle side of the Group almost every seat was taken and we almost ran out of mugs for the tea and coffee. Stephen was a fund of stories and even after the presentation was formally over he continued to regale us with more tales. Many thanks to Stephen for an excellent night all round which we thoroughly enjoyed.

If you wish to see more of Stephen's pictures go to :
https://stephendavison.photoshelter.com/index

For a list of his books go to https://stephendavison.photoshelter.com/about

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Graduated Driving Licence

IAM RoadSmart welcomes the introduction of graduated driver licensing in Northern Ireland

IAM RoadSmart Director of Policy and Standards Nicholas Lyes said: "Evidence from around the world shows that a form of graduated driver licensing can reduce fatal and serious collisions among new drivers. What is particularly pleasing is the announcement emphasises the need for younger drivers to develop essential skills on their journey to a full licence. While some new drivers in Northern Ireland may have reservations, they may yet benefit not only from being safer road users, but they could also look forward to cheaper insurance premiums."

More details of the proposed arrangement are below:

Overview: What Is the New Graduated Licence Scheme?

The *Northern Ireland Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL)* scheme is a comprehensive reform of the learner and newly qualified driver system, aimed at improving road safety by structuring training, testing, and restrictions for novice drivers. It is expected to come into effect on **1 October 2026** following an announcement by Infrastructure Minister Liz Kimmins.

The scheme represents the *most significant reform to driver licensing and testing in Northern Ireland in nearly 70 years* and echoes similar systems in countries such as Australia, Canada, and parts of the United States, where evidence shows that graduated systems can reduce serious collisions involving new drivers.

Why GDL Is Being Introduced

A core motivation for the scheme is road safety. Young and newly qualified drivers are disproportionately involved in serious and fatal collisions. Statistics cited by the Department for Infrastructure show that in 2024, **drivers aged 17–23 accounted for 24% of fatal or serious casualties but held only about 8% of licences**.

These figures underscore a long-standing concern: while passing a driving test demonstrates a level of technical competence, it does not necessarily reflect a fully developed ability to anticipate hazards, manage risks, or adapt to complex real-world conditions. Graduated licensing is intended to *bridge that gap*, ensuring new drivers gain vital experience in a safer, phased way.

Key Changes Under the New GDL Scheme

1. Mandatory Minimum Learning Period

One of the central elements of the new scheme is the introduction of a **mandatory minimum learning period**. Learner drivers will not be permitted to take their practical driving test until they

have held a provisional licence for at least **six months (this will not apply to motorcyclists).**

This contrasts with the current system, where there is no minimum period — learners can theoretically take the test soon after getting a provisional licence if they feel ready. Under GDL, the

six-month minimum ensures an extended period of learning and supervised driving before full independence.

2. Structured Programme of Training and Logbook

Learners will follow a **Programme of Training** that outlines essential skills and competencies they must develop before attempting the practical test. This training must be recorded in a **Logbook** and signed off by an approved driving instructor or supervising driver (such as a parent or guardian).

The programme is intended to promote a more systematic and reflective learning process, helping learners not just master manoeuvres, but develop safe driving habits and an understanding of risk factors.

3. Longer Post-Test Restriction Period

Once a learner passes their practical test, they enter a **post-test new-driver period**. Under current rules, this is 12 months. The GDL scheme will extend this to **24 months**, during which new drivers must display a distinguishing "R" plate on their car to show they are still in the early stage of licensed driving.

The plates serve a safety function by signalling to other road users that the driver is inexperienced, and also support enforcement of the new restriction rules.

4. Night-Time Driving and Passenger Restrictions

To reduce risk during times and situations associated with higher collision rates, the scheme introduces **night-time restrictions** for newly qualified drivers *under the age of 24*. For the first **six months** after passing the test, drivers in this age group will face limits on carrying passengers.

Specifically, they will be allowed to carry only **one passenger aged 14–20 between 23:00 and 06:00** (11 pm to 6 am). Exemptions apply for *immediate family members*, and the restriction does not apply if a qualified supervising adult (aged 21+ with at least three years' experience) is in the front passenger seat.

These measures reflect international evidence that peer passengers, especially late at night, increase risk for novice drivers.

5. Motorway Driving and Speed Limits

Under the new GDL framework:

- Learner drivers will be **permitted to drive on motorways** *provided they are accompanied by an Approved Driving Instructor*.
- Once qualified, new drivers with R plates will be allowed to drive on motorways at the *posted speed limit* — a notable departure from the old 45 mph limit that previously applied under the older "restricted licence" approach.

These changes aim to make learning and early independent driving more realistic and aligned with actual road conditions, addressing concerns that overly restrictive speed limits and exclusions from motorways could create dangerous situations.

Enforcement and Penalties

The scheme will be backed by specified penalties for breaches of the restrictions. Drivers who fail to comply with requirements — such as passenger limits or displaying the correct R plate — may face fines of up to **£1,000 and three penalty points** on their licence. Existing probationary rules remain in place: accumulating six or more penalty points within the initial two-year period following first qualification can lead to licence revocation and retesting.

Implementation and Preparation

The Department for Infrastructure plans a **public information campaign** ahead of the scheme's introduction to help learners, parents, driving instructors, employers and insurers understand the new rules. Officials will also work with stakeholders such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland and approved driving instructors to support rollout and compliance.

The first tests under this system are expected to be taken from **April 2027** onward, given the six-month minimum learning period.

Conclusion: A Major Shift in Driver Safety Policy

The Northern Ireland Graduated Licence scheme represents a transformative change in how novice drivers progress to full driving independence. By combining extended training, structured learning, longer post-test restrictions, and targeted risk reductions (such as night driving and passenger limits), the system aims to *produce safer, more capable drivers and ultimately reduce young driver casualties*.

When this system takes effect it will be watched closely both locally and across the UK, where there is growing interest in adopting similar graduated approaches to improve road safety.

Road Layout Changes at Craigantlet

From 2nd to 5th of March there will be road works at the T junction between Whinney Hill and the Ballymiscaw Road. The purpose is to remove the slip lane for traffic turning left from Whinney Hill into the Ballymiscaw Road.

On Facebook Stephen Dunne MLA said “The sight vision line is greatly reduced for motorists exiting the Ballymiscaw Road particularly if turning right. If a vehicle is then turning left onto the Ballymiscaw Road, there may well be a vehicle going straight on to Whinney Hill which can be ghosted, which has often led to accidents over many years.”

Editor’s note: If a driver is exiting the Ballymiscaw Road they have the responsibility to ensure that the road is clear before exiting. You cannot assume that because your view to the right is obscured by a vehicle in the slip lane that nothing else is approaching.

Not only will the road works cause congestion at a very busy junction especially at peak times but once the changes are made the removal of the slip lane is likely to cause even longer queues for traffic turning left or right from the Ballymiscaw Road.

February bike runs

1st February

Five bikes, flowing roads, and just enough weather to keep it interesting.
February’s 1st Sunday Run saw five riders roll out from McDonald’s in Ards under the steady leadership of Neil Anthony.
It wasn’t a huge crowd, but as any seasoned rider knows, sometimes five well-spaced bikes on flowing country roads is absolute perfection.

The route was a proper County Down classic:
Ards → Comber → Moneyreagh → Carryduff → Hillsborough → Ballynahinch → Clough → Downpatrick → Killyleagh, finishing at the ever-reliable Daft Eddie’s in Killyleagh.

There’s something satisfying about linking those roads together: the open stretches, tidy bends, and enough variation to keep everyone engaged. It was one of those runs where the rhythm just worked.
Special mention must go to Neil, who somehow managed to keep his wheels turning continuously from the Stop-signed junction at Legacurry all the way to Downpatrick. We’re not saying it was a

personal challenge… but it definitely sounded like one. With smooth progress, excellent positioning, and reading the road properly, it was advanced riding in action.

The weather could've been worse. "At least it wasn't raining much" became the unofficial slogan of the day. It was a little damp in places, but it wasn't a biblical downpour, and we'll take that as a win for February.

The run wrapped up at Daft Eddie's; what's a Sunday ride without a decent refuel? There were warm drinks, tasty food, and the usual debrief about road surfaces, lines taken, and who definitely didn't enjoy that one bumpy stretch (names protected to preserve dignity).
All in all, it was a good, tidy run out: proof that you don't need big numbers to have a cracking morning on two wheels.

Here's to the next one. Same principle: ride smart, ride smooth, and if it's not raining much… we're going.

21st February

We rolled out from McDonald's in Ards at 9:30am sharp, nine riders strong and armed with optimism (and waterproofs). Despite the ominous forecast earlier in the week, the weather co-operated well enough to allow us to focus on the crucial task of riding.

The route was epic:
Comber → Ballygowan → Saintfield → Ballynahinch → Dromore → Moneyslane → Rathfriland → Hilltown → and up into the Mournes.
It was one of those runs where the scenery quietly gets better with every mile, and you remember exactly why you own a motorbike.

We paused briefly at Spelga Dam where Edward unfortunately had to peel off and head home. The rest of us continued on to Silent Valley, and—miracle of miracles—the place was practically ours.

The forest walks and children's playground were closed due to storm damage and unsafe paths (sensible call), and with the forecast scaring off the walkers, the café was open but gloriously empty. Nine bikers with unlimited seating and no queues – it felt like we'd hired the place out. The menu covered everything from a simple coffee to a full Ulster fry, and judging by the plates arriving at tables, restraint was optional.

With the England v Ireland rugby kicking off later, most members were keen to make it home in good time. That meant a sensible departure rather than a long wander around the reservoir—especially with building works ongoing and weather still threatening to change its mind.
That said, there was one special moment worth noting.

This was the first time since being about two years old that Ivan had seen the water flowing through the lake's overflow. And what a sight it was. The structure was substantial and perfectly level, allowing water to spill over evenly from every side at once. The engineering elegance on display was both quietly impressive and strangely hypnotic.

Interestingly, with a few regulars unable to attend, the event turned into one of our better-flowing runs. There was good spacing, tidy riding, and smooth progress. Sometimes a slightly smaller group just clicks. We had clear roads, the Mournes loomed properly dramatic in the background, and we had the café to ourselves.

It was a delightful way to spend a February morning.
See you on the next one—rugby schedule permitting!

Many thanks to Ivan for the words and pictures and to Andy for the other pictures.

And finally……. Some more insurance stories

- I knocked over a man. He admitted it was his fault as he had been run over before.

- I left for work this morning at 7am as usual when I collided straight into a bus. The bus was 5 minutes early.

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