



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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A PROPER ENGLISHMAN

It had been a good trip so far but I had no idea what nightmares lay ahead. I came north from Madrid, drove across France, and was now easing my Spanish-made Renault 4 off the ferry at Southampton. Once on English soil I stopped to have a look around. This was, after all, the land of my forefathers; the British Isles are my ancestral home.

All my grandparents left pre-World War I Britain from this very port and settled in Buenos Aires. Their children—my parents—later moved to Uruguay, taking my brother and me with them, and I grew up in Montevideo. I first went to England when I was twenty years old, in 1965, but didn't stay long. Just because it was my ancestral home didn't mean I felt at home there, and I soon moved to Spain.

During my first stint in London I lived in Hampstead, and one Friday evening I was chatting to one of the regulars at The Flask, my local pub. After telling this chap my story he informed me rather stiffly that, as a colonial, I was not "a proper Englishman." I dismissed him as just another snooty Brit but now, a couple of years later, as I drove along the motorway from Southampton, I had to admit that he had a point. A proper Englishman would have had no trouble driving on the left side of the road, and would be driving a car with the steering wheel on the right. On both these counts, my car and I were unquestionably foreigners, no matter where my grandparents were born.

In Montevideo I grew up in a cocoon-like expat community where our cultural, academic, and sporting life was heavily influenced by British history and tradition. At our British Schools I read more Shakespeare than Cervantes, sang God Save the Queen on Empire Day, and knew more about the Charge of the Light Brigade than the exploits of José Gervasio Artigas, Uruguay's national hero. But though we played cricket and spoke to each other in "the Queen's English," when we took our vehicles out on the roads we had no choice but to respect the house rules, and

Uruguayans drive on the right. So do Spaniards.

Timidly hugging the left on the English motorway I came to a roundabout and, in a complete panic, found that I could make my Renault 4 go with the flow of traffic circling in what felt like the wrong direction, but could not figure out how to break away and take the exit to London. It all seemed back-to-front, like trying to write with my left hand, and as I went round and round and round I could almost hear the other drivers laughing and saying "Oh look, he's not a proper Englishman, he can't get off the roundabout!" Why did it have to be so hard? Why don't we all drive on the same side of the road?

Roughly a third of the people in the world drive on the left, and most of them live in what were, at one time or another, British colonies. Why? To understand that we must look back in time to days of old when knights were bold and most of them were also right-handed. When Sir Lancelot, for example, rode his horse along an English country lane he kept to the left so that his right arm was free to draw his sword if he felt threatened by an unknown knight approaching from the opposite direction.



It was also easier for right-handed riders to mount and dismount on the left, especially if they were wearing a scabbard, which was another reason to keep to the left side of the road. The



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tradition actually goes back further than that; archaeologists have determined that Roman soldiers always marched on the left, so ordinary Romans, it is believed, followed suit when driving their carts and wagons to and fro. This custom was officially sanctioned in 1300 AD when Pope Boniface VIII decreed that pilgrims on their way to Rome should keep to the left.

By the time the British colonized what is now the United States they had been riding and driving on the left for many generations. They brought many of their customs with them across the Atlantic, and in the early days everyone in America drove their horse-drawn buggies and buckboards on the left. Time passed and by the late eighteenth century there was a growing demand for larger wagons to transport farm goods in ever-greater quantities. These wagons were powered by teams of horses driven by men who originally sat on the horse at the back on the left in order to keep their whip hand free. From that perch, however, it was tricky to judge traffic coming from the opposite direction, as I could testify from my terrifying position behind the wheel of my Renault 4! So American teamsters—partly for practical reasons and partly as a snub to their colonial past—broke with tradition and started driving on the right side of the road. In 1792 Pennsylvania was the first state to pass a law requiring drivers to keep right, and others soon followed. A century later, though American motor vehicles drove on the right side of the road, the earliest models were manufactured according to British standards, with the steering wheel on the right, and didn't change until the early 1900s. The Ford Motor Company, in fact, did not produce a left-hand drive model until 1908.

In England, narrow country lanes somewhat restricted the size of the above-mentioned farm wagons, which were soon equipped with a bench for the driver. Like their US counterparts, UK teamsters wanted to sit close to the centre of the road where they could see oncoming traffic and not get their wheels entangled. But



Circa 2016:
 Right-hand traffic (red). Left-hand traffic (blue).

while Americans chose to sit on the left and drive on the right, the British—perhaps more mindful of tradition—continued to drive on the left and simply moved over to sit on the right of the driver's seat. To avoid accidents, especially on bridges, a law requiring all traffic to drive on the left was drafted into the English Highway Act of 1835 and then adopted throughout the British Empire.

Like the Americans, the French had also taken to driving on the right side of the road, and Napoleon's conquests and then Hitler's invasions gradually forced most of the remaining European countries to do so as well. Faced with this discrepancy, Great Britain actually considered switching sides in the 1960s, but the initiative was doomed by stiff conservative resistance and the potential cost involved.

I knew none of that history as I eventually managed to break free from the centrifugal death grip of the roundabout and make my way to London. On my arrival I went straight to my brother's flat in Hampstead, and he wasted no time in taking me to The Flask for a medicinal pint. We chatted about my ordeal on the road from Southampton, and I asked the publican why the British didn't change the law and allow motorists to drive on the right like everyone else. He laughed and said no proper Englishman would ever vote for anything like that.