

Henry devoted every Sunday morning to cleaning, polishing and maintaining his car. Henry's two neighbours, Phil and Geoff, recognised it as an old man's car.

Phil drove a lively open-topped sports model and his wife a fourwheeled drive sports utility vehicle. Geoff drove a BMW Phil and Geoff would often lean over their fences and engage Henry in half mocking conversations as he toiled away on a Sunday morning.

'Why don't you trade it in and get something a bit more up to date?' queried Phil.

'I'm not wasting my money on one of those ridiculous things,' Henry replied, indicating the sports utility vehicle parked halfway across the pavement.

'Yeah, but this is modern technology.'

'Modern technology, pah,' said Henry. 'Look under your bonnet and tell me the difference.'

'Engines are much better designed these days.'

'Alright,' said Henry. 'If it's such wonderful modern technology, how many miles to the gallon does that thing do?'

Phil thought for a minute and then replied, 'Dunno. Fifteen or so.'

'Fifteen! That's terrible.'

'Yeah but it's a utility vehicle. It's not supposed to do good mileage.'

'No,' replied Henry. 'It's supposed to be rounding up sheep, not driving the kids to school.'

'What does yours do then?' asked Phil regretting asking the question immediately, particularly as he already knew the answer.

'49.'

'That never does 49.'

Henry opened the car door, leant over to the glove compartment and took out his petrol book.

'See this,' he said. 'I've had this book since the car was new.'

The book was ruled through with four columns. In the bottom corner of each page was a calculation of the miles per gallon achieved. On every page it was always 49.

'Look after your car, drive carefully and that's what you get,' said Henry.

And with that Henry went indoors to fetch his hand-held vacuum cleaner which would remove every bit of dirt and grit from the carpets in his car while Phil and Geoff shook their heads. Later, in the pub, they were unable to shake off the uneasy feeling that, for once, Henry had got the better of them and, a little later on, as the beers started to flow, they plotted their revenge.

Exactly six weeks later saw Henry sitting at the kitchen table with a look of bemusement on his face. He had just pushed the equals button on his calculator and had his biro at the ready when he realised there was something terribly wrong with the digits on display. Instead of a four and a nine, there was a four and a seven. Forty-seven.

'That can't be right,' said Henry out loud.

'What is it, dear?' asked his wife. 'Forty-seven.'

'What dear?'

The only explanation he could think of was that there was something wrong with the car.

He took it to the garage for a full service and discussed the matter with the mechanic in some detail, but the mechanic could come up with no sensible explanation. In fact, he couldn't seem to grasp the significance of the loss of two miles per gallon at all.

Henry began to dread the next month's calculation and, with some justification, because the result was, once again, forty seven. The following month, the miles per gallon had fallen to forty five.

'You wanna get rid of it,' advised Geoff, 'it's just worn out. Get something new.'

'Could be your spigot locks,' suggested Phil. Henry frowned because what went on inside of the engine compartment was a complete mystery and these technical terms meant nothing to him at all.

'Or your flange gusset,' said Geoff. 'They were always a problem on that model.'

'The garage can't find anything wrong,' said Henry in despair. 'Anyway, 45's still pretty good, Henry. Like you say, it's much better than we get.'

'True,' said Henry, 'very true.' And he felt a little reassured, as he watched his two neighbors walk off towards the pub, laughing loudly as if they were celebrating some great victory.

Henry shook his head and walked slowly and sadly back into his house. He had a feeling that things were going to get worse. And they did.

The miles per gallon fell relentlessly, month after month. When it reached '29' Henry resolved, as his wife suggested, to do something about it. He decided that the car had to go.

'I'll be round the showrooms on Monday,' he told Geoff and Phil. 'Somebody must sell sensible cars these days, mustn't they?'

Phil and Geoff nodded their heads sagely but behind these calm faces, thoughts were whirring. Siphoning petrol out of Henry's petrol tank at midnight had become something of a highlight in their otherwise routine lives and they were loath to see the fun end there. Drastic action and an entirely new direction

were required.

The next day, Henry began his slow and methodical search for a new car, something sensible and comfortable, which would offer a good many miles per gallon - 50 would be a minimum. His search stretched over days, then weeks but while he was busy with this endeavour, something strange happened. His old car started to do more miles per gallon.

First it was thirty, then thirty nine. When it reached 43, Henry temporarily suspended the search for a new car. At 47 he gave it up altogether. The following month his car was back doing '49' and he felt a great sense of relief that everything seemed, at last, to be back to normal.

But his relief was temporary. The following month he found the car had achieved 55 miles per gallon. A month later it was 59. A month later 65.

'I just don't understand it,' Henry said to his two young neighbours. 'I mean, have you heard of anything like it before?'

'Never,' said Phil.

'I read something about it once,' said Geoff. 'Something about an engine reaching its ultimate torque ratio. You know, when the piston valve heads get into proper alignment on these old engines, apparently there's no limit to what sort of distance they can do.'

'It's all double Dutch tome,' said Henry. 'All I know is that my car is doing 65 miles to the gallon, and if it goes on like this, I won't have to put any petrol in it at all. Do you think I ought to ring up the telly?'

'You could do,' said Phil. 'TOMORROW'S WORLD or something like that. Bound to be interested. I mean you could solve the oil crisis.'

'I might just do that,' said Henry laughing, as he picked up his cleaning tools and disappeared into the house. 'I might just do that.'

'"Might solve the oil crisis"! sneered Geoff. 'He's not that daft, you know.'

'We'll see. We'll see,' said Phil, wondering just how far the whole thing could go.'

It continued to go up and up in a steady curve.

On one occasion it reached 100. But that wasn't the end of it.

On one particular Tuesday, the fuel indicator hadn't moved at all despite three trips into a town and a 60 mile round trip visiting their daughter on the coast. In fact they made a series of day trips all over the district and while the fuel indicator seemed to go down a little while driving, the next day it'd be back up to where it was before.

'It's beyond me,' said Henry. 'It'll have to go in the Guinness Book of Records. See you two, you were taking the mickey out of this old beauty a few months ago, now you're laughing on the other side of your faces.'

And with that, Geoff decided it had all gone far enough.

'Sorry, Henry,' he said. 'It was us.'

'What do you mean?'

'It wasn't the car. It was us. We've been topping up your tank every night.'

'What you mean....'

"Fraid so. It's probably still doing 49. We siphoned off a bit to start with. Then we started adding a bit at night. Then a bit more. We were just having a laugh. You don't mind, do you?'

'No, no,' Henry chuckled. 'The wife told me about you two and your practical jokes. Anyway we saw you sneaking round the back.'

'You knew?'

'Of course,' said Henry. 'I don't know which is more ridiculous. Me thinking my car was breaking the laws of physics or you two daft sods paying for my petrol for the last three weeks.'