



Richard Barr gets his own fire engine

The low loader pulled up outside our house, blocking traffic and attracting a small crowd of onlookers. Its cargo, tall, green but not gleaming, towered above us. Two weeks earlier my wife had telephoned me at work. 'Please forgive me for what I have done,' she begged, but would not go on to confess her sins. She then kept me in the dark for several days before taking me to a company in the wilds of Lincolnshire that specialises in selling surplus government vehicles. The salesman led us to a long row of Green Goddess fire engines and pointed to one of them.

Green Goddesses are fully equipped fire engines that originally operated (under the

banner of the AFS or Auxiliary Fire Service) side by side with local authority fire brigades. Back in the 1950s everyone's fear was that there would be a nuclear war. After a nuclear holocaust, convoys of Green Goddesses were to be sent in to devastated cities to salvage what they could. More than 3000 Green Goddesses were made. No nuclear war broke out (at least not yet!) and the Green Goddesses were relegated to occasional use when fire fighters went on strike. "This one is yours," said the salesman with a wink to my wife.

So that is what she had been doing. She had seen a feature on early morning television about the sell-off of a limited number of Green Goddesses for about £3500 each. Fearing that they would be quickly snapped up she put our

name down for one. Fearing that I might be angry she kept it a secret until she was able to show me what she had done.

It was not quite the same as falling in love with a puppy or kitten in a pet shop window, but it was close. I have not yet decided what I am going to do when I grow up. Becoming a solicitor was only a stop gap until I found out what I really wanted to do.

When I was younger there was little to do in Wisbech where I was brought up, but one of the excitements was the moment when the town fire siren went off. It could be heard for miles. Then we would race on our bicycles to the fire station and watch the firemen rush in and climb onto their engines (every bit as antique as the ones we were now looking at) and lumber off (followed by us on

Tom and Philippa my step children posing!



My brother in law trying out a main hose



A scary business driving this thing. 40 mph feels dangerous!



our bicycles) to a straw stack or chimney on fire.

There was a little method in my wife's (I was going to say "madness" but I won't as she might be reading this)... We live in one of Norfolk's thatched houses and we are terrified that one day the roof might catch fire. And the problem with thatch is that it does spread quickly. There is not a minute to waste.

She figured that if we had our own fire appliance we would have a chance of keeping any fire at bay until the professionals arrived. The 50 year old Green Goddess (with only 3000 miles on the clock) is equipped with nearly half a mile of hose, two ladders, bolt cutters, hydrant stand pipes, coils of rope, chimney rods and even a stirrup pump. There were no instructions and it took a while to find out how all the controls

worked, but now the entire family is trained to start it up and get the hoses going. My record is 55 seconds to get water squirting onto the roof. You don't have to use it just to fight fires. The Green Goddess has been to several fetes and rallies. Once we allowed a group of small children to spray each other. That worked fine until they decided to drench the nearby car boot sale. After that we were not flavour of the month.

It is every aspiring firefighter's dream to fight a real fire. One night some yobboes set fire to several vehicles at a hire depot opposite us. Now was the opportunity for the Green Goddess to show what it was made of. While my wife called the real fire brigade, I started up and headed for the flames with blue flashing lights on and horn blaring.

'Stop. Stop.' A little voice above the sound of the

engine, "The fire brigade say you must not tackle the fire' shouted my wife breathlessly. No one is going to take this moment of glory from me, I thought, as I continued towards the fire.

'Oh yes they are' thought the Green Goddess. And before I reached the road, its engine died and we came to a halt.

It turned out later that it had run out of petrol (it does about four miles to the gallon), but it is just as well that it did then. It would have been pretty embarrassing to block the road and prevent the real firemen from reaching the scene.

Ah well..... it looks as though I will have to be a solicitor for a while longer. ■

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