

The Gooding guide to transport

Steve Gooding insists the RAC Foundation isn't just about car travel, but mobility in general



INTERVIEW BY [PAUL HUTTON](#)

Steve Gooding spent 32 years in the variously-named transport department of the UK, more than ten of them as Director General. He's now Director of the RAC Foundation think-tank, a registered charity. Paul Hutton met up with him to discuss Government, technology... and motorbikes

Q You read politics at Durham which I guess is a good grounding for a job in the Civil Service, but how did a lifetime in transport come about? **By accident or design?**

I joined the civil service at a time when you were invited to state a departmental preference on your application form. Then, as far as I can tell, where you got sent was completely random.

I ended up in the old Department of the Environment empire, which was still in the process of detaching itself from the Department of Transport. I was offered a job as private secretary to the DoT Roads Minister on the basis that if I accepted I'd

probably end up on the transport side of the fence, so I said "yes". I've never regretted that decision, though I'd confess that if I never have to deal with railway finances again it'll be too soon. I never had a train set as a boy, I preferred slot-racing cars.

Q You worked under Conservative Labour and then coalition administrations. When governments and ministers change, is that a great challenge or do you just keep calm and carry on? **Keep calm, definitely.** But the key thing when governments change at elections, or when ministers change in reshuffles, is to remember that while the new minister

might be in the same party as their predecessor they still might have very different views, priorities and working style. Top civil servants become very good at fitting round and winning the trust of their ministers. They can perform 1800 policy turns without batting an eyelid, which politicians sometimes struggle to understand because, like football fans, they tend to be lifetime followers of the same club, whereas it's the job of civil servants to support the winning team, whoever that might be.

I remember the arrival of the new ministerial team when Labour won its landslide in 1997. We were called in to make our welcoming presentations over



Steve in 2003 at the DoT's Office of Rail & Road

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the weekend; I think they were impressed that we'd been studying their manifesto and their speeches so we already had a pretty good idea not only of what they wanted to do but also how they wanted to do it.

Austerity came in like an icy winter wind in 2010 (and then we had an icy winter to contend with too). In a low number of days the new transport ministers had set-to on slashing the roads programme, making very clear that practically everything not already in construction was going to be unaffordable.

By 2013 all those cancelled schemes had been re-instated as the Chancellor, George Osborne, became increasingly persuaded of the case for investing in infrastructure. By 2015 the programme had trebled in value!

Q What was the best project you worked on in the Department?

I think banking the first Road Investment Strategy, with the establishment of Highways England and a locked-in 5 year budget takes some beating – all credit to the folk who had a far more direct involvement in it than me, particularly Alan Cook, whose role as the original architect, as the first chairman of the Highways Agency, is often overlooked and, of course, John Dowie who did so much to lead and shape the project. I remember one of my bosses explaining that civil servants don't

get statues, we leave that to the politicians, but somewhere in the foyer of Highways England's offices there should be a brass plaque commemorating John's work.

Q And what was the most challenging?

Not a project as such, but in 2009 I became, amongst other things, the Transport

Department's Chief Information Officer, in an era of high anxiety about data losses but also much excitement about cloud-hosting and digital delivery.

Of course we should be worried about data security – none of us wants our bank details or medical records falling into the wrong hands. I wonder how many people really understand how 'visible' they become when transacting on-line. Thankfully I had the good fortune to be able to point to the DVLA's excellent car-tax on-line service, which was then and I think still is the most popular of the government's on-line offerings, which is pretty remarkable given that it's about paying tax!

On the other hand, to this day I'm convinced that we've wrapped the whole digital agenda in a fog of awe and mystery that just gets in the way. I accept that the technology is a bit beyond many of us – that said how many of us could actually build a transistor radio or explain how a microwave oven works? (OK, so the readers of this journal probably could, but I think the point stands).

But the principle itself strikes me as fairly simple: digital enables us to reduce the world to numbers and to manipulate those numbers in vast volume at incredible speeds. Add in a few sensors and hey presto your car not only knows when to turn on its windscreen wipers but can also set them to the right speed.

I was told that the proper job of the CIO community should be to "create government as a platform". I never did work out what that meant, and I don't think I was alone.



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Q How much did the use of technology change in your time there?

I arrived in a time of typewriters and carbon paper. You sent manuscript minutes to the typing pool, which was handy because the typists were very good at correcting your spelling. The only photocopier on the floor was for the director, and only he could authorise its use. If younger readers are curious to see what this was like I recommend a day trip to the museum at Bletchley Park.

Sometimes technological development moves very fast – look at the rapid development of the touch-screen smart phone. The modern motor vehicle is massively safer and cleaner than its 1980s equivalent. But by turn I remember back in 1988 the minister I was working for asking the motorcycle industry when he could hope to see ABS routinely fitted to learner-legal bikes. I think he might have banged the table a bit harder if he'd known that it would still be a work-in-progress decades later.

Q When you spoke in Glasgow at the ITS Congress you talked about autonomous vehicles and came over as a bit of a sceptic... has the last year changed your view at all and where do you sit on the whole Connected and Autonomous Car debate?

My view then and my view now is that we have yet to see the business model for the mass deployment of autonomous technology, so we don't really know what the travelling public is going to be offered by way of cars to own that have autonomous capability and driverless minicabs that come when we call them.

One thing I am sceptical about is level 3 on the NHTSA scale (where the car can hand back control to the driver at its own discretion) – I'm convinced this is utter folly.

As of today I'd add two things. I think the industry is racing ahead of the regulators who have yet to establish what all this means for the vehicle construction and use regime. And I think we may be about to slide from cyber-anxiety into cyber-panic when the next major hack of an important public system happens, such as the recent case with the NHS.

So when I see visions of a future world

Steve often questions how people using a shared vehicle might react to using it straight after someone's large dog has been transported after a muddy walk



being presented where our lives have all been made immeasurably better by being able to summon a vehicle at will to waft us smoothly through uncongested streets to our destination in slippered luxury I can't help but muse on the parts of the picture I can't see: who owns this vehicle? Who refuels it? Who cleans it? How much will it cost to use it? If it's expensive, what's so great about it? If it's not expensive then might we be headed for more congestion, not less?

Does that make me a sceptic? I don't think so, because I'm not saying these questions are unanswerable, I'm just saying we haven't answered them yet.

I am a martyr to travel sickness. I can barely make it across the Woolwich Ferry without a packet of Kwells. Same goes for the tilting train on the West Coast Main Line. And for being a car passenger. So if I'm going to benefit from the driverless revolution, getting on with work or reading a book rather than driving myself, it's going to be because there's an accompanying step-change in the quality of car suspension systems. Did I promise not to mention my disappointment that the hover car I'm sure I saw on Tomorrow's World as a boy is still only available in CGI form?

Q So if we still have the driverless debate in the future, let's look at the past... what is the best contribution Intelligent Transport Systems has made to transport in the UK?

The concept of UTMC. To move from the idea that traffic at a single junction could be controlled to a system that tracks live traffic flow across a city and adjusts multiple junction timings to smooth flow and

maximise capacity was quite something. The key is to remember that UTMC shouldn't be regarded as a fixed product but as a way of linking and automating systems to achieve a better overall traffic outcome.

Q What made you depart the DfT and move to the RAC Foundation?

I fancied a change of scene. If I'd stayed in the civil service I'd probably have been despatched to work on BREXIT or NHS waiting lists or reforming the court system, and while they're all fascinating and worthwhile things I decided to stick with the long-term interest I had developed in transport.

Q Explain how the RAC Foundation fits into the overall Royal Automobile Club and the bit we'd most know, the guys who show up when your car breaks down...

The RAC Foundation is a charitably funded think-tank. We're a small team and we commission and disseminate research about motoring and roads. Although the work of the Foundation was once part and parcel of the Royal Automobile Club, that stopped in 1998 when the Club 'liberated' the Foundation, the breakdown boys with the orange vans and the Motor Sports Association. But unlike the other two, we got to stay on the premises in Pall Mall, where we still rent a room. In addition to producing reports, factsheets and indexes we also seek to disseminate others' research – for example working with the University Transport Studies Group – and to participate in and convene events to debate live issues.

So we have the same ability as other Club members to hire the meeting rooms, which are very grand, but don't expect us to mend your car or organise your hill-climb.

As Director I've inherited an astonishingly comprehensive back-catalogue of work. The first Foundation report – back in 1992 – took a dispassionate, analytical look at the societal benefits and societal costs of motoring, and identified, accurately, a slew of work that was going to be needed on issues such as fuel efficiency, CO2, NOx, safety and land-use planning. Since when there have been further landmark reports – I'd always point to Motoring towards 2050 as the report that made the Foundation's reputation in government – and more tightly targets pieces, focusing on issues such as the safety of young drivers, the effectiveness of speed cameras and our increasing dependence on imported fuel.

This year we've put the Foundation's spotlight on the growth in van traffic (you

might have thought it was all about internet shopping being delivered, but it turns out not to be the case), the drivers of the cost of motor insurance, the design of road safety 'interventions', such as the events held to educate pre-driving age children on the dangers of the road, and, shortly, on how best the powers in the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill might be used to grow the market for electric cars.

We'll repeat our annual survey of highway bridge condition, as part of our work to highlight the risks we're running from inadequate road maintenance funding. And we'll be celebrating with Gary Raccuja, who's just scooped the Wolfson Economics Prize, with our help, proposing a new approach to motoring taxation and paying for roads. All on our website, all free. Take a look.

Q Of course your vehicle of choice - when you can - isn't a car but a rather fun-looking motorbike...

As I write this my Harley Sportster is looking (and sounding) very sad. It's turned out to be a Friday-afternoon-special, as they used to call them in British Leyland, and it's rusting away in front of my eyes. I've been into bikes since my teens. I rode to the last ITS event I took part in, in Oxford a

“ Who owns this vehicle? Who refuels it? Who cleans it? How much will it cost to use it? If it's expensive, what's so great about it? If it's not expensive then might we be headed for more congestion, not less? ”

few weeks ago, but I probably rack up more miles by car over the year - the bike doesn't even have room for a tool-roll, let alone a week's worth of grocery shopping. When the premium bond finally comes up trumps I'll be off to the Triumph showroom, now they've sorted their production quality it's definitely time to fly the flag.

Q I once flew to Chicago and chatted to a couple who were about to pick up matching Harleys and ride Route 66 to LA - is that something you fancy?

Mrs G tolerates my biking, but is very much a member of the four-wheel fan club. She'd prefer us to hire a 4x4 and go off road. We went on the Land Rover experience a while ago, which was great fun. It's amazing to experience just what those cars are capable of doing. Anyway, it's a good job that I like to ride alone.

For a big holiday in

company, in LA? I think I'd go for a drophead coupé - what was it Hunter S Thompson drove in *Fear and Loathing*? Or a classic Corvette Stingray. Mind you, the new Mustang looks the business too. And I'm told the Pacific Coast road is the best bet for scenery. Definitely worth researching.

Been there, done that, and yes, you're right it's stunning. Give yourself much more than the day I had to do it, though! ■

Below: Steve's motorbiking through the ages - getting a feel for the saddle in 1961; on a red Suzuki in 1978; and still on the throttle today...

