

What Life's All About

Advance Motorcycle Training in Britain with Nigel Bowers (www.advancedmotorcycletraining.com)



By
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An American in Stoke-on-Trent, I'm an enthusiastic wanna-be motorcyclist. My prior motorcycling experience is at best spotty. I took a basic course last year at the local community college just outside Chapel Hill, North Carolina. 35 years before that I was dodging chickens, goats, sand and gravel while motorcycling on African roadways during three years as a Peace Corps volunteer.

This course promises one-on-one instruction with Nigel Bowers, a local policeman and law enforcement motorcycle riding instructor who can help me realize my ambition. It's an all-expenses-paid, surprise, 58th birthday gift from my wife Liz to learn, in a proper British-style tutorial, proper cornering technique on the open road. Instruction will be by almost constant one-way voice communication, his words in my ear, helmet to helmet, coach to wanna-be.

There's a wonderful island welcome the night before getting on the road. Nigel's arranged a barbeque with his family, George a local rider, long time friend of Nigel's and protagonist in one of Nigel's instructional videos and George's wife. Tomorrow while I ride a rented Suzuki SV 650 S from Sean at Greenlight Performance Bike Hire in Burton on Trent (www.greenlightbikes.co.uk), Liz will shop the famous regional potters, Wedgwood, etc. with "the girls", a family unit comprising two octogenarians, grandma, my lovely mother-in-law, and her sister Rene. Life's wonderful.

The next morning, still slightly jet lagged, I'm on the left side of the road, most of the time anyway, dodging parked trucks [sorry "lorries"] and cars. The British love of ancient dwellings strongly influences their philosophy of urban planning. Accommodating their passion for ancient architecture, however, dictates that vehicles must be parked along the narrow and only thoroughfare in villages in willy-nilly fashion half in the road and half on the sidewalk. This is not Las Vegas that metamorphoses every few years.

The next surprise is road signs. Road signs can be a bit difficult to spot because they're on short legs off to the roadside sometimes amongst foliage, even on the "M" routes. Roads there are labeled "M", "A" and "B" (Mutually Assured Britain). U. S.-style interstates are "Ms". The "M" roads are traffic-packed with cars and countless vans except in places where taxis, buses and motorcycles flow relatively unimpeded in reserved lanes. No tolls for motorcycles either. As in the States, there don't appear to be enough "M-type" routes because much of the heavy-goods traffic still moves on the "A" and "B" routes through villages. These villages are quaint, but during certain hours there's stand-still congestion. To deal with congestion, however, it's legal, on-coming traffic permitting, to ride a motorcycle in the right-hand lane on two lane roads. This is Britain, remember? They drive on the left. Terrifyingly brilliant! Of course, this is of little use in standstill traffic but "filtering" is and it's legal and employed routinely by motorcyclists.

"A" and "B" routes are mostly two lane with short stretches of four and three lanes. Remember three lane roads? Yah me too, good-riddance. The narrower and twistier routes with ever-taller hedgerows are more likely to be labeled "B". As the view of oncoming traffic deteriorates the mix of traffic can grow more complex. These routes facilitate the shifting of small herds of ambulating cows and sheep. They also contain very slow moving vehicles like the department of transportation mowers that struggle to contain the ever waxing hedgerow, the local Baronet's "honey wagon" and other agricultural conveyances. Thankfully there are occasional signs on these routes that help predict what lies around the next tight bend. Clumps of freshly cut grass, hay or manure are to be searched for and treasured because, when spotted, are highly predictive of your immediate future. If there are no tracks through the manure or when steaming, Nigel advises extreme caution. His refrain "loose your view, loose your speed" is heard approaching every tight curve. It's great advice. As the course progressed I heard it even when Nigel's microphone was off. If you lose your view and see a chevron it's best to slow to a crawl until the blind curve reveals itself. If there's more than one chevron, expect the curve to tighten dramatically before unwinding. These curves are great fun when you learn to ride them, but riders come to grief if they're not alert to the warning. If you see chevrons expect an experience like riding the "Dragon's Tale" in the mountains of North Carolina.

The more conventional signage, as alluded to, is mostly to the side of the road, as opposed to directly over the roadway as on "interstates" here. But beware vital instruction to riders is also written directly on the British road surface. So if you see writing directly on the road, best try to read it. Information intended for riders is also presented as painted patches, without numbers or letters, across the road or displayed as white triangles, not sure what that's about. Fortunately much road signage, including what's on the road surface, is written in Arabic numbers and English familiar to North Americans. Except in Wales, of course, where Welsh appears. Interesting, however, I never met anyone who actually spoke the language. Never the less, on many Welsh road surfaces, usually when approaching a village, it's common to find the word "ARAF" in white letters. Seeing this, of course, provides an exception to the advice I gave earlier, because it didn't help much to look down and read "ARAF".

Also, road signs compared to ours can be "chatty" with lots of words. Therefore, lettering is relative small, especially in Wales with the obligatory two languages appearing together on signs. No problems though. Remember all those vans and the roadside signs on short legs? Unless you anticipate by positioning to see around the vans you'll never notice many of the signs you pass on the four or more lane roads. The Welsh exception is "ARAF" which is very curt and always written in large letters, like they mean it.

Another challenge to the foreign motorcyclist in Britain is communication by British-recognized symbols. There's a small round sign usually atop a post with a white background that contains a black circle with a line through it. I didn't figure that one out until the end of the first day. It means go for it, no restriction except the national limit of somewhere between 70 & 100 mph judging from the flow of traffic. It's not a suggested upper speed limit either. You're expected to get to speed quickly and maintain it until signs indicate something else. Locals want to get from here to there, so you need to get a move on too. As you approach the next village, look down and you'll see a white number 30 contained in a white circle, you get the idea. If you look down and see "ARAF" you know you're in Wales.

Far and away my favorite cryptic British road sign is a strikingly simple, very large rectangular plaque with a woad blue background that sets off white solid and dashed lines. Woad is a mustered-related plant and source of blue dye used by ancient Britons to paint themselves Liz explains. She grew up in Wales and should know. These signs are beautiful and enchanting roadside art boldly displayed and impossible to overlook. They are by their boldness different from most British signs, except for "ARAF" of course. They call to my mind Matisse's dancing blue figures. I only saw these signs on "M" roads around London and never while with Nigel so still don't know what they mean.

All this to say that there's a lot to mastering the curve on a motorcycle in Britain. Fact is there's a lot, in general, to motoring on two wheels only. The fundamentals are not intuitive, at least not for me and I've peddled a bike to work daily for 30 years. To improve my situation Nigel and I had three days and 400 miles. We worked hard. There were 12 to 15 critiques, many over hot tea, as opposed to iced and accompanied by video of my most recent assault on Britain. I love hot tea with milk and have since my Peace Corps days when I was first introduced to it in what used to be "British Africa". The result of all those reviews and tea, is that I now approach curves much more slowly, power on much earlier and with greater confidence, power through the curve more smoothly with the intension of maintaining position near the outside of the curve when safe and crane my neck to keep my nose pointed at the most distant and ever changing "vanishing point" on the road ahead. I also practice searching the horizon for hazards and clues to the shape of the invisible path ahead.

My ambition is to develop a controlled riding style powered by seamless effort. The hedgerow line, initially regarded by me as an obstacle to seeing my way, became an aid to help predict the direction my immediate but invisible destination. No hedgerows in North Carolina so I employ the lines formed by distant power line poles and rows of tree tops that I suspect line the about-to-be-revealed road. The top of a truck floating across the horizon also helps predicts an upcoming bend or intersection and potential hazard.

Cornering on a motorcycle in the videos and articles is all about "slow in and powering through and out". That's good advice. But, while it's helpful to prepare intellectually, it was, for me, a far more useful exercise to do it and experience the sensation. That's where Nigel's coaching was most useful. His moment-to-moment encouragement provided me the courage to try what I thought was required to get it right. Getting through a curve without midcourse corrections the first time at speed was a revelation and it happened early the first day. His decades of riding and teaching experience came through loud and clear. Now when I get it right, my right wrist and visceral senses reflexively collaborate to build the planted feeling I want while powering through and out of a curve; somehow this allows my mind's eye, at the same moment, to anticipate and plan my approach to the next bend only seconds away. Such epiphanies are what life's all about. Nigel's course transformed my riding experience. I was amazed at what happened in three days. My next goal is to ride this

this way consistently.

There's more I could mention about my experiences during the course like my first experience riding directly toward the center of a roundabout that served as a hub for four other major roads, a type of "black hole" for vehicles. I thought I'd found the center of the universe. It was, I thought, the only possible explanation. Turns out there are lots of roundabouts, so there's likely something else going on. Wasn't Rome either, what a terrible disappointment.

The roundabout can be intimidating but it actually works surprisingly well to productively disperse all that converging and potentially destructive energy. After a little practice it's no big deal.

Then there's the dreaded right turn after stopping at a busy "T" junction. On two occasions I reflexively turned hard right into oncoming traffic instead of crossing over onto the left hand lane. I recovered seamlessly by explaining to Nigel that in America we call it playing "chicken" and do it all the time. It's the American equivalent of the British passion for parking to obstruct traffic on narrow streets in villages, I explained further. I think he bought it because by the end of the course he rated me a "silver" rider, up from "bronze". Perhaps I'll strike "gold" next time. Some of my success is due to the Suzuki; it's very comfortable and great fun to ride on the "twisties". It's not as good as my 2001 Honda VFR, but proved a suspiring delight to ride; it's also probably a better choice as a "learner's" bike.

The other dimensions to this adventure as yet not mentioned include the wonderful accommodation provided by Lyn and Andy at their B&B at Chapel Croft, Biddulph Park (www.chapelcroft.com) outside Stoke-on-Trent; purchasing motorcycle gear from Dennis Holmes, a motorcycle racer, motorcycle maven, entrepreneur and owner of D.H. Autos in Newcastle (www.dhautos.co.uk); breath-taking scenic roads and biker hangouts that only local riders know, Nigel's friends and family and grandma's letter from Wales. She and Aunty Rene are, of course, like Liz Welsh. Recently while picking woad on the moors, they were informed by Welsh leadership that "ARAF" means "SLOW". Further, because the woad harvest was plentiful the decision was made that "ARAF" will soon appear in woad blue on the road set off by a white background. Such woaded signage will, of course echo the theme first noticed in the large plaques around London but this time the blue figures will appear on a white background. Matisse's employed the same device, interchanging the color of his figures and background employing only blue and white. It promises to be the most beautiful road sign in Britain. All in all it was a great birthday present. I learned much about motorcycling, one Welsh word and discovered an intriguing link between Britain and French impressionism.

While Nigel rated me "silver", I grade him "gold". Thanks to all.

