

Winter driving with Devon's Country Mile

Dropping towards the A377 at Umberleigh via the South Molton road on a turbulent November morning, with the wind howling, rain sweeping horizontally across the bonnet and visibility under a hundred metres, the reason why the Department for Transport-funded Devon Country Mile project is running Winter Driving days hereabouts comes into sharp focus. The overall aim is to develop new ways of improving rural road safety, through partnerships with Devon County Council and 'blue light' services such as Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue and Devon and Cornwall Police. Recent studies have highlighted problems on the A377 Exeter to Barnstaple road, where an average of 80 incidents and collisions occur each year on this 40 mile stretch of endlessly twisting and usually damp tarmac. Around 95% relate to human error, over 10% to adverse weather - and over 80% involve someone living within 12 miles of the incident.

In the comfortably sheltered lee of a wind- and rain-swept Umberleigh Village Hall, Community Driving Instructor Mike Hull explains the Country Mile offer of an hour's helpful free advice and information, available to those regularly driving on or near the A377. "We can take your car or ours," he says, "and look at winter driving problems... coping with big puddles across the road - perhaps where there's a bend ahead... or dealing with fallen leaves, the problems of mud, ice, fallen rocks, flooding and plenty more. "These are typical winter problems - but if someone has more specific worries, we can spend time on those aspects."

Abruptly, the rain stops, the sun appears, and the first client of the day arrives. Tony Kneil lives locally, and drives a Vauxhall Frontera 4x4. He came to the Umberleigh event keen to learn. "I've been driving a long time," he says, "but like all drivers I do have worries: people drive too fast sometimes, and I worry about young drivers particularly. I like to think I'm safe, but I'm sure there's plenty more to find out."

He and Mike Hull had a quick chat - after which the Frontera disappeared onto a sun-kissed but deeply autumnal A377. An hour later Tony Kneil was back, and distinctly enthusiastic. "I've learnt about the two-second rule... didn't know that about gaps between cars... we talked about how four wheel drive vehicles behave in winter: I'm certainly more aware of puddles and the chances of falling rocks, horses and so on: I've learnt plenty - it's been well worth it - and best of all, it's free."

Since professional advice usually costs money, that incentive is surely amongst the reasons virtually every event so far has been oversubscribed. They've also been very warmly received, though Mike Hull isn't fazed by the keenness of Exe valley drivers. "We're putting on extra days to meet demand," he says enthusiastically - despite the onset of a particularly virile form of stair rods, masquerading as mere rain: "...anyone interested can ring the Devon Drivers Centre on Exeter 444773, and we'll get something organised..."