

A kick in the carburettor

Machines get old and tired just like people do so be gentle when it comes to trading them in, says **Richard Barr**

I well remember my father kicking and beating the lawnmower, an old petrol model that had been misbehaving all morning. The grass had to be cut because the Archdeacon of Huntingdon and Wisbech was coming to take tea in the garden, and my father, who was ungodly to the end, wanted to impress him.

After several more thrashings, the mower eventually spluttered into life and sulkily transformed the lawn, if not into a bowling green, at least into something that one could walk on without fear of falling into pot holes. - Yet it still exacted its revenge – by catching its blade in a large stone.

From then on, it made a noise like a machine gun every time it was used. It taught me at a tender age that machines do



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have minds of their own and you mess with them at your peril.

This all happened before various EU regulations were passed prohibiting corporal punishment on inanimate objects. That episode of anthropomorphism came to mind this week when I started my sexennial process of changing cars, i.e. every six years, whether or not it needs it. My usual rule of thumb is that before I get another car, my old one must have travelled at least halfway to the moon. The number of miles on the clock would get it close to the moon's gravitational pull.

Over the past few months, my elderly Citroen became geriatric. Its once clever windows, which could be opened from the other side of the car park and which would close automatically if you turned on the windscreen wipers, tended to stick half open or half closed (depending on one's state of optimism or pessimism). The engine rattled like a snake, and the suspension creaked and groaned. I felt an affinity with it: we were both not getting any younger, and I could manage the odd creak too.

However, the creaking and groaning was then supplanted by crashing and crunching. It left me feeling uneasy that one or more of the wheels was in imminent danger of coming off.

It was time for a change. And the car must have realised it because suddenly it was being cleaned inside and out for the first time in my six years of ownership. If you ignored the scratches (close encounters with hawthorn bushes, a brush with a skip and the dent caused by an anonymous driver in the station car park), it looked reasonable and worth at least a pound or two.



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One lady owner

My brilliant brain surgeon stepdaughter, Rebecca, owns an RAV4. She regularly performs life-saving operations on people with head injuries but she cannot care for her car to save her (or its) life. On a recent trip to visit her in Australia, we found that its clutch was all but burnt out, its wheel bearings had blown and it had no oil in the sump. Despite these shortcomings, it still worked.

"An RAV4 is what you want," ordered my wife, and sent me off to Luton where a "very clean" RAV4 owned from new by an "elderly lady" was awaiting my purchase. The seedy backstreet motor dealer took one look at my car and giggled. He called in his colleague and they both nearly split their sides at the thought of taking my car in part exchange.

This RAV4 had very low mileage but was older than what I wanted to sell. The elderly lady had clearly driven very slowly.

My car and I both took against the salesman. Neither of us appreciated being giggled at. The car hurled a groan in the direction of the car dealers then fell silent – as did I. All the way home it behaved impeccably: the engine purred like a contented cat, the suspension became smooth and noiseless, and the windows obediently responded to my command. Clearly the old dear did not want to be sold and was trying to tell me.

The evidence is clear: machines have souls. As for my old car, I hope it is not reading this piece because I have agreed to trade it in for a slightly younger model. An unsmiling, straight-faced salesman offered me – wait for it – £300. Better than a kick in the carburettor, but not much. **SJ**

