

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



September 2025





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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

September 2025

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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 car member Jake Taylor and bike member Martyn Griffiths. 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 August cover picture was the junction on the Millisle to Carrowdore road (Abbey Road) with Woburn Road showing the old entrance to Carrowdore Castle. Congratulations to David Harcourt, James O'Brien, David McFall, Norman Shearer and Ivan Greenfield. Belated congratulations and apologies to Davie Hall who was missed in the list of those spotting the Temple Roundabout in the May issue.

Do you know where this month's picture was taken? There is now 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 2025. 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. All meetings will take place in the Boathouse at Groomsport Harbour car park unless otherwise stated.

30 September	STAC 3 - Bends
7 October	STAC 4 - Junctions and roundabouts
14 October	Group Night - Annual General Meeting - Guest Speaker Stephen Sherry, Northern Ireland IAM RoadSmart Chief Examiner
28 October	STAC 5 - Overtaking
4 November	STAC 6 - Motorways and dual carriageways
11 November	Group Night - Speaker Bruce Steele IAM RoadSmart Road Safety Manager (NI)
25 November	STAC 7 - Manoeuvring
2 December	Additional driving practice
9 December	Group Night - Christmas Dinner

STAC - Short Term Associate Course. 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.

September Group Night

Second Tuesday of the month is when we get together socially, listen to invited speakers or go out for a drive/ride (not through the winter). September saw us gathering at The Pheasant on the Lisburn to Ballynahinch Road for refreshments and an opportunity to catch up.

A total of 18 car and bike members attended. 6 of the bikers travelled from Groomsport and took the country roads via Newtownards, Comber, Moneyreagh, Carryduff to get there. I took the same route and spotted Ralph on his bike parked in a lay-by just outside Comber waiting for the rest to pick him up.



Luckily it stayed dry after a day of showers. I took advantage of the light traffic and had a brisk drive to the Pheasant. It was an enjoyable evening and good to have a chat without the distraction of doing observed drives.



FIAT 600

Reflections on almost 600 miles touring parts of Brittany in a FIAT 600 hire car. We had booked a manual compact car (Peugeot 3008 or equivalent) but when we arrived at the desk in Nantes airport we were offered an automatic at no extra cost. I happily agreed but became a bit hesitant when I saw the FIAT logo on the key and wondered what model it would be.



It's described as a compact SUV and for the technically minded the details are: 1.2 litre 3 cylinder engine (100bhp) with a 6 speed double clutch automatic transmission. It was a mild hybrid offering an additional 28 bhp to boost the efficiency and performance of the petrol engine. In practice the electric motor was sufficient for a little low speed manoeuvring.

The first challenge was luggage. Would it all fit - one large suitcase, one small (mine!) and a small rucksack. They did fit, just and with a squeeze there was room for some bottled water!



Next challenge was the sat nav. Everything was in French and with our limited French we couldn't figure out how to change it to English. It was a long walk back to the check-in desk and we were a bit pressed for time to reach our first hotel. As I had my trusty Garmin with me (just in case) with destinations pre-loaded, we used that to get us going. With a bit more time that evening we worked out how to change the car sat nav to English.

Another challenge was finding the first hotel which was located in the centre of the town of Savenay. Unfortunately the centre of the town was undergoing a major upgrade to roads and footpaths and was inaccessible to vehicles and vehicular access to the hotel! Having circled the town centre a couple of times I decided I had to park (illegally) as close to the hotel as possible and walk in to find out the score. After discovering that there was absolutely no way in for vehicles we had to park the car in the street and walk in with the luggage. A great 3 course meal of classic French cooking for only 29€ each (yes that was not a typo) put the earlier mild frustrations in their place.

Back to the car. It proved remarkably comfortable over a variety of roads from autoroutes to narrow winding rural roads and not for the first time I wondered how can the French achieve such smooth road surfaces and an almost complete absence of potholes. The gearbox was good and the only downside was rather wooly steering with little feel. The engine was very responsive, no doubt helped by the electric motor when that little bit of extra power was required.

The sat nav, now speaking English, was very good with clear instructions given in plenty of time. It managed to get me into and out of the city of Rennes without any hassle.

Downsides - the wipers. Like most cars these days there is an automatic setting for the wipers but during a period of heavy showers the wipers continued at their fastest speed despite the fact that the rain was virtually off.

The gear selector was a series of 4 push-buttons across the centre console - the usual P, R, N D/M but it took a while to get used to them down there.

I couldn't figure out how to switch off the lane departure warning (shaking the steering wheel) nor could I switch off the speed limit warning system. Cleverly the speed displayed on the dash was 10kph less than the posted speed (90kph or over) on signs when it was raining reflecting the French

requirement to reduce higher speeds in the rain. I presume it did this by linking the speed posted to whether the wipers were on or off.

When I engaged cruise control at one point I discovered that as long as I kept my hands lightly on the steering wheel the car would drive and steer itself. I did take my hands off to see and after about 10 seconds I got a warning on the dash to put my hands back.

It was far from perfect: steering tended to be like the sides of a 50p coin taking several coarse cuts on even the gentlest of bends which made it far from comfortable. Also, at one point approaching a junction with a traffic island and where the road markings were well worn it tried to steer towards the traffic island. That was enough of that! Give me smooth manual steering any day. If this is typical of semi-autonomous driving there is a lot of work needed to develop it. Perhaps on more up-market models it would be better.

The car did the job for a holiday car, apart from the semi-autonomous operation, but somehow I can't see me buying one.

For those with sweet tooth here are some dessert pictures from a week of great eating:



Bike runs

Who could resist a wee evening ice cream in the sun, especially in September? Despite a day of very changeable weather, the skies did us a favour and held steady just long enough for a sweet escape to Maud's in Ballywalter.

Five hungry souls made the dash from Ards for a 'point and shoot' job to the coast – nothing too complicated, just a bit of light-hearted craic and cones in the dry, with a touch of sunshine to top it off.

On the way back, Len added a bonus wee loop to take us into the dusk – a great way to round off the evening and stretch the legs (and tyres) a little more before heading home.

September bike run

We couldn't have asked for a better way to spend a Saturday 20 September! A group of us gathered at in Newtownards for a 09:30 meet and hit the road by 09:45, setting off on a beautiful route that delivered great roads, great views, and even better company.

Route Highlights:

- Direct run to Ballynahinch
- Out towards Dromara, then a scenic climb past the Slieve Croob car park
- Dropped into Castlewellan, then on to Hilltown
- Up past Spelga Dam, through the heart of the Mourne, and out to the coast at Rostrevor
- Finished with a well-earned tea/coffee stop in Kilbroney

The Yellow weather warning was thankfully cancelled, and we were rewarded with clear skies and stunning views – especially up in the hills and around Spelga.

Rider feedback included:

> "Thanks for a great run today – some great new-to-me roads and even a few green lanes on the way back, thanks to that diversion!"

> "Wonderful company and some lessons learnt. Every day's a school day."

This run had a bit of everything – from sweeping bends to technical sections, and just enough unpredictability to keep things interesting. A massive thanks to everyone who turned out and helped make it such an enjoyable day!

Keep an eye out for upcoming autumn rides – we'll keep them going as long as the weather allows!

If you aren't familiar with the enjoyable roads through the Mourne here are some examples of what you will encounter. Give it a try.





And finally.....urban transport FIAT style

Despite its diminutive size of the FIAT Topolino the owner has still managed to scrape the right hand side and front corner!



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