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# Sensing the past along Britain's A roads

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the particular characteristics of British A-roads by focusing upon a motoring journey from Slough to Torquay. This trip was undertaken as part of an extended motoring adventure by two Indian tourists in 1955, and exactly the same route was followed in 2023 by the authors. Informed by the interviews and records of the tourists, we scrutinized the infrastructure of the A-roads along which we travelled, as well as the roadside features and the wider landscape beyond. In becoming sensorially and affectively attuned to the distinctive qualities of these roads by the memories of the tourists and our own impressions, we underline how motoring opens up diverse experiences of mobility and roadscape according to the motivations and purpose of journeys, the particular landscape traversed through, the attunements of the car's inhabitants, and the infrastructural and formal characteristics of the road. Further, we emphasize how the details we identify disclose how roads and motoring are saturated with recollections of other people, our own prior journeys by car and mediatized memories. Above all, we argue, the material signifiers of past function and experience that are encountered offer powerful evidence that roads are ever-changing, dynamic realms, culturally and historically shaped in myriad ways.

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Motoring; landscapes; sensations and memories; Englishness; Empire

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we focus on the historical, sensory and affective affordances encountered while motoring along Britain's A-roads on a journey from Slough to Torquay, a route followed by two Indian tourists in May 1955 and again, by the authors 68 years later. In following Peter Merriman's (2006) injunction to develop sensibilities around how landscapes are experienced while mobile, we explore motoring along these roads these different times. We illuminate how motoring can both conjure up as sense of the past and register how car travel and the roadside change.

Roads are often portrayed as utilitarian structures that connect one point to another. However, as Tim Cresswell (2010, 19) emphasises, they are enfolded within "historically and geographically specific formations of movements, narratives about mobility and mobile

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practices” that shape how motoring is experienced. Roads are freighted with emotional, affective, sensory and symbolic associations, and enmeshed within international, national and regional spaces and cultures (Mauch and Zeller 2008). Critically, as Lynne Pearce (2023a) discusses, roadscape are dynamic realms that can suddenly be reconfigured. Familiar landmarks disappear while new structures, relics and surfaces emerge. Successive infrastructures, urban expansion, agricultural transformations, botanical growth, conservation and heritage policies, economic developments and shifting class compositions have significantly transformed parts of the British roadscape. Yet, certain roadside features endure for years, even centuries. Many roads are haunted by obsolete infrastructural elements and historical markers that generate intimations of earlier travels. In this sense, they can be considered as chronotopical objects “in which temporality takes on palpable form” (Ingold 1993, 169). Far from static, roads invariably alter in form and material constituency, along with the meanings, feelings and practices that circulate around them. Like cities, roads are subject to continuous re-composition through the “accumulation of overlapping traces from successive periods, each trace modifying and being modified by the new additions, to produce something like a collage of time” (Lynch 1972). In this paper, we explore how these changes and continuities shape the sensory and affective experience of motoring during different historical periods. We contend that the motoring delights solicited need to be thoroughly acknowledged in current debates that foreground the environmental and social damage perpetrated by automobility: these pleasurable associations constitute formidable cultural obstacles to progressing towards a car-free future.

The first journey from Slough to Torquay that we explore took place in 1955. In this year, two Indian tourists in their mid-20s, Tara and Shanti, the parents of one of the paper’s authors, boarded a steamer from Mumbai to Southampton and travelled to London where they purchased a second-hand Morris Minor car. They drove through northern Europe for two months, subsequently visiting Egypt, Aden (now Yemen), Congo and Uganda, before boarding a ship back to India from Mombasa, Kenya (see Edensor and Kothari 2018). But before these travels, they undertook extensive motoring journeys around the UK. For the end of the Second World War in 1945 and Indian Independence in 1947 had produced an epochal postcolonial moment in which exciting possibilities for travel arose, particularly amongst middle-class Indians. These former colonial subjects could now fulfil long-standing desires to visit Britain. The two tourists sought to experience at first hand the strangely familiar landscapes, literature and histories that had sparked their imagination during their education in India under British colonial rule, conjuring up magical places that seemed infused with romance. By providing an account of postcolonial tourists, the paper offers a counter to the numerous travel accounts, including motoring stories, of Western colonial travellers in colonised settings, disclosing a different range of “cultures, discourses, practices and subjectivities” (Lambert and Merriman 2020, 3). We focus on the first journey noted in their logbook: “Slough to Torquay” (see Figure 1(a,b)), following the same route they detailed.

The logbook recorded Shanti and Tara’s travels, chronicling dates, precise times of places “left” and “reached”, the number of miles covered and the quantity of petrol remaining in the tank. Their financial accounts, listed on the back pages, provide details of the cost of food, petrol, accommodation, public baths and tickets for attractions and events. In addition to these written records, over many years they have periodically recounted anecdotes of their extraordinary journey, with particular memories often invoked by an incident, person, song, film or object. More recently, we interviewed

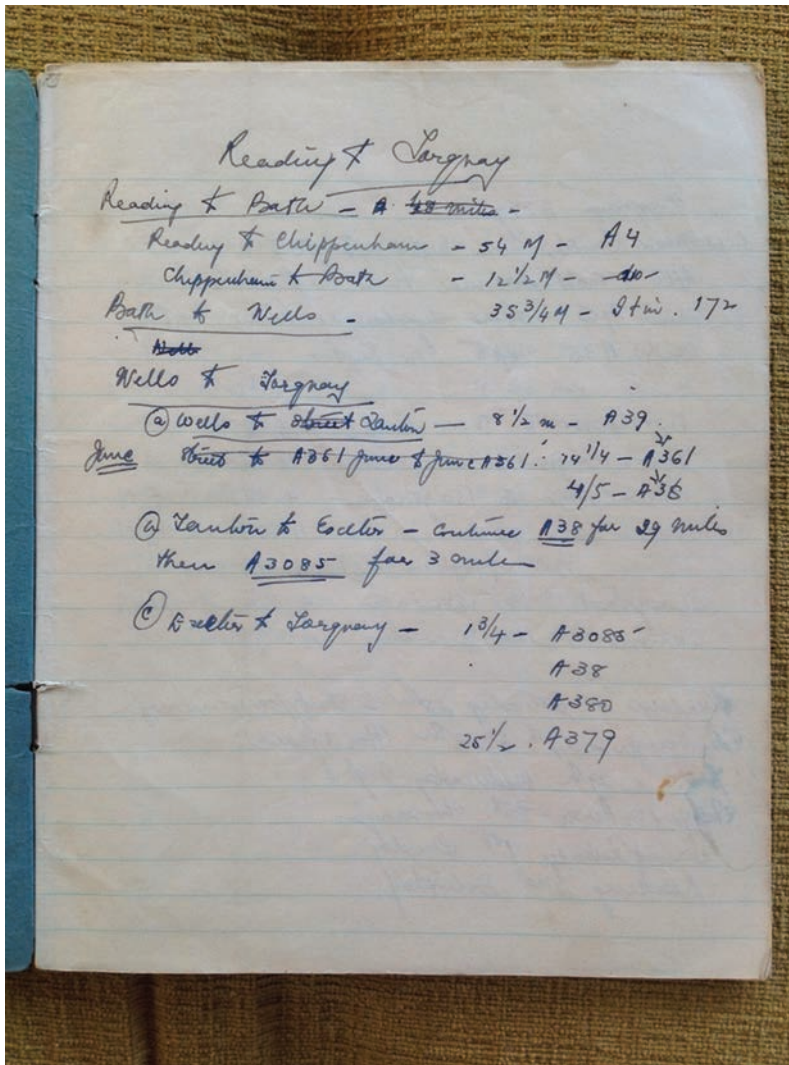


Figure 1a. Directions from Reading to Torquay (source: Tara and Shanti Kothari).

them more formally about their tour, videoing, taping and transcribing their stories. The resulting material included reminiscences about the Slough to Torquay journey, several of which we recount below, and these extracts stimulated us to reflect upon how a motoring trip along these roads in 1955 might have been experienced as we drove along the same route. While we must surmise about aspects of their experiences, our considerations are not purely speculative since we possess deep knowledge of their characters and interests.

Besides their recollections, we adopted a mobile methodology, following in Tara and Shanti's "footsteps" to recreate their routes and gain a sense of their experiences. Moreover, this enabled us to identify the distinctive practices of our own journey focused on compiling data generated through reflective thought and sensory impressions (Pearce 2023a). Accordingly, we acknowledge the force of the non-human and

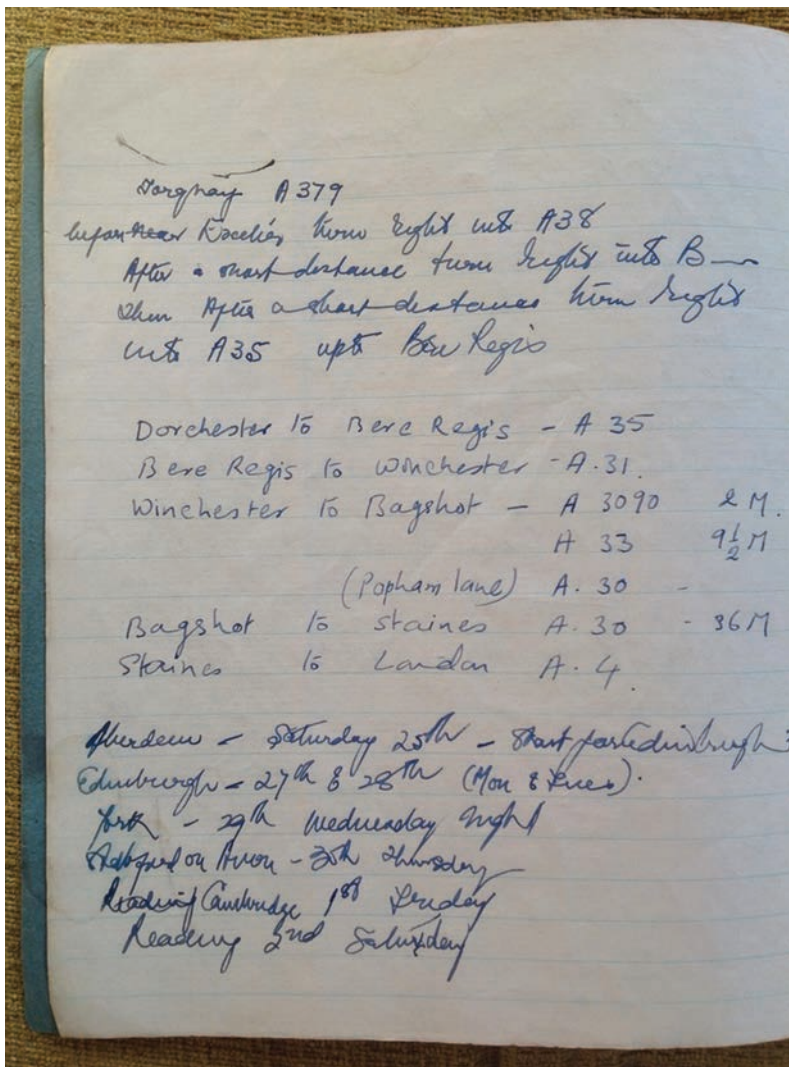


Figure 1b. Directions Torquay to London (source: Tara and Shanti Kothari).

human agencies that snared our attention (Hannah 2013), as we registered an array of historical resonances, recent developments, sceneries, roadside idiosyncrasies and serial features that provoked sensory, emotional and affective responses. Registering these experiential elements of the journey, we sought to highlight the specific characteristics of the roadscape, the environmental, architectural, infrastructural, historical and cultural qualities and consistencies we experienced, regularities that extend across the British road network and underline how motoring has been advocated as a cultural practice through which the nation might be more substantively “known” (Edensor 2004; Pearce 2023b). As part of this acquisition of knowledge and impressions, a sense of place emerged through glimpses of landmarks, oddities, surprises and regularities espied in passing rather than through close, lingering scrutiny. Our motoring experience was not akin to Lynne Pearce’s (forthcoming repeated journeys



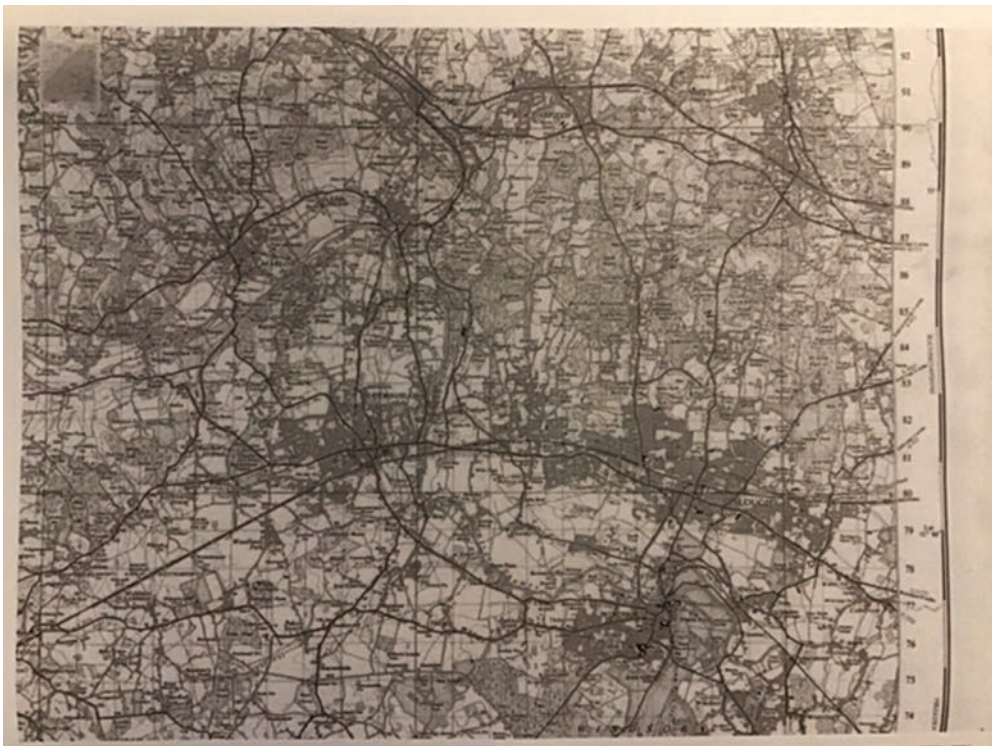
through which she becomes extremely familiar with passing features. Instead, it was shaped by original encounters and remembered spatial consistencies accumulated through other excursions.

Just as Shanti and Tara prepared for their trip with maps and guidebooks, we too carried out some groundwork prior to our journey. We marked the route they had taken with a highlighter pen on a large road atlas (see [Figure 2\(a,b\)](#)).

Throughout our journey, we noted the mileage recorded in the logbook at each key junction and found it to be almost exactly the same today as in the 1950s. Yet though the length of the route had not changed, the journey time had. Our excursion took 10 hours, but we imagine that it was longer in 1955 in a Morris Minor with its manufacturer's recommended top speed of 62 mph. And Shanti's cautious driving meant that "I never went fast, we took things slowly. Sometimes cars behind hooted at us but I didn't mind, we wanted to experience it all" (pers. comm., September 9, 2014). We too became aware of how the slower pace of motoring on A roads afforded the acquisition of different sensory and affective impressions.

## 2. Road travel: driving and travel infrastructure in 1955

As a means to experience Britain, Shanti and Tara enthusiastically embraced automobilism, a 20<sup>th</sup> century culture of individual mobility based on private



**Figure 2a.** Reading to Henley on Thames OS map 1955 (source: National Library of Scotland).

transportation that relies on extensive infrastructure and service provision. Early proponents of motoring offered narratives of adventure and mobility as integral to a “good life”, while early automobile clubs championed a car-based culture based upon middle-class leisure and consumption. Although initially confined to the wealthy, motoring later thrived on more extensive ideals of mobility and freedom irrespective of age and class (Wagner 2013), moving beyond a sensory quest for speed towards the “slow, meandering motor tour” (Urry 2006) that might veer “off the beaten track”. In his periodisation of British motor travel, Urry distinguishes between practices of “inhabiting the road” to the more insulated experience of “inhabiting the car”. In their Morris Minor, Tara and Shanti experienced a transitional period between these two modalities. In the interwar years, motoring became woven into an expanded national quest to encounter a historically and geographically varied England of the regions, instigating practices of “stopping, starting and searching at will” (Pearce 2016, 65). This endeavour was facilitated by guidebooks and travelogues that focused upon particular arcadian landscapes – what Matless (2016) refers to as “motoring pastoral” – building styles, natural history, agricultural and industrial economies, and iconic historical sites such as abbeys, castles and country estates (Coulbert 2011; Featherstone 2009). Throughout the 1950s, as “semioticians” (Urry 1990), motorists hunted for regionally specific and serial features in a quest to identify an Englishness that encompassed the iconic, the picturesque and the ordinary (Pearce 2016). Tourists from overseas could also embark on this quest for archetypal signs of Britishness. In this context, like other motorists, Shanti and Tara’s experience was ‘a mixing of the pastoral and the modern (Jeremiah 2007, 163) as they travelled to discover the esteemed rural landscapes, historical sites and literary figures they had learned about in their schoolbooks.

Indeed, as car ownership expanded in the 1950s and 60s, publications detailing tourist attractions catered for increasing numbers of motor excursions, while promotional strategies sought to attract more foreign tourists to the UK. The A roads along which Tara and Shanti travelled were incorporated into guidebooks and gazetteers compiled by local historians, antiquarians and travel writers. Such publications contributed to what Colbert (2012, 4) refers to as a “textualized landscape” in which imaginaries of the road were generated (Jeremiah 2007). For instance, the Shell Guides reconfigured the rural landscape into an aestheticized space of leisure, history, “nature” and tradition for the motorist (Shirley 2015). Contemporary guidebooks continue to foreground specific attractions for motorists, with selective routes more intensively colonised by heritage sites, commercial outlets, leisure activities, cafes and bars.

To help organise their journey, Tara and Shanti purchased the popular, rather hyperbolic, guidebook published by the British Travel and Holiday Association, *Britain, A Book Which Attempts To Do More Than Its Size Permits* (British Travel and Holiday Association 1952). Immediately, the book whetted their appetite by claiming the UK to be “a country which by reason of its structure, position and history has, perhaps, more beauty, interest and variety to offer the visitor than any other country in the world” (1952, 7). This proclamation chimes with James Buzard’s contention that the UK is frequently represented as “the veritable home of the touristic sublime”, is “a land so teeming with sights valuable to tourists that it beggars representation”



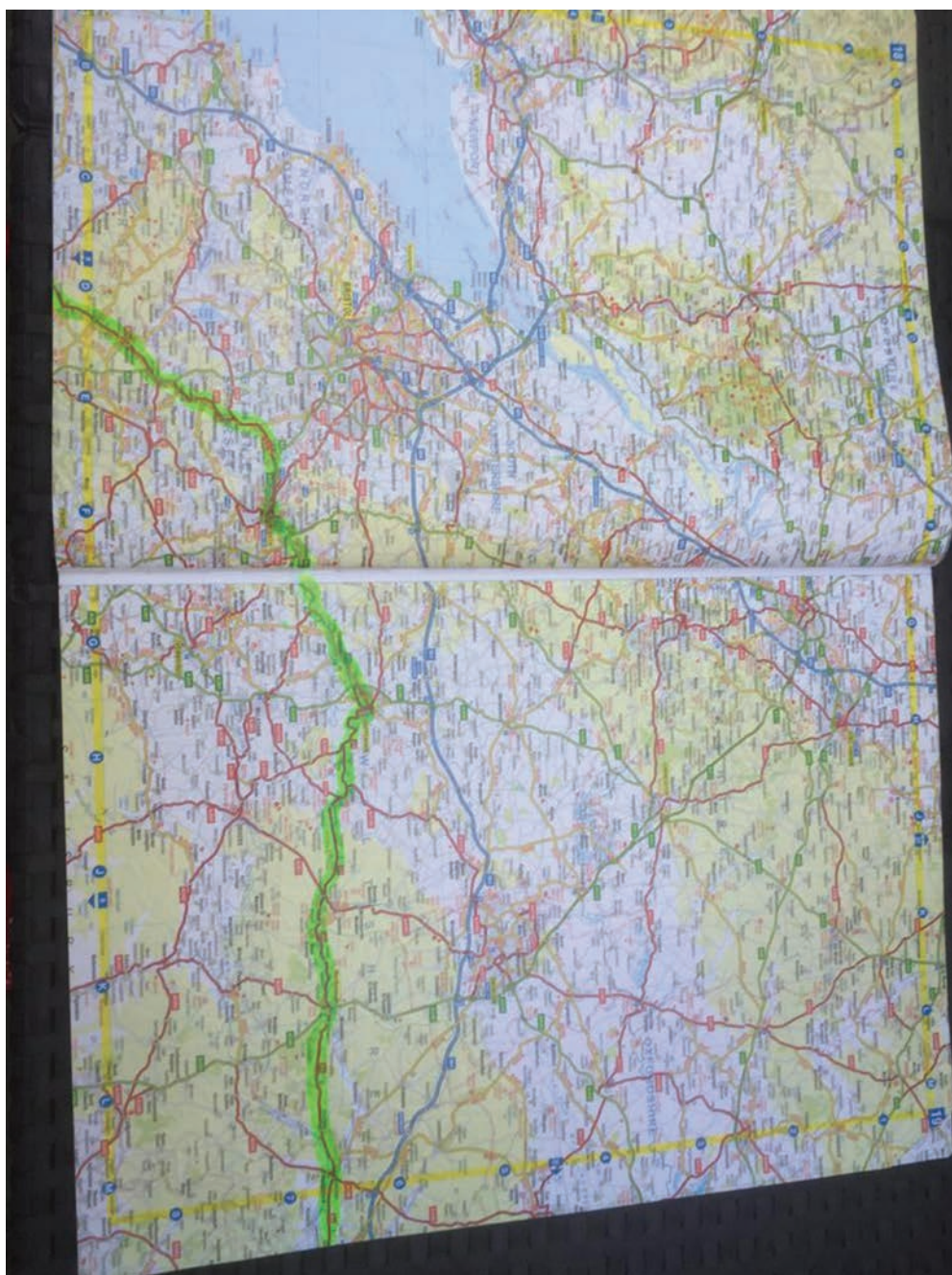
and is construed as being “so packed with significance that a step in any direction sets off historical and affective resonance” (2001 312).

In order to maximise their enjoyment and security during their motoring excursions, Shanti and Tara made other practical preparations. On their logbook’s front page, under the heading “London important addresses”, were listed three public associations: the Automobile Association (AA), the aforementioned British Travel and Holidays Association (BTHA) and the International Friendship League (IFL). The first two organizations provided critical information, including maps and details about accommodation, routes, petrol stations and garages. The IFL had been established in 1931 as a way of “replacing old enmities with friendship and peace between nations”. It expanded after the Second World War and was important for the Indian travellers who sought friendship and support from like-minded people as they travelled.

More prosaically, Shanti’s driving licence, obtained in India under British colonial rule, was legally valid for UK motoring. The *Highway Code*, launched in 1931 and updated in 1954, was carefully studied by the ever cautious Shanti, for motoring could be dangerous, with over 7,000 annual fatalities caused by road accidents stoking anxieties amplified in media reports (Jeremiah 2007). Numbers of road travellers had grown, boosted by the end of petrol rationing in 1950 and by 1952, 30% of long-distance travel in Britain was vehicular (D’Urso and Schraer 2017). In 1955, there were 3.3 million passenger cars on the roads, equating to one car per 16 people. In 2023, this has increased to 33 million.

Despite the growth in car ownership and the rise in motoring holidays, 1950s British road infrastructure was “poor”, according to Church (1994). The first section of “motorway”, the Preston Bypass, did not open until 1958, and Britain’s first full-length motorway, the M1, opened one year later. Likewise, safety precautions were minimal, with speed limits and drink-driving restrictions only introduced in 1967, and wearing seat belts not obligatory until 1983. Cars were not fitted with airbags, ABS, traction control, cupholders, alloy wheels and other later technical innovations. In contrast, our journey took place in a context of fewer accidents, safer vehicles, established forms of national road infrastructure and more tightly regulated roads.

The journey from Slough to Torquay initially follows the A4, historically known as the Bath Road and at the time of Shanti and Tara’s excursion, still the main route from Central London to Bath and Bristol. The route dates from pre-Roman times and historical roadside elements underpin its ancient vintage. At Wells, the journey proceeds southwest along the A39, A361, A38, A3085, A380 and finally, the A379. The trip passes through or close to Slough, Maidenhead, Charvil, Reading, Woolhampton, Thatcham, Newbury, Marlborough, Calne, Chippenham, Corsham, Bath, Wells, Glastonbury, Street, Taunton, Exeter, Dawlish and Teignmouth, before arriving at Torquay (see Figure 2(b) above). Given the relatively low numbers of cars on the road in 1955, Tara and Shanti would not have encountered extensive traffic except at occasional bottlenecks when driving through town centres (Jeremiah 2007). This chimed with our journey, where apart from some congested stretches of the road that entered central urban areas and had not yet been alleviated by bypasses, traffic was light. This is because the A4 has been superseded by the M4, 189 miles long and completed between 1961 and 1996 as the primary route



**Figure 2b.** Reading to Torquay road atlas 2023 (photo by authors).

between London and Bath, Bristol and South Wales. The motorway transformed the experience of the roads it supplanted. Their relegation from important national highways to regional and local byways resonate with Donald Davie's (1974) poem, *Buckinghamshire*, which focuses on the effects of the M1 on formerly busy A-roads

To west and east the motorways draw off  
 Poisons that clogged this artery. Abandoned  
 Transport cafes blink at the weedy asphalt;  
 An old white inn at a copse-side yawns and stretches

(Davie 1974)

The itinerary followed by Shanti and Tara remains, and we drove along almost exactly the same route on our contemporary motoring excursion. However, in preparing for our journey, we were unable to find a short section of the A38 listed in their logbook, even though all other written directions were so precise. Our bafflement was eased when we discovered that between Exeter and junction 27 of the M5, the original A38 had been “demoted” and “downgraded” to become the B3181 when the M5 motorway was opened in 1977 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A38\\_road](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A38_road)).

### 3. Being in the car

In the 1950s, Britain was the world’s second leading car exporter. In 1955, more than 95% of the cars on British roads were made in the UK by Nuffield/BMC, Ford, Rootes, Standard-Triumph and Vauxhall, with three of these fully British owned; today, this is less than 20%. Shanti and Tara purchased a Morris Minor Series II two door saloon, championed for its “long life and luxury for low-cost . . . motoring” (Jeremiah 2007, 180). Designed by Sir Alec Issigonis in 1948 and regarded as quintessentially British, it was Britain’s first mass-appeal car and the first automobile for many motorists, selling in far greater numbers than the Morris Eight, Morris Cowley, Morris Ten and Austin 7 models that it superseded. John Urry (2000, 26) vividly conjures the English “middle classes, comfortably and safely located in their Morris Minor” imagining that they were taking “a kind of voyage through the life and history of the land”. Martin Wainwright (2008, 2) writes of the split screen, indicators poking up “like perspex orange fingers”, notoriously rust-prone floors and pootling exhaust as “some of the much-loved characteristics of the Morris Minor”, a “solid but soft-looking” car.

For our journey in 2023, we travelled in our Mini Cooper 3-door hatch. While not comparable to the tight squeeze of a 1950s Morris Minor, the Mini gave us a sense of what it was like to make long journeys in a small vehicle, enclosed but not wholly insulated from the textures of the road and the elements. This cocooning by the small automobile (Mom 2015) reinforced the idea that the car trip is experienced by the entire bodily sensorium, is a “co-construction of emotion and motion” (Sheller 2004, 222). Yet we did not sense the loud rattling, weak suspension, and noisy, scraping windscreen wipers that Tara and Shanti had experienced (Pearce 2016). Although the weather in May 1955 averaged 23 degrees, similar to the temperature during our trip in May 2023, when the inside of the Mini became too steamy we could turn on the cooling system. By contrast, the Morris Minor’s small side windows needed to be wound down to enable air flow. The relationship between a car’s inhabitants and the landscape are shaped by the material form of the vehicle and the views it enables. The Mini’s front and rear windows afforded a rather expansive view while the Morris Minor’s split front window screen provided a more restricted perspective of the road ahead; together with the narrow rear windows, this would have exacerbated the confined feeling of the car’s

interior. As Tara recalled, “we loved that car. The front seats were so close together and the front window was divided so it was like we had our own little screen to look out of, our own separate view”. These sensations reflect how cultures of automobility are differently “implicated in a deep context of affective and embodied relations between people, machines and spaces of mobility and dwelling” (Sheller 2004, 221).

We now focus on our contemporary experiences of motoring from Slough to Torquay and intersperse our observations of the roadside and travel experience with those of Tara and Shanti, drawing on interview extracts. Discussion focuses on the general and specific qualities of A-road travel through two interlinked sections: the distinctive infrastructural forms of the road and the everyday environmental and scenic features apprehended during the journey.

#### **4. Road infrastructures: roundabouts, lay-bys, milestones and signage**

Peter Merriman identifies how 20<sup>th</sup> century road designers have endeavoured to align routes with the contours and features of diverse regional landscapes. However, motorway construction generated a tension between desires to devise bridges, signs and roadsides that enhanced landscapes and a more functional imperative to maximise mobile flow and efficiency “designed around the movements and embodied vision of the high-speed motorist” (2006, 84). Accordingly, many motorway designs have generated motoring experiences that are less intimately connected to the spaces through which they pass, in contrast to those encountered on earlier roads. Although not immune from redesign, A-roads typically retain many of their characteristic features from the 1950s and earlier. Moreover, like most roads, they are characterised by varied but distinctively national infrastructural features (see Morrison and Morris 2012). During our journey, several evident A-road discontinuities and consistencies generated by Tara and Shanti’s recollections and our own hazy memories of childhood journeys conjured up a sense of these earlier motoring experiences.

In considering these infrastructural adaptations, rather strikingly, upon entering Slough at the start of their journey, Tara and Shanti immediately encountered the Slough Experiment, a significant, two-year exploratory project launched in April 1955 by the UK Government’s Road Research Laboratory that had a significant impact on subsequent road design across Britain. The project investigated the potential for diverse safety innovations to reduce the growing number of road accidents, while also trialling the first linked traffic signals along the A4 to minimise prolonged stoppages. Single yellow lines were deployed at the side of the road to delineate no waiting zones and later widely adopted, and yield signs at junctions were introduced and subsequently adapted into the ubiquitous give way sign. Light-controlled pedestrian crossings with push buttons and 20 mph and 40 mph speed limits were trialled and also later rolled out across Britain’s roads. For this brief stretch, the two travellers encountered a roadscape of the future. Shanti contrasted these institutional endeavours to manage roads more effectively with the very different “free for all” that was emerging on India’s roads, regarding the experiment as signifying a progressive governmental approach to organisation.

An abundance of roundabouts have replaced the junctions and crossroads that Tara and Shanti would have encountered in 1955. The Road Research Laboratory standardised circular intersections in the 1960s to improve traffic flow, safety and mobility. We noted



that the central islands formed within roundabouts are often sponsored by local businesses. Some are neatly mown and embellished with flower beds, fountains and sculptures; others are colonised by trees and thick undergrowth.

Yet, besides these evident changes, many infrastructural features from earlier historical periods remain. Regularly spaced milestones adorn the roadside of the A4 and other roads along which we drove. Initially installed alongside roman roads, milestones became more prominent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as road traffic increased. Consolidating local initiatives, the government legislation culminated in the 1766 Turnpike Act that decreed that turnpike trusts should install milestones along roads. Often low in height and marked with small-scale lettering, milestones were ideally suited to those travelling on foot or on horseback, but the advent of the railways in the 19<sup>th</sup> century diminished the volume of industrial traffic on the roads and led to the dissolution of the turnpike trusts. Later, the speed at which motor vehicles travelled made it difficult for their occupants to discern the details inscribed on milestones and their utility waned. Moreover, many milestones were removed, buried or defaced in World War II to baffle potential German invaders and not all were replaced afterwards, with others demolished in road-widening schemes. Yet, on our journey, older milestones remain quite numerous; perhaps because they are far from the coast, there was less urgency to efface their utility to potential Nazi invaders. Between Reading and Hungerford on the A4, for instance, a distance of about 27 miles, 24 old milestones remain. Further along the journey a particularly prominent milestone situated near the summit of the enigmatically named “Labour-In-Vain Hill” marks the distance of 85 miles from London and 21 miles to Bath (see [Figure 3](#)). Now largely distinguished as heritage objects, their material presence elicits a sense of the antiquity of these roads and their historical importance as way markers. Unlike the 1930s concrete milestones that are more numerous along the UK’s roads ([Haines 2000](#)), these older fixtures evoked an extinct soundscape dominated by the rhythmic clatter of iron clad cartwheels and the clip clop of horse hooves.

Less common are the signposts erected by late 18<sup>th</sup> century turnpike trusts at junctions, with many replaced by the uniform, flat, retroreflective, rectangular road signs that facilitate the easy uptake of information for motorists, following the 1964 Traffic Sign Regulations Act. On major A-roads, these contemporary signs are characterised by white and yellow lettering printed upon a green background, and fewer white signs imprinted with black lettering, and they accompany the standardised warning, informational and regulatory signs that pervade the UK road network. Like milestones, many signposts were temporarily removed during the Second World War. Typified by black lettering placed on a white background, they were erected at a height to be discerned from horseback or horse carriage. Often designed in regional styles and wrought out of local stone, they were far more common before the imposition of generic national signage. Yet some older signposts or fingerposts that were more prevalent during Shanti and Tara’s journey persist, especially along the A39, A361 and A38 where traffic is less frequent and post-war roadside developments sporadic. These older signs are increasingly regarded as integral to local identity. Indeed, Somerset County Council, with 1200 cast iron survivors under their stewardship, have initiated a programme to restore and repair many finger signposts ([roads.org.uk 2021](#)), as with the sign from Chewton Mendip we photographed on the A39 (see [Figure 4](#)), replete with the inclusion of half and three-quarter mile distances. This precision is reflected in Tara and Shanti’s logbook where distances are measured in similar fractions. Curiously, on the google street view app, images recorded





**Figure 3.** Milestone (photo by authors).

in 2011 show this sign to have been formerly positioned on the opposite side of the road; like many signs, while treasured as an element of local heritage it has been moved and refurbished, subject to repair and preservation (Edensor 2022) and is part of a mutable material history of the road.

Also, far more prominent on the latter half of the journey are the older laybys that curve away into detached, semi-circular, off-road stretches that offer a more substantive separation from the main road than the shallow laybys situated directly alongside other sections. These looped stretches of tarmac are typically separated from the road by swathes of trees and undergrowth (see Figure 5) and provide a dramatic transformation in mood, with intervening vegetation muffling traffic sounds. Getting out of the car at one such layby to stretch our legs we take in the sights of hedges, fields, trees and brambles, inhale floral scents, cherish the relief



**Figure 4.** Finger signpost (photo by authors).

from the steady hum of the car engine replaced by birdsong and sounds of livestock, and the breeze that stirs the foliage. Shanti and Tara, enthusiastic users of the thermos flask, would regularly pause their journey for refreshment of tea and biscuits, enjoying brief, impromptu picnics. Shanti fondly recalled “I looked forward to our stops in the layby, it was like being in the country, away from the road, surrounded by trees, fields and flowers. Tara would get out the thermos flask that we had filled with masala tea in the morning and take out some digestive biscuits from our little *dabha* (box)” (pers. comm., May 20, 2015). Today, the need to carry such provisions is less important since such laybys often host catering vans to sell refreshments.





**Figure 5.** Layby (photo by authors).

Finally, regularly located along the entire route are service stations, filling stations and car servicing garages. These were very important for Shanti and Tara who were not mechanically minded and felt safe in the knowledge that should they break down, they would not have to go far for help. In the 1950s cars would have been filled up with petrol by forecourt attendants who would also carry out oil and tyre pressure checks (Morris 1995). These services were much appreciated by Shanti: “I wasn’t accustomed to filling up the car, the petrol pumps looked so different to what I was used to but here there was always someone to help. We were worried about running out of petrol so in our book we always wrote down the mileage and how much petrol was left in the tank when we arrived at a place” (pers. comm., September 9, 2014). Following the end of post-war petrol rationing, retailers were increasingly tied to a particular oil company, with one or two pumps adorned with the same brand designs that Tara and Shanti could recognise from a distance (see Evans 2019). Contemporary petrol stations usually remain associated with a single supplying company but are typically much larger, containing multiple pumps and retail provision, and forecourt attendants have been supplanted by self-service pumps.

## **5. Spaces by the side of the road**

Besides the road infrastructures that shaped the driving experiences along the route, the drive afforded a wealth of encounters with passing architecture, scenery, vegetation,

agriculture and landmarks. The experience of this part of southern England is suffused with divergencies from the 1950s roadscape as well as abiding continuities.

Once more, Slough provides a gateway to certain kinds of roadside experience. First, as the A4 passes through the town, it epitomises the 20<sup>th</sup> century subtopian developments that have extended along roads that enter and exit urban centres. Concerns about these roadsides rose in the late 1920s and intensified after the Second World War, as critics drew attention to mediocre state planning, unrestrained commercial developments and ugly architecture (Moran 2010). The early adoption of an extensive trading estate in the town prompted John Betjeman to write his 1937 controversial poem *Slough* (Betjeman 1977). Betjeman regarded this modern development as heralding the “menace of things to come”, with its renowned opening two lines, “Come friendly bombs and drop on Slough; It isn’t fit for people now” - a negative perspective recently countered by celebratory verses about the town penned by Attila the Stockbroker and Ian McMillan (Slough History online n.d.). Sprawl had already colonised the roadside when Tara and Shanti drove through Slough (Moran 2010), and they have greatly expanded in the intervening years. For several miles, a host of retail sheds, shopping precincts, supermarkets, garden centres, office blocks, paintball venues, corporate eateries, car showrooms, churches, warehouses and depots and generic hotels line the roadside. These rather generic developments also extend into and out of Maidenhead, Reading and Newbury, though they diminish westwards through the smaller towns of Marlborough, Calne and Chippenham where the roadside bears stronger continuities with the 1950s.

Another characteristic of Slough’s contemporary roadside would have astonished and delighted the two travellers. An abundant constellation of Indian eateries, places of worship, businesses, and retail outlets line the main streets and the A4. The migration of Indians and Pakistanis commenced in the mid-fifties to fill job vacancies as the town’s economy surged, and nearly 40% of its population are now of South Asian origin. We can be sure that Tara and Shanti would have stopped for a refreshing drink of masala tea at the chaiwallah shop and purchased food from the Exotic Supermarket for their journey (See Figure 6). In 1955, the existence of such outlets would have been unimaginable to the two travellers; as we discuss below South Asian additions to the roadside recur throughout the journey. When they arrived in May 1955, the 1951 census recorded that of the UK’s 50 million population, only three per cent of the population had been born overseas, with the great majority white and European, with fewer than 140,000 black and Asian immigrants. These developments exemplify how globalisation, increased migration and the growth of diasporic communities have transformed urban and rural environments in Britain and are very much evident along the A-roads.

Along the route today there are many other food and drink outlets, most conspicuously, numerous pubs and inns. Some are reminders that travellers stopped for refreshments and accommodation in earlier times when journeys took much longer. For instance, the Halfway Inn, demarcating the midway point between London and Bristol on the Old Bath Road (or London Road), provides a resting place (See Figure 7(a,b)). The names of the Inns would have provided early travellers with a rich history of the local area and of the time in which they were established. Pub signs were accompanied by images, chosen for practical reasons when most of the population were illiterate, “So you couldn’t put a name sign up. You had to have a pictorial sign ... a picture of something that had some resonance with people” (Brown 2022). Pub names along the route include *Royal*



**Figure 6.** Chaiiwala, Slough (photo by authors).

*Oak, Bell and Bottle, Bird in Hand, Horse and Groom, Coach and Horses, Swan, Pelican, Wagon and Horses, Black Horse and London Road.* Tara and Shanti did not stop at any of the pubs, as Tara declares: “we didn’t really know about these places and they didn’t look like the kind of place we would be comfortable and what we would do there as we didn’t drink” (pers. comm., July 8, 2020). But as a keen cricketer, Shanti recalls feeling “happy to see a pub called *The Cricketers*. I thought it meant that the local people played cricket” (pers. comm., July 3, 2014).

While many of the pubs have a long history and exemplify Englishness (Matless 2023), several are now emblazoned with advertisements for their South Asian dining experiences: the *Javatri* at the *Bell and Bottle* in Maidenhead, the *Burj* at Marlborough’s *Bell*, and the *Gurkha Baynjan* at the *Black Dog* between Calne and Chippenham. Whereas such roadside inns once provided overnight accommodation and drinking stops, many now also serve gastro-tourist desires (see Figure 8).

Many renowned landmarks and historic sites on the route, including Avebury, Glastonbury Tor, Silbury Hill, Long Kennett, Bath and Wells Cathedral, have attracted visitors for centuries. Some are visible from the road, others require diversion and stopping. While Tara and Shanti paused to walk around Bath, enter Wells Cathedral and stroll to the foot of Silbury Hill, the trip was primarily a motoring excursion in which the imperatives were to gain experience of driving in Britain, peruse the road and its environs while moving, and arrive at Torquay. Indeed, our journey took 10 hours and lengthy excursions away from the road would have drastically extended travelling time.





**Figure 7a.** The halfway inn (photo by authors).

Nonetheless, since the 1950s, tourist provision has intensified along the route, creating significant honeypots, attractions and services. This is exemplified in Marlborough, an enduringly popular town for visitors, and a place at which Shanti and Tara stopped for refreshments. For them Marlborough characterised the England they were searching for: “we had read about Marlborough in our guidebook, and we wanted to visit. We had never seen such a wide street, and all those old buildings. We went into a tea shop, had tea in small cups and saucers and shared a scone. We enjoyed it – but very expensive!” (pers. comm., July 12, 2017). In current times, Marlborough’s high street is dominated by restaurants and cafes, craft and antique shops, pubs and delicatessens and clothes shops. Besides such concentrations of tourist businesses, in 2018 a broader approach to promoting tourism has been the rebranding of the A4 as the “Great West Way” (Great West Way 2023). The road is described as a touring route that offers an experience of “England Concentrated” and the “real essence of England” (The Great West Way 2021, 8), consolidating the long association of the road with motoring excursions in search of England and Englishness.

In some places, an encounter with traditionally English bucolic landscapes viewed from the road has been erased, notably with the rise of mega farms around Marlborough, Chippenham and other parts of rural Wiltshire. Since the mid-1950s, the acceleration of productivist imperatives, widespread use of fertilisers and pesticides, expanding size of farms and fields, removal of hedgerows and extensive mechanisation of arable and livestock farming has transformed much of the British landscape that delighted Shanti and Tara. However, neither smaller farms nor all hedges have been entirely obliterated,



**Figure 7b.** The halfway inn sign (photo by authors).

and they are more predominant as we travel further southwest, with landscapes characterised by a multi-hued, textured patchwork of smaller fields and copses. Like Tara and Shanti before us, as we neared the end of the journey we gleefully glimpsed subtropical yuccas and palm trees that signify the warmer climes of the southwest.

Closer at hand, many roadside verges retain a thick botanical richness, boosted by environmentalists and local government managers who are becoming increasingly aware of the biodiverse potential of these interstitial spaces. During the seasonal time of our journey, the creamy displays of mayflower from the abundant hawthorns and thriving cow parsley were exceptionally profuse alongside the road. Bluebells that carpeted woodland floors and the yellow laburnum and purple wisteria spilling from gardens added splashes of colour. Trees too, were almost in full leaf, with the metallic sheen of copper beech complementing the diverse greens of oak, beech, silver birch, ash and lime.



**Figure 8.** Gurkha Baynjan at the Black Dog (photo by authors).

This late Spring verdancy was striking to the Indian travellers as well, meeting their expectations of the green and pleasant land they had anticipated. As Tara recounts, “we wanted to visit the cities we had heard so much about, London, Bath, Oxford . . . but we also wanted to go to the countryside. And on that journey to Torquay, we couldn’t believe how green and beautiful everything was. It wasn’t like in India, it was so calm and quiet and clean” (pers. comm., June 3, 2020). In 2023, for us too, this seasonal botanical fecundity seemed to express an exuberant sense of regeneration and renewal.

Throughout our journey, numerous magpies, blackbirds, pheasants, and rooks wheeling around their woodland nesting colonies were common sights. However, the huge decline in other avian species suggests that a greater quantity and diversity of birds would have been heard and seen during Tara and Shanti’s journey, although they were not necessarily familiar to them. The formerly common sights and sounds of cuckoo, song thrush, skylark, sparrow, starling and kestrel have lamentably diminished in areas of rural Britain, eliminated by the heavy use of chemicals and the removals of hedgerows. By contrast, especially in the area south of the Chiltern Hills where breeding numbers are high, we frequently spotted the red kites that have recently extended their habitat across large swathes of the UK after previously being confined to a small area of mid Wales. Kites were not present during a 1950s journey along these roads following the relentless 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century poisoning and shooting that led to their extinction in England. In recent years, reintroduction programmes by conservation bodies have restored their presence, and roadkill lures them to many highways across the UK, including the A4 (Carter 2019).





**Figure 9.** Torquay harbour 1955 (source: Facebook Torquay in Pictures posted 29 August 2020).

After driving for over 10 hours, Tara and Shanti drove south along the A379 to Torquay. In the mid-1950s, it was still referred to as the English Riviera, a fashionable seaside resort for middle class tourists renowned for its mild climate. Since the early 1960s, Torquay has faced a spiral of decline as the tourist base contracted and businesses began to cater to a greater range of visitors. Yet when they drove into the town in May 1955, the past glories of its heyday were still evident (see [Figure 9](#)) with the Pavilion, Princess Gardens, the Marina Spa and the luxurious Imperial Hotel. Although crowded with visitors, they proclaimed that it possessed a genteel atmosphere. They must have enjoyed their stay in Torquay, for many family holidays were later spent there. This contrasted with our experience. When we arrived on a Friday night, the bars, cafes and clubs were in full swing, occupied by thousands of young people, some belonging to hen and stag parties. Rather than a sophisticated Riviera ambience, a raucous, festive atmosphere was generated by a melange of loud conversation, drunken utterances and musical beats.

## **6. Encountering the past through motoring: becoming attuned to the qualities, continuities and changes on British A-roads**

The practice of motoring discloses a wealth of sensory impressions, memories, historical resonances and unexpected sights along the driving space of the road. Critically, these experiences are shaped by the kinds of road upon which motoring is practised. A motorway journey affords different experiences to travel along a single-track road, a dual carriageway and A and B roads. In this paper, we have focused on motoring between Slough and Torquay, drawing out characteristic consistencies of A-roads in general, as well as the more distinctive infrastructural and scenic qualities of the particular roads along which we travelled. Also important is the kind of automobile and the technologies that shape motoring experiences. A large sports utility vehicle offers

comfortable suspension, greater internal space and more elevated views but drivers must carefully attend to the larger proportion of the road its size occupies. By contrast, our Mini and the Morris Minor occupied by Shanti and Tara afford a more confined interior, more restricted views and less comfortable suspension. Further, the motivation and function of motorists informs how the attention of driver and passengers is directed to the roadside and beyond. Commuters and regular travellers may discern familiar landmarks that mark distance travelled (Pearce [forthcoming](#)), commercial drivers are particularly concerned with managing journey times and progress, while independent tourists can stop or take diversions whenever they choose. The mobile gaze of a vehicle's occupants also depends upon their predilections – a birdwatcher will scan the landscape for signs of avian movement while a tourist photographer may scrutinize the passing landscape for photogenic scenes and features (Büscher 2006).

Despite these distinctive proclivities, unpredictable events, striking sights, bodily feelings, conversations, sudden decisions and sharp memories mean that each journey is unique, if also usually resonating with previous motoring experiences. As Lynne Pearce (2023a) insists, motoring journeys and driving space can be suffused with emotion, affect and sensation, stimulate memories and reflection, and generate surprises. She focuses upon familiar roads along which she has repeatedly travelled as a form of “dwelling in motion”, replete with reassuring landmarks that mark the stages of the route, but which may have changed or disappeared over time, generating disorientation. Such consistencies and disclosures may also be appreciated during motorway travel (Edensor 2003), often hyperbolically decried as homogeneous and featureless. We motored along an unfamiliar route but one that was informed by the experiences of Shanti and Tara's journey of 1955. Our focus on historical and contemporary infrastructures and roadside scenes fostered sensory, emotional and affective impressions of earlier motoring experiences and attuned us to the durable consistencies and transformations we encountered.

Moreover, unlike most modern motorways that cut a swathe through farmland, woods and suburbs, often on compulsorily purchased land, the roads upon which we travelled typically superseded earlier roads over which they were constructed. They thus shadow, consolidate and supplement a landscape that “is still webbed with paths and footways” (Macfarlane 2012, 13), including pilgrim paths, drove roads, holloways, ridings and bridleways, some vestigial, others truncated, overgrown or buried. Robert Macfarlane (2012, 153) considers that these byways may connect us with the past “as an archive of past habits and practices”, provoking uncanny intimations of travellers from long ago, “as if time had somehow pleated back on itself” (22). Their feet and carts engraved the same routes along which we now drive, an absent presence that solicits thoughts about the conversations, songs, anticipations and desires that they carried along with them. As Macfarlane notes, “every path or track shows up as the accumulated imprint of countless journeys that people have made” and in this network “is sedimented the activity of an entire community, over many generations” (167). Certain road journeys can thus accentuate Tim Ingold's (1993, 152–3) contention that “to perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance ... [to engage] perceptually with an environment ... pregnant with the past”. The numerous durable historic features we encountered – the laybys, signposts, milestones, pubs, fields and roadside vegetation – may be considered as belonging to what Laurent Olivier (2004, 210)



refers to as “a mass of details which do not date from the past but belong to an ‘ever-present’ with no precise place in time”. The roads along which we motored are thus part of a “pluritemporal landscape” that resonates with different temporalities, rhythms and origins (Crang and Travlou 2001, 174).

The applied mobility approach practised here, a motorised version of following the earlier excursion of Tara and Shanti, enabled us to gain a more intimate and immediate feel for their journey. Besides emerging from our attentive scrutiny, these intimations were stoked by the tales they recounted, and their words informed how we considered particular places along the route and the journey as a whole. They were also summoned up by elusive childhood recollections of motoring, and obscure intimations drawn from film, television and photography (Edensor 2008). These impressionistic scraps made the landscape seem partially familiar, for the roads along which we drove, resonated with a host of other motoring spaces from prior experience. They are intertextual, interspatial and intersubjective: the scenes, impressions and sensations we experienced are shared by others. As we relate our journey to others, there is widespread recognition of the features and consistencies we recorded.

These attunements to the past also helped us to identify the many changes that had taken place along the route since the 1950s – the roundabouts, serial signage, subtopian and commercial developments, multicultural characteristics, intensive farming, changing bird populations, and the escalation of tourism and heritage. Such transformations resonate with wider changes across the British landscape and road network and mark how the nature and function of A-roads has changed. They also disclose more broadly how persistence and erasure in space is an uneven process; roadscape are no exception. As Louise Crewe (2011, 27) remarks, “things are dismantled, cast aside, destroyed, and disposed of but remain in countless material and immaterial forms, traces, remnants, fragments, and memories”. Particular networks evaporate, meanings shift or disappear, things become marooned, decay or are repurposed (Kothari and Edensor 2023). On A-roads, while intensive forms of regeneration, development and the imposition of new infrastructures has introduced great transformations in some places, elsewhere, traces of the past may linger more prominently.

Tara and Shanti set off from Slough to Torquay as the first journey through which they might experience a sense of England and Englishness; motoring was the practice through which this would be gained. In following their route, we were struck by a discernible 1950s Englishness that was still palpable, as well as more recent expressions of a national landscape that includes urban and suburban development and the adoption of serial infrastructural features. More specifically, this journey coursed through particular southern English landscapes, underpinning a host of local and regional qualities that are also always imbricated in the national (Hubbard 2022; Matless 2023), and this is amplified by motoring. The trip also disclosed that the national is entangled with the global. For Tara and Shanti, their pre-travel imaginaries were stirred by their colonial education and for us, by the diverse retail outlets and institutions we encountered. These globalised elements further added to our awareness of the complex, multiple temporalities of the roadscape through which we drove.

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