

WHAT IF...! A more optimistic 21st century visionⁱ

Let's pretend the year is 2021 and I'm still working, not pushing up the daisies in Eynsham Churchyard. Being a feature writer, I operate from home nowadays. I only visit the office in Osney Mead when the editor of the Oxford *Telemail*, your indispensable small screen guide to what's happening in Oxfordshire and the world, calls me in.

Today I have received the summons. I press a few keys on my domestic computer and Fred, the green-eyed monster in the corner we named after a beloved cat, purrs softly as he offers me my travel options. I could go by boat. The water-bus leaves the Caribbean Cruiser Station down the road at 9.30am. There is a two-hourly service and — thanks to electronically operated locks — it runs to time. But I'm not sure I can stand hearing the pre-recorded commentary for tourists for the umpteenth time.

I could go by electro-bus. The service is frequent. I enjoy standing at the stop watching the vehicles moving closer to Eynsham on the digital display map that has replaced the timetables. It is fun seeing it forecast how long the bus will take to arrive and the number of seats available increasing and decreasing as people get off and on. You can pick up useful tips from your fellow travellers. The principal topic of conversation at this time of day on the journey into Oxford is the best buys available at the various ring road supermarkets. The shoppers monitor the fluctuations in prices on their home screens as carefully as any broker does the Stock Exchange.

I could go by rail-bus. That service is frequent too and it is a good deal faster than electro-bus. But though it runs on a monorail alongside the road, it won't drop you anywhere. As a result of a successful campaign by the University and the Oxford Preservation Trust the nearest you can get to the city centre are the spur-line termini at the Station, the war memorial in St. Giles, the Plain or Folly Bridge. In any case the editor wants me to take him in some tomato plants (the real reason I suspect for the conference!). So I had better risk the black looks of my environmentally conscious neighbours and take the car.

Fred tells me there are no traffic snarl-ups on the route to Osney Mead this morning, then courteously reminds me of the tolls involved: it will cost me two Eurocents to cross Swinford Toll Bridge and ten Eurodollars if I drive beyond the Botley Road Park and Ride. I check the battery of my car. There's enough power to get me to Osney and back. The automatic electronic service link-up with my local garage tells me all systems are go. I remember to change the RAC compact disc on my inboard car computer from the one we used three weeks ago to fetch my mother-in-law and dog from Wester Ross to the one labelled work.

The centre of Eynsham is now a traffic-free zone except for disabled drivers and essential delivery vans, ambulances, doctors, etc. — a fact represented in the escalating property prices! I turn left from Millstone Cottage, thread my way through the traffic-calming chicanes in Hanborough Road and join the Eynsham Bypass. Because of the screen of trees I can no longer see the A40 dual carriageway, but if I could, I wouldn't be surprised to spot a motorist whizz by with his feet up reading Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

These days when you reach a major trunk road, you slip your gear lever into automatic and the computer takes over. Cars travel bumper to bumper without risk of pile-ups even in fog. I wait for a family of cyclists from the new car-free town near Barnard Gate to pass. According to a recent report in the *Telemail* over 80 per cent of the residents there use bicycles as their main form of transport. Then I cross the cycle lane. Although the bypass is quite busy, there is no risk of me running into anything at junctions or roundabouts. An infra-red sensor automatically overrides my directions in the event of traffic hazards.

At the toll bridge another roadside sensor automatically deducts two Eurocents from my car bank account. Further roadside sensors prevent me exceeding the speed limit driving through Farmoor. At Dean Court the program on the compact disc in my inboard computer means I have to join the Cumnor Hill Bypass. I would anyway for the view of the dreaming spires, which this morning I share with a party of open top bus passengers. I glance down at the A34 as I cross the flyover. Somebody has broken down and is swapping cars. It's on occasions like that you appreciate the bonuses of leasehold motoring. Always a friendly neighbourhood garage to supply you with a replacement.

As I join the slipway to the Botley Road, the roadside digital display board informs me Gloucester Green car park is already full and Westgate has only 34 places — it corrects itself, 33 — which will be gone by the time I reach the centre of Oxford. Better to park and ride. 'If I was going to the city centre, mate,' I find myself muttering, 'I would have booked myself a parking space in advance!' 'Only 17 spaces left,' the display board replies.

As I pass the Park and Ride and enter Oxford's central traffic zone, automatically paying ten Eurodollars for the privilege, the telephone rings. It is the editor. He's halfway to London by hover-train, flashing through Reading at 300mph. Would I leave the tomato plants in the boot of his car. He gives me the combination number. What he wanted to talk to me about was a feature on Oxfordshire traffic in the popular Bad Old Days series.

'There must be plenty of suitable video clips in the County Archives at Woodstock and with your long memory... Hop over there and find me about 30 minutes-worth, would you?' 'Yes, and it might be fun to have a clip of a Keystone Kops car chase,' I say. 'Who are they?' he says. So much for 21st century whizz kids!

Don Chapman – Oxford Mail, 18 June 1990

ⁱ Based on a briefing from Peter Jones, Deputy Director of the Oxford University Transport Studies Unit.