
Opening Extract from...

Or Is That Just Me?

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Introduction

Afraid of Being Forty

There is a very simple solution available to those people who are on telly and who complain about people stopping them in the street because they recognise them: don't be on the telly. Personally, I fail to see how you can be on TV and then complain when people watch it. And so it's part of life's daily goings-on that people will say 'Hi', stop me in the street, ask about people they see me working with on the box, observe that I'm taller/shorter, older/younger in real life than they expected, or beg me to talk to their wife on the phone because 'She really fancies you, mate, and it would make her day if you woke her up and said it was you'. Never quite sure what to do about that last one; a mate of mine suggested I breathe heavily into the receiver and ask what they're wearing. Funny, but slightly inappropriate, and possibly quite dangerous, as it is generally the husband of the woman in question who has asked me to call her and he is standing right next to me. Nevertheless, it happens as a sort of by-

product of doing the job and I certainly don't complain about it. And it happens quite a lot in the car.

I tend to scoot about the place in a range of unusual cars; it's part of the job really and it's also one of my biggest passions. I collect all manner of daft motors and so, if I'm not testing some outrageous machine or other for the job, I'll be punting one of my own vehicles about the place, glad of the chance to use it. And, naturally, driving an unusual or distinctive car is going to attract even more attention. The kind of person whose eye is drawn by a Ferrari or a vintage Mustang is going to look at such a car when it appears alongside them on the motorway; and that person is, by definition, likely to be a fan of *Top Gear*. Therefore, if I'm sloping along the M4 in my Morgan Aeromax, people who like cars are going to look at it. And as people who like cars, they are likely to be *Top Gear* viewers and therefore recognise me, perched behind the wheel with one finger jammed firmly up my nose. This happens a lot and on this particular occasion it happened, once again, on the M4 as I made my way out of London towards home in Herefordshire.

A VW Golf – third generation, quite good nick, obviously cared for and therefore probably owned and cherished by a younger driver with a passion for cars – was flitting busily about the big Morgan like a pilot fish around a shark. I caught it changing lanes behind me and then watched it buzz past slowly while its occupants took in the Morgan's outlandish curves. They dropped a window to soak in the noise of the V8 burbling and barking through the side-exit exhausts. I saw young faces,

four of them, grinning, in the Golf. They looked along the car to see who was driving such a thing and, sure enough, caught sight of the short one off *Top Gear* and launched into a barrage of shouts and waves. All fair enough. And then they got a bit daft, slowing in the outside lane to drop back along the Morgan and tuck in behind it again. They hovered there for a bit and then found a gap to run up the inside of the car in lane one and undertake me to check out the other side of the Morgan.

I figured this was getting a bit silly and certainly didn't want to be involved in causing anything dangerous to unfold on the motorway. So I gave it a bootful in the Morgan, pulled out into lane three, overtook a few cars and tucked back in, all quiet and cosy. And the Golf caught up to carry on the game, rotating around the car, its occupants all the time grinning and brandishing their upturned thumbs. Clearly, this couldn't continue, so I drifted across into lane one and slowed with the traffic to drop back from the Golf. Gradually, I dropped back further until the blue Golf had disappeared ahead. Better still, an exit road to a service station was coming up. I flicked the indicator on and dived off, slowing into the petrol station. I could do with a tankful and this would give the Golf a chance to get further ahead and out of trouble.

Pulling in alongside a pump, I drew to a halt and climbed out of the car. It's an awkward old thing into and out of which to manoeuvre, the Morgan, and I wrestled myself out on to the forecourt, red-faced and bothered.

Parked in front of me was the same blue Golf I had met earlier. And gathering around it were the four kids who had, only minutes before, been grinning, gawping and giving me an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Only now they didn't look quite so chipper. The largest of them – and therefore, by my reckoning at the time, the eldest and the leader – stepped out of the group towards me. He was all blond, floppy surf hair, white teeth and baggy clothes.

'Hey, Rich!'

His mates giggled at the greeting.

'Sorry about the racing back there.' He jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the motorway and nodded his head towards the Golf – I assumed the car was his. Something happened inside me, some primal switch or other flicked and I became angry. Not angry in a bar-room brawl kind of way, but angry in an indignant, 'stop this nonsense at once,' kind of way.

'Now listen' – I may just as well have added 'young man', so laden with adult admonishment of a junior was my tone of delivery – 'that was not racing. For one thing, it's a public motorway and why the hell do you think I would race against you when there's a very real chance someone entirely innocent could be killed? If anyone even thought we were actually racing I would be arrested quicker than you can think about it and fired from my job immediately, and rightly bloody so.'

The young man in question lowered his eyes and looked suddenly sheepish. As did his entire group. They were, I realised, a rather foppish, middle-class, pleasant bunch of lads, probably from a posh school. They wore

rugby shirts and deck shoes. They felt bad at being shouted at.

'And anyway,' I blustered now, feeling suddenly awkward, though not quite sure why, 'if we actually were racing and I was in that', I nodded at the big Morgan, cooling quietly by the petrol pump, 'do you really think you'd stand any kind of chance? Hah, I mean …'

I tried to inject some matey levity and banter into the situation, but it didn't work. The lads were cowed, browbeaten. And I realised where my sudden awkwardness had sprung from: they were taking my admonishment as exactly that: a bollocking. And yet here was a bunch of strapping young lads, any one of whom could have picked me up and bundled me out of the way as easily as dealing out a tackle on a rugby pitch. I scanned their faces instinctively, acting on a lifetime of waiting to see which punter in my local would be the first to throw a punch at my irritating little face. But nothing flickered, not a trace of anger or danger. They looked down at their feet and muttered their apologies. They were, I realised, apologising naturally to the older man, feeling shameful and sorry. They viewed me as an adult crashing into their young man's world and telling them to stop being so silly. I wasn't ready for this. It's my age, it's because I'm forty soon – have I mentioned that? – and I don't yet want to be the indignant older bloke at the petrol station who shouts at teenagers and expects to get their respect simply by dint of being older.

'Anyway lads, er, take it easy out there.' I punched the air at about waist height as I spoke, giving the non-con-

tact equivalent of a chuck on the shoulder. I may as well have put on a bad tie and danced like a twat at a wedding disco.

'Sorry,' one of them muttered in gentle, polished tones and they returned to their car, shuffling quietly, heads slightly bowed, their buoyant mood burst by my middle-age sensitivities. And so the nearly-forty-year-old-man climbed back into his sports car, surveyed the sparkling dashboard, sporty dials and bucket seats and denied to himself that he was having a mid-life crisis. Then he fired up the big V8 and gunned it to send pops and bangs ricocheting off the walls of the filling station and powered back towards the motorway. If I'm going to have a mid-life crisis, may as well do it properly. And loudly.

Or is that just me?

Chapter One

There's No Snow in Hawaii, Surely?

'It's about fourteen thousand feet, which is about the same as when you go skiing. Do you go skiing?'

'No, look, for the last time, I don't go and never have been skiing. Well, I did once, but that was to the North Pole and that was different because it wasn't downhill and the dogs kept peeing on me and, oh God …' I tentatively patted the point where a large and visibly very angry spot had recently set up camp, presumably mistaking me for a teenager. In the few days since its arrival I had grown accustomed to reaching up and checking it, testing the tautness of the skin stretched across its shining, ominous dome. I was fearful that it might appear unsightly on camera. Mindy had laughed and told me that it might get fan mail. And that people would wonder if I had the spot or the spot had me. Was it, she asked, in fact wearing me, stuck to its little bottom? Was I a boil on the bum of a spot? She told me to stop touching it because this, she added, would make it bigger. I protested that spots don't thrive on being petted. They are not Labradors. She spoke

testily about the transfer of germs and grease and other unmentionable things. Eventually the three of us – the spot, Mindy and me – had agreed on a standoff. We would all try to get along together as best we could: I wouldn't pick at the spot, Mindy wouldn't keep asking me if it made a noise at night and the spot itself, though we had to make this assumption on its behalf as communication was not among the wealth of qualities it brought to our unhappy triumvirate, would not erupt like Vesuvius on camera, leaving a TV studio ruined and a generation of children traumatised for life by the horror.

'Don't touch it …' Mindy hissed the words at me in a stage whisper, standing to my left with a mug of tea in one hand and a single riding boot in the other, listening in to my conversation as I dealt with the intricacies of planning another filming trip abroad.

'All right, all right.' I mouthed the words and waved her away loftily, striving to give the impression that my mind was busy dealing with important professional matters.

'What? Never! You don't ski? God, I go every year and it's soooo …'

The young researcher on the other end of the phone was in danger of slipping into the stereotypical waffle about how she goes skiing every year with her friends and it's just great and little Toby, my godson, looks so cute in his little ski suit and when I have kids I'll, y'know, make sure they can ski by the time they're three and .... I decided on a pre-emptive strike and interrupted her before things turned too grisly.

'Look, I was born in Birmingham; people from Birmingham didn't go skiing, they went camping in the Forest of Dean. James Bond went skiing. And people in car ads. Real people in the real world went camping. We took the tent, the deck chairs and the camping stove out of the shed where they had gone mouldy and rusty, we strapped them all to the top of the Marina, we drove for hours and hours and hours, we argued about where to pitch the tent when we got there, we got wet putting it up in the rain, argued about who's turn it was to wash up, argued about who had lost a playing card and ruined the pack, slept on a damp groundsheet and went home. So, please, stop asking me about skiing.'

'Okay, well, er …' She wasn't sure if my rant was meant in jest or if I was genuinely cross.

'And we had to eat gravel and grass and, ooooh, we had it bad back then.' I added the coda with pantomime emphasis to make it clear that I was having fun with her. I wasn't; it had made me a bit cross, but I didn't see the need for her to know that.

Reassured, she continued, 'At that altitude you to have to be a bit careful because the air's thin and you can get altitude sickness …' The young researcher swung into a lecture about the need to stay off the booze and fags while we were up there and how we would need to make sure we took the time to acclimatise on every trip to the top of the mountain. She lectured me about the importance of watching for symptoms, about how a headache can be the first sign of the onset of altitude sickness. I zoned out and made the appropriate noises during the

quiet bits to indicate that I was listening intently and taking on board the critical, possibly life-saving information I was being given. It's not that I wasn't interested or was being blasé about serious stuff, but I knew that we would go through all of this again and again over the next few weeks and it would be well covered before we set off. Right now I was more concerned about what we were actually going up this mountain, wherever it was, to film.

This was to be just one of a series of journeys I was involved in making for a new series for the National Geographic Channel. Called *Engineering Connections*, it would look at the unlikely and unexpected stories connecting major technological structures and achievements of the modern age with older, stranger, simpler and altogether wilder stuff from around the world. When first invited to host it, the producers asked me if I remembered the original series, presented by James Burke in the 1970s. Of course I did, I reassured them. A man with my scientific credentials was hardly likely to have failed to observe a truly landmark television series in the field of science communication.

'God, yes, of course; part of my childhood. A founding stone of it, in fact. Michael Burke, sorry, James, huh, how could I forget? He was my hero. No, James, James Burke walked up and down a lot of streets wearing a suit and talked about how jet fighters are actually directly descended from letterboxes. And stuff. I loved it. When do we start?'

And it had indeed made for some fascinating work. In the course of filming an episode about the Airbus A380

airliner, I had found myself charging out of some woodland on a horse, with a bow in my hand, firing arrows into an archery target in front of a slightly bewildered archery club from Middlesex. It was part of a stunt to explore the properties of the groundbreaking high-tech material from which the plane is built. Called Glare, it is made rather like fibreglass, from two different substances that have different qualities which when combined make a material capable of more than the constituent parts on their own. The Mongol army of Genghis Khan did something rather similar with its bows. As a mounted army, it needed weapons that could be used from horseback. A traditional longbow was a bit too, well, long to use on a horse. You tended to stick the end of it in the horse's back, which sort of made it cross, and caused it to chuck you off and look a right prat in front of the enemy, who killed you where you lay with knives or clubs. And on this particular day's filming, somewhere in Middlesex, I had already demonstrated this problem – not the being killed with knives and/or clubs bit, but I had shown the difficulties of manhandling a five-foot-long bow on horseback by being filmed trying to loose off an arrow using a full-sized wooden longbow. It was impossible, and the crew were relieved when I put the bow down and admitted defeat. They had feared one of them would lose an eye. The Mongols, clever chaps, noticed that if you just made a wooden bow shorter, it snapped in half when you tried to pull it back far enough to get sufficient tension into it to send an arrow further than the end of your wrist. That was because on one side of the bow, the for-

ward-facing bit, you're asking the wood to stretch as it forms the outside of the curve. That puts the material under tension. On the other side, the inside, it's being squashed, compressed, as the bow bends inwards. And that's quite a big ask of one material; to manage to be good at two completely opposing jobs – tension and compression. So the Mongols made a bow using two very different materials. On the outside they used sinew taken from an animal carcass, typically the leg tendon of a deer, which is naturally very good at stretching and returning to its original shape without breaking. On the inside, they used water buffalo horn, which is very good at being squashed. And it worked a treat. The bow needed only to be about three feet long and yet could send an arrow hundreds of yards with marvellous accuracy. The Mongols, as well as being fearsome warriors with a bloody reputation, were a pretty brainy lot, as it turned out, sort of warrior boffins, with their neat, high-tech little bow. They murdered millions with it. Obviously, that last bit strikes a bit of a sombre note, but it was very, very clever and really the origin of modern composites like carbon fibre. Unlike our more recent response to the invention of carbon fibre, the Mongols didn't then go on to buy sheets of plastic made to look a bit like their new composite material and then stick them all over their hot hatches because they believed their friends would then think their 1.2 litre Nova was a Formula 1 car.

So I wobbled about on horseback, waving a replica Mongol warrior bow around and explaining all of this stuff, while the crew hid in the trees and crapped them-

selves laughing at my ropey horsemanship. We needed to demonstrate just how significant a development this was in a historical context and, to set the scene, had invited a local archery club down to the airfield where we were filming. They would take part in a scene in which they would play humble, foot-bound archers. and I would crash majestically from the woods as a fearless Mongol warrior, master of horse, bow and terror. It was going to be a bit tricky playing my part authentically, though, as Health and Safety had insisted on me wearing a riding hat. This was never part of a Mongol warrior's battle dress and did rather stand out. Particularly when the archery club members had really gone for it and turned up in clothing that more closely resembled their ancestors' - a sea of imitation leather jerkins and archer's wrist guards. I wore jeans, a green jacket from Cheltenham and a blue riding hat with a plastic bit down the middle. On a given signal, I was to ride the horse out of the woods as the archers milled about in front of the target attempting to impersonate an angry mob armed with longbows. They made slightly embarrassed, middle-class noises while I tried to persuade the black Friesian stunt horse I had been loaned to transport me out of the trees in a heroic fashion. The riding hat was a couple of sizes too big and wobbled about on my head as the horse, out of spite, took me under the lowest branches at the fringes of the wood. The archers were now doing what they had been briefed to do earlier in the day by a tired and harassed director, loading up their bows (or notching their arrows, as is, I believe, the correct term) and letting loose a fearsome

flurry at the straw target perched on a wooden stand at the edge of the clearing. Obviously, Mongol warriors didn't spend much of their time interrupting provincial archery club competitions in southern England, but to ship me, the crew and a horse out to the Mongolian steppe just to film a two-minute segment of a programme about an aeroplane would have stretched the budget rather. So I steeled my nerves and tried to look fierce and heroic. The horse wandered out of the woods and stood at the edge of the clearing chewing at a leaf it had grabbed from an overhead branch. I wrestled with the chinstrap of my oversized riding hat and shifted in the saddle awkwardly. The script now called for me to crash out of the woods on the black charger, prance fearsomely in front of the archers on the ground and loose a lethal volley of arrows into the target before spinning and galloping away, presumably to enjoy whatever massive drink-fuelled, sex-charged party your average Mongol warrior tucked into after a bit of raiding and conquering. This would conclusively demonstrate the deadly superiority that the Mongol war bow, with its forward-thinking composite construction, gave the horse-mounted archer over the traditional archer on foot. Obviously it was quite important that the archery club stop their firing at this point, lest the horse and I wander into their lethal hailstorm and be reduced to pincushions. The owner of the horse would be quite angry about this. The horse was, it had been pointed out to me in no uncertain terms, a very expensive horse. He had previously been ridden by Johnny Depp. Or Orlando Bloom. Or Michael Caine.

Someone very famous had ridden him in a film, anyway. And I was made to feel that it was indeed an honour for my low-rent, humble television butt to be allowed to rest on the back of a creature that had supported the stellar cheeks of some Hollywood luminary.

Right now, though, as I watched the archery club's 'lethal' volley flop from their bows and land on the ground a yard or two in front of them, I wondered if it might just save time if I rode out in front of them anyway and took my chances. Their arrows, launched with the ferocity and pinpoint accuracy of a bin-bound chip wrapper, looked as if they would have had trouble piercing a hole in a crepe paper modesty screen. As the horse and I pawed and snorted at the edge of the wood awaiting our cue, I noticed a middle-aged woman halfway along the line notch an arrow carefully, her tongue sticking out with the effort of steadying her hands as she put the string into the notch behind the feathered flights. She raised the bow and drew back the arrow. Her arms shook, the string moved back three or four inches, most of the shaft of the arrow still protruding from the front of the bow at an unpromising angle. She closed her eyes, turned her head to one side as though expecting a shotgun's retort and released the bowstring. The arrow flopped sideways out of the bow and fell on her feet.

This was not quite the hailstorm of steel-tipped death I had envisaged. I had told Mindy what I was doing that day and she had begged me to be careful. Highly strung black stallions can be very difficult, she had warned me,

and doing stunt work on horseback is dangerous – I may have dressed it up a bit as we sat with a bottle of wine the night before I left. This scene, as it was playing out now, was not going to impress her. I kicked the horse on, and moved out across the clearing. The target lay off to my left; the archers were gathered by some low bushes to my right. They saw me moving out of the woods and lowered their bows and ceased fire. A couple of arrows lay on the ground at the foot of the target. One had actually penetrated the straw of the target itself and stuck out of it now, a lone salute to one archer's competency. The horse would, I had been told by the patient but not, I could tell, impressed handler, respond very well to input from my legs. I dropped the reins and lifting the bow in my left hand, notched an arrow into the thick string with my right. I used my legs to put the horse into a gentle right turn and as we trotted away from the target I twisted in the saddle, bringing the tip of the arrow into line with the target, tensioned the string and then released it. The arrow leapt from the bow and, with a sinister and satisfying whistle, hurtled towards the target, burying its metal beak in the round straw face. The archers, in front of me now as I legged the horse through the rest of our long, curving turn, were silenced. No comments or even abuse floated up from the crew either, their tripod and sound boom standing black and angular at the edge of the field. The plan called for me to loose a whole quiverful of arrows at the target. The camera would pick up shots as I repeated each manoeuvre and the best bits would, in the time-honoured fashion, be

strung together in the final sequence. I turned the horse further to the right, bringing us out of the curve and now parallel with the target. There are four positions used to fire from horseback: you can fire off to the right of the horse's head, off to the left, a broadside directly perpendicular to the length of the horse and then, finally, turn in the saddle and fire backwards as you ride away. This was the 'parting shot'. I ran through the lot of them, blazing away with the bow from each of the accepted positions. It was an absolute bloody doddle and unbelievably good fun. There is, sadly, no national governing body for the sport of mounted archery – it isn't a national sport. Which is a monumental shame. Apart from the near certainty that someone, either participant or spectator, will end up with an arrow sticking out of his or her face, it is something all of us should be doing every weekend. I can think of nothing finer to do of a crisp Sunday morning than riding out to your local park, pinning a target to a tree, sneaking up on it on horseback and blazing away with a Mongol war bow. You could team up with a mate and devise a point-scoring system for accuracy, grouping and speed of delivery. Picnickers and the like might moan a bit, but what exactly is the point of such public spaces if they are not for members of the public to use for the pursuit of their chosen activities, whatever they may be, without being harassed and persecuted just for blinding or maiming a few idle pork pie noshers and surprising the odd squirrel?

And now, just a few weeks after inventing a new national sport – that, admittedly, has yet to catch on in a

big way, but give it time – I was planning a trip to film another *Engineering Connections* programme. This one would feature the Keck Observatory, home to the most powerful telescope in the world, and capable of taking us further into the depths of space than ever before. We would film the links and associated stories later, and they would include setting fire to boats with an ancient Greek mirror and carving my name across the width of a single hair using an atom-blasting microscope, but, first, we had to visit the telescope itself and film the piece of astonishing technology at the centre of the story. All very exciting stuff that was made, it must be said, only more exciting by the fact that the telescope was based, not on some dismal mountain range in Wales or the Arctic Circle, but on the island of Hawaii. In the course of a bit of background reading I discovered that the 'scope had not been sited there to facilitate a spot of fun in the sun for the astronomers. The island had been chosen because on it is an extinct volcano, Mauna Kea, which stands nearly 14,000 feet high and this altitude is one of the many factors that come together to make Mauna Kea such a prized site for boffins with big telescopes. I quickly found that the benefit of setting up your telescope at high altitude doesn't come about because you're a bit closer to your subject, the stars. You *are* closer, of course, but proportionally it makes as much difference as standing on a chair to wave at the moon. I was glad to have cleared that one up before I set off to interview the brain boxes operating the telescope. I absolutely would have asked how much it helped being a bit closer to the stars. And they

would have thought me an idiot. And been right. The altitude helps because the air is thinner up there, giving the telescope a better chance of peering out through the atmosphere and into space. This factor, together with the absence of light pollution – given the island's solitary position, far from big cities – and the stable winds coming in off the Pacific make it one of the world's absolute best locations for setting up observatories. It bristles with them in fact, with universities and companies from all over the world competing to set up telescopes using all manner of modern technologies to see further and further out into the universe. My hopes of a couple of weeks in the sun, looking at hula girls and drinking coconut milk were somewhat dashed when I saw photographs of the ice-clad summit of Mauna Kea where the observatories huddle together; so many hunched domes sheltering in the thin, freezing air. This was to be my home for a fortnight. Could be worse. Could have turned out that the perfect conditions all came together to make Burnley the best place to build a telescope. And as for the freezing weather up there, well, I'm not a fan of Bermuda shorts anyway and I still had all the kit I'd bought for our *Top Gear* trip to the Pole, so I could, at least, turn up looking the part.

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There was a slight twinge, experienced by all of us in the team, as we landed in Hawaii and caught glimpses of the legendary beaches, sparkling blue seas and swaying palms

of this classic jewel in the ocean. We were not many in our team for our assault on Mauna Kea, but we had worked together before and were happy that, between us, we could more than do the job. But any ideas that we were about to spend a few days together posing with TV cameras on a palm-fringed beach were slowly withering.

The hotel was not going to be glamorous; I was prepared for that. I was glad of it, even. This was very much a proper, working trip. We were there to make a grown-up documentary about the most powerful telescope in the world. It was to be screened by the National Geographic Channel in America and across the world. Every fact in it would be thoroughly researched and checked against three different sources to be sure of its validity. This was certainly not a *Top Gear* shoot. At no point was I going to be challenged by the producers to drive across a lake in a dustbin lorry or join the Le Mans 24 Hour race in a canoe. And so it felt immediately appropriate when our hired minibus dropped us and our mountain of kit off in the car park of a low-lying concrete and wood building that looked like something members of a school field trip might stay in. I stepped from the bus and tried to show willing as Pete, the cameraman, marshalled the filming kit coming out of the back of the lorry into the all too familiar mound of shining aluminium cases, sinister black boxes and battered bags. Grant hefted me a tripod out of the back of the bus like he was hefting coal into a steam train's boiler. He looked up and smiled as I grabbed the heavy end of the bulky metal tripod.