

Chapter 5. Roadcraft

The road goes ever on and on, down from the door where it began.

J.R.R. Tolkien

5.1 V is not for Victory, Stan

Oh, what an awesome view!"
The family is driving along the Welsh coast on a winding road with lots of bends. Occasionally through the trees they can see a river and beyond that, blue in the distance, hills and mountains with grazing sheep, and the sea. Pam, however, is worried.

"Daddy, you know you've got a line of cars behind you?"

"I know sweetie," Stan replies, "but I'm going as fast as it's safe. I wish we had a smaller car."

Suddenly, the road straightens and Stan can speed up. All too soon, however, they are back with the bends, and he has to brake. After two more miles, the same thing happens – a straight section where Stan is once again able to speed up, followed by more slow bends.

"That's odd," he mutters, after three more miles. "That fancy car on my tail has dropped way back."

They come to a straight stretch, Stan accelerates, and a sports car driven by a young man comes past like a bat out of hell, headlights full up and the horn blaring.

"Jeez, look at the speed he's going, he's way over the speed limit," says Fran. "He's in one heck of a hurry." As the sports car pulls back onto his own side of the road and brakes, an arm with two outstretched fingers shoots straight up from the driver's window.

"Oh look, he's giving us Churchill's V for victory sign," says Stan. "How quaint."

"I hate to tell you, dear" says Fran, "but I think that's the Brit equivalent of giving the finger."

"How rude!" he replies. "I thought Brits were supposed to be polite!"

A little voice pipes up from the back: "But you do it when we're driving in Chicago, Daddy."

Up to this point we've looked at fundamental technical aspects of driving in the Islands, as well as the effect of habit. While these are crucially important, I don't feel they are quite enough for you to drive with optimal safety and comfort for yourself and others. So I'm hoping the extra information in the

present chapter will supplement what you know from driving at home. It's needed, quite simply, because of the different nature of the roads. Without this information, particularly on rural roads, you will be forever driving slowly ("Dad, are we there yet?"), taking far more time than you anticipated in going from Aberystwyth to Beddgelert, and in the process, leaving a wake of utter frustration behind you. If that frustration builds for long enough, it could lead to other drivers passing you dangerously, which is what happened in the vignette above.

Let me be clear: the last thing we shall be trying to do is to get you to drive as fast as a local. It isn't possible – *I* can't do it, and the good professional Welsh driver we'll meet a little later (his name is Brân) can't either when driving in, for example, the Scottish Highlands or Ireland. This is because a local driver knows every inch of the road: how severe every bend is, where the road narrows, where there is suddenly a straight stretch, and so on. Hopefully, what we *can* do, though, is show you what's needed to get you driving elegantly, economically and pretty quickly.

5.2 How Far Can You See?

On a winding road that has two narrow lanes, one in each direction, there is one overarching principle to driving safely: ***you MUST be able to stop within your "seeing distance"***. It might be a hard stop, but as they say, a miss is as good as a mile. (It just doesn't sound the same with kilometres, does it?) It follows that to increase your speed to that of Brân, you need to be driving such that ***at all times you safely maximise your seeing distance***.

The further you can see, the faster you can go.

Regrettably, the skill of maximising your line of sight is rarely taught in driving school in N. America because it's not often needed; to make things worse, your "autopilot" can work against you in the Islands in this regard. Let me try to explain.

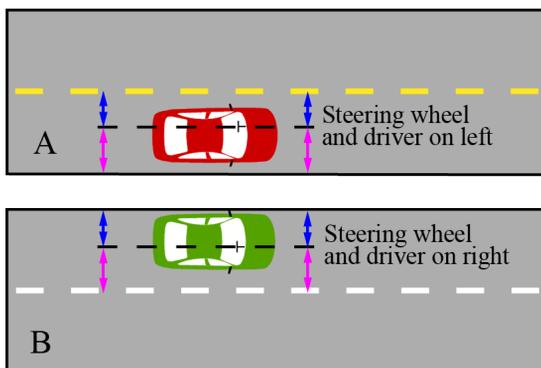


Figure 5.1. Those used to driving on the right (A) have a tendency to be too close to the edge of the road (B) when driving on the left.

At home, when driving with the car in the middle of a traffic lane, the steering wheel and hence you, the driver, are in the left part of the lane, reasonably close to the centre line, as shown in Fig. 5.1A. This is where you are used to sitting, it's where you "belong". It follows that when you are in a car with the steering wheel on the *right*, you tend by habit to adopt for yourself the same position in the lane, as shown in Fig. 5.1B. Your autopilot is at work again! Of course, on a narrow road this puts the left-hand side of the car perilously close to any hedgerow or wall, and if you are too close you will get an abrupt reminder from your left mirror! However, once you know about this rather subtle tendency, you can take steps to counteract it. This is another example of the "awareness training" of the previous chapter. By the way, if you have a front-seat passenger, he or she can help with this by warning you.

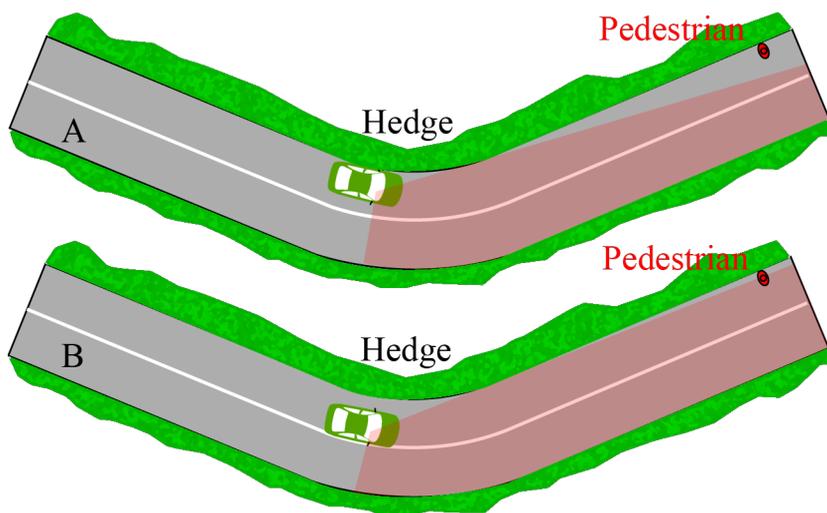


Figure 5.2. On a left-hand bend, driving too close to the (h)edge seriously restricts the view of the road ahead. In A), as opposed to B), the pedestrian cannot be seen. Note that pedestrians are legally entitled to walk on a country road.

The tendency to drive too far to the left has an unfortunate consequence: it seriously restricts your vision on a left-hand bend, which in turn causes you to drive far too slowly around it (and drive the locals crazy in the process!) In Fig. 5.2, compare lines of sight (pink area) for a driver who is too far to the left (A) and another who is as far right as legally possible (B). The driver in B sees the pedestrian far sooner – the difference is actually quite dramatic in practice. This driver can therefore safely go faster round the bend.

The further you can see, the faster you can go.

5.3 Right-Hand Bends

The opposite situation holds for a right-hand bend. After hugging the hedge, the temptation is to "cut" the bend, as shown in Fig. 5.3A (dashed yellow line). However, to maximise the seeing distance, the exact opposite should be done! Here, you *want* to hug the hedge, and "cut" the corner only when the line of sight is good enough for safety. The driver in B sees the broken-down car ahead sooner than the driver in A, and so can safely have been going faster.

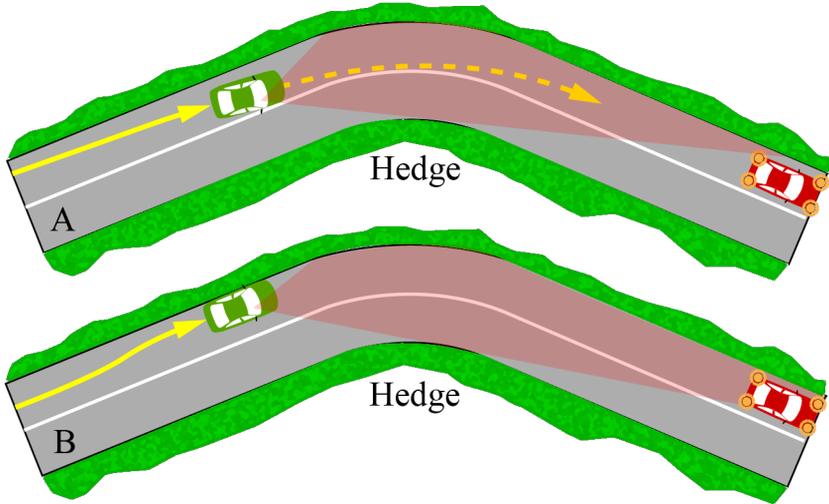


Figure 5.3. Hugging the (h)edge before a right-hand bend increases the line of sight, and you see the obstacle sooner. (For emergency stopping to avoid hitting the broken-down vehicle see Fig. 5.7.)

The further you can see, the faster you can go.

5.4 Multiple Bends

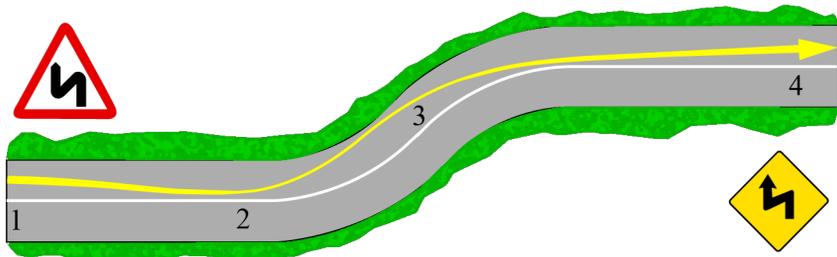


Figure 5.4. The yellow line is a composite of Figs. 5.2 and 5.3 showing approximately the best road positioning for maximum vision (and hence speed) round a double bend.

The width of the yellow line indicates speed; the numbers are used in the text.