

TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN

By Annette Cowling

I have always admired those who seem to drive effortlessly for hundreds of miles with three or four children on regular trips to the northern parts of Scotland, or as far south as Toulouse or even Italy. They must be tapped into secret knowledge, have endless patience, or be blessed with offspring who have an affinity for car travel in their genes. We had none of these things. The furthest we ever ventured was 200 miles and was fraught with discontentment, frayed tempers and travel sickness.

My parents lived in the Wirral, which for those of you who are unaware, is a small peninsular in Cheshire situated opposite Liverpool across the river Mersey. It is readily accessible by motorway, and from the driver's point of view is a straightforward journey. However, with two and eventually three children in the back, the journey developed into a nightmare.

My mother always used to tell me that travelling with children was relatively easy and if we had problems then it must be our fault. Now she may have had a point. The truth is that I myself dislike travelling by car for more than a maximum of two hours. I find it boring, uncomfortable and suffer from travel sickness, and my mother reckoned that my attitude towards car travel was picked up by the children. So I ended up dealing with the negativity within myself as well as the outward manifestation in the children.

Mark and Lynne got on very well together in normal life, but put them into a car together and everything changed. They argued about anything and everything. The first argument was about who had the most comfortable seat. Cliff has long legs so the driver's seat is pushed back as far as it will go, which rather cramps the traveller who is behind him. I am much smaller, so my seat can be brought forwards enough to give the passenger behind me much more leg space. When they had decided who should have the more comfortable seat they would complain about the articles which had been packed around them. The offending articles would be shoved from one place to another. It was bad enough when there were only the two of them but when Ian joined the family they really felt like squashed sardines. Most of the journey would be spent pushing the middle seat where Ian was sitting with constant complaints of not enough room. Temperature was another source of contention. It was never just right for everyone. There was always someone who was too hot or too cold or exposed to too much draught.

Before Ian came along and also before it was compulsory to have safety belts in the back of the car, we solved the problems of car travel by turning the back seats into a kind of bed and travelling by night. It worked like magic. We left home at about 7.30 p.m. which was the

children's bedtime and arrived at my parents' home about four hours later. This was the nearest to civilised car travel that we achieved but of course it would not be compatible with today's safety consciousness and compulsory seat belts. Neither would it have worked with three children in the back.

One way to minimise the discomfort is to have frequent breaks where you can get out and stretch your legs. It works up to a point. However there is always the problem of getting back into the car to continue the journey, it prolongs the travelling time proportionately to how many breaks that are taken, and most stopping places are not exactly inspiring or relaxing. Even if it is a warm, sunny day there is either the constant roar of traffic speeding past or endless rows of parked cars; on a dismal day there is the added prospect of getting wet, cold or both while stretching your legs.

On our car journeys the cry of "Are we nearly there?" started within the first half an hour of the drive. What can be done in a car apart from watch the scenery and traffic go by and play counting and singing games? Lynne used to like singing in rounds and I struggled to co-operate with her to keep her amused. But it was a real effort to join in because car journeys de-motivate me and I easily become "switched off".

Reading and drawing were totally banned on our car journeys because both Mark and Lynne suffered from travel sickness. Mark was just two when it first happened. We had been travelling to my parents-in-law who lived in Coventry. Mark had been coughing in an odd way for the second half of the journey and as we pulled up outside the house he just vomited over everything. So the quest began to find an anti-sickness remedy that suited him. Our local doctor was unusually helpful and prescribed various liquid preparations but the first one knocked him out, took him hours to recover from and left him irritable and bad tempered. The second gave him hallucinations! He was seeing monsters and worse and was impossible to calm down. It was approximately half way through the journey so we were forced to take a very long break until the effects had worn off sufficiently to carry on travelling. After a second occurrence we abandoned that remedy as well. Then our resourceful, persevering doctor produced the perfect answer. It was called Benadryl and it worked a treat. We used it for Lynne as well in due course, and as the children grew older we exchanged the liquid for the same drug in capsule form.

Eventually (I am ashamed to admit) we took the easy way out when travelling. Train travel was much more acceptable to both the children and myself, in fact with a few notable exceptions we really enjoyed it. So we travelled to my parents by rail. There was more leg room, more of interest to watch, a greater ease of moving around, more scope for play and conversation and, for our family at least, the tendency to travel sickness was reduced to nil. We used to drive the car to Cheltenham, buy a long stay parking ticket, travel by train to Liverpool, use the underground to Birkenhead and were picked up by one of my parents from there.

For holidays, we became very lazy and unimaginative. All holidays were taken within a maximum radius of 120 miles which we could guarantee to take less than three hours to reach by car. As a result we were all much happier and less frazzled when we reached our destination so holidays and life became much more enjoyable. The car at last had become our servant and not our master!