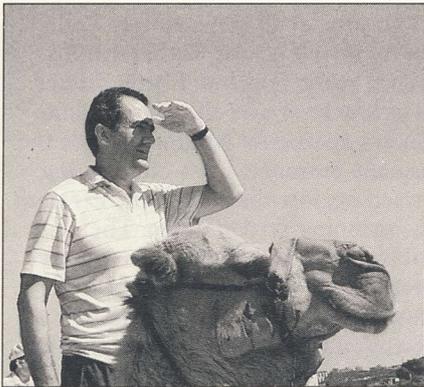

THE SOFT EDGES

Doctors' Cars – Chris Ellis



The motor car has been regarded as many things from a symbol of man's sexuality to a sign of success and status. A psychologist even went to the length of describing the car as an extension of a man's penis. Certainly modern cars are sold and advertised mainly on their sex and status appeal.

The natural history of the medical motor car is in several stages. It usually starts as a second hand banger in late student life. The medical student's car, by definition, has a music centre that is worth more than the complete value of the car. This first ford fiasco retains fond memories of journeys at night packed with drunken medical students and no view through the rear view mirror. It is usually the only car you can always remember the number plate of. After this, the price and quality of the car increases as the doctor rises slowly through the establishment until he arrives.

The Arrived Medical Car varies from country to country. One of the front runners is without doubt the Mercedes Benz, which made someone wonder what exactly the initials MB stood for, after a doctor's name. The colour has to be conservative and any colour will do as long as it is white. It has also to be driven in a grandiose manner and wearing an expression of gravitas. A stethoscope on the front dashboard and the Medical Association disc under the third party licence are optional. Daring colours such as red or green suggest a flippancy and a hint of rebellion, perhaps in the junior partner. Coupés or sports models denote a last menopausal fling in the middle partners before a return to the fold of conservative aplomb. A tow bar is not included

and shows a deviation into rather vulgar pursuits such as caravans.

There are other Arrived Medical Cars that are not totally unacceptable, especially in the flashier specialties who don't know any better. The Porsche says a lot of things to some and combines the visible symbol of success with a bit of dashing disregard for doing the done thing. Even so, one has to work up from the bottom of the line to the figures on the top. I mean one doesn't want to be stuck with a bottom of the line Porsche for ever, does one?

The upmarket profile can also be maintained with a pristine unmuddied Range Rover standing ruggedly in the hospital parking lot. The owner works deep in the inner sanctum of the hospital theatre where natural light never penetrates. He occasionally emerges, like a miner, blinking into the sunlight and fires it into four wheel drive for the journey down the rutted mud of Eloff street to his rooms.

Different nationalities favour other cars, for instance the French have Citroens, the Swedes have Volvos and the Italians have Alfa Romeos. The British on the otherhand have several. This is due to the ever so subtle difference in England between recent genteelism and established respectability. For instance the Rolls Royce, although allowed, might be considered a bit over the top in some circles. The chap might have arrived just a little too eagerly. A Jaguar qualifies, but the old money favours something more along the lines of a Daimler or perhaps a Bentley, always black of course. It is a cachet of indefinable exclusivity that the tweed and flannel team maintain over the arrivistes. The North Americans of

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course allow anything from slob extraordinaire to vulgar supreme.

In the seventies I emigrated to Canada. In those days the regulations were that you could work under the supervision of a Canadian doctor until the Canadian exams had been passed. I got a job as an assistant to a quietly balding old family doctor. We practised out of a ramschakle wooden house in a quiet suburb of Vancouver.

During my first week in the practice an urgent call came in for an emergency. It was at the local hospital for which we were on duty. I either had not got a car yet or it was not available. My elderly supervisor asked me to go as he was busy. He handed me the keys of his car to use.

"Had I?" he asked over the rim of his bifocals, "ever driven with power steering or power brakes before?"

"No" I answered over my shoulder as I bounded confidently out of the door "but I'm sure I can get the hang of it".

It lay like a sleek grey torpedo beside the curb as though it had been left by a nuclear submarine. It had a name of rampant animal potency like Mustang or Thunderbird or something similar. The psychologist was right. This was a motorised metal phallus. It was so low lying I had to crouch down, then unstick the door and slide in. The seat seemed to have three positions; upright, semi-adultery, and full-adultery and was stuck in the half reclining semi-adultery position. I could not find the lever to adjust it and as time was of the essence, I turned my attention to the dashboard. It was a small version of the control tower at Cape Canaveral.

I eventually found the starter and put the key in. The floorboards were much simpler. There were just two pedals, the accelerator and the brake. It was an automatic phallus.

In my semireclining position I could just touch both pedals with my toes. It was obviously going to be either stop or go. I turned the key and gunned it into life. The steering wheel immediately moved up and down and started to spin round like the wheel on a ship. I thought for a minute it was going to come off in my hand but then realised that this was power steering. I steadied the helm and gently pressed the accelerator. The effect was instantaneous. The Mustang leapt out of the corral. It short forward so quickly I reflexly slammed my foot onto the brake. They worked and my front incisors impaled themselves on the rim of the steering wheel. After a moment I disimpacted back into my semi-reclining position and collected myself together. When the car had stopped rocking, I once more, very gently, touched the accelerator. The effect was again instantaneous and so was the reflex onto the brake. This time I cleared the steering wheel and made an attempt to put my maxilla through the windscreen. Luckily there were no cars parked nearby, so on the third attempt, with gently watering eyes, I jerked her out into the stream with my feet on both pedals.

The journey was like a rerun of the Man from Snowy River where he tries to break in Champion the Wonderhorse. Somewhere along the line I was losing my casual nonchalance about getting the hang of it, as the scenery flashed by in a series of nystagmic turns on the power steering.

In no time at all (several light years) I found myself on the flight path for arrival at the hospital. I brought her in at low level over the car park and made a successful landing outside the casualty entrance. I got out holding myself against the side of the car until the spinning settled down. The subsequent events in the emergency department were performed with slow exaggerated movements. The consultation must have gone alright because no one mentioned anything untoward or complained about me being sick in the casualty basin. Perhaps they thought the new doctor was overwhelmed by the occasion.

Getting the car back was done in a dream too. I parked her beside the kerb outside the rooms and crawled out.

Gently swaying I handed the keys back to my benign mentor. He never said a thing. I'm not sure but I think I heard a soft chuckle as he walked back down the corridor to his room.