

In Defence of the Internal Combustion Engine

By Adrian Pulford

The 20th Century was one of immense political, sociological and economic change for all members of the human race. Mankind showed his brilliance in so many amazing ways, that despite the horror of two World Wars and one Great Depression the general advancement of the human condition was as exponential as it was astonishing.

In healthcare the advances are too many to list but penicillin, cancer treatment and general advances in drug know-how have completely transformed life expectancy and quality of life beyond recognition of our 19th Century forebears.

Although it took a dreadful World War [if you accept my belief that WW1 and WW2 were the same war with a 20 year armistice] to achieve the formation of NATO, United Nations, World Health Organisation, the IMF and the World Bank, these institutions have played their part in fostering a sense of unity and fair-play that has protected generations from hardship and poverty in a way that would be seen as remarkable to our great grandparents.

The freedoms we take for granted have indeed been hard-won and we should not underestimate how valuable they are. Freedoms of speech, scientific experiment, sexuality and religion are unrecognisable compared to those of previous generations. Freedom to travel transformed life for millions during the second half of the 20th Century and the benefits to the human condition are profound.

Freedoms come under attack, often from well-meaning but vociferous minority groups who through well-timed and well-aimed political pressure, gain the tipping point they need to push their often one-dimensional views into mainstream acceptance, usually to the disadvantage of the silent majority. We hardly notice the erosion until it is too late.

One of the greatest freedoms we gained in the 20th Century is the ability to walk out of our homes into a warm, dry vehicle at the precise time we choose, to travel to exactly where we wish, at any time of day or night, arriving safely at our destination untroubled by the weather, horse manure, other members of the public, highwaymen or muggers. Victorians would envy the freedoms bestowed upon us by Henry Ford, his mass-produced vehicles-for-the-masses and the motoring revolution it inspired around the world.

My premise is that the very essence of this freedom has been provided by an invention that is now starting to get such a bad press it almost becomes unfashionable to praise it. Indeed just writing the headline for this piece made me feel like a heretic when I typed in into my keyboard. However, I believe that the internal combustion engine has provided us with the most incredible advances and that it deserves some defence here.

The age of steam was the driver of the industrial revolution around the world, and electricity unleashed incredible advances too. Indeed the very first ‘horseless carriages’ were fuelled by these sources and early motor manufacturers were as inventive with their ideas as anything we see today. The Otto-cycle four-stroke internal combustion engine which won out as the best motive power for motorised vehicles has fascinated me since I was a youngster and the wonder of it is that it still does.

Induction, compression, ignition, exhaust – ah, just the sound of it conjures up the magic immediately. I’m a life-long fanatic of cars, motorcycles, speedboats, Spitfires and Lancaster’s; in fact if it’s got an internal combustion engine, it’s of interest to me.

Motor sport has a history almost as long as the internal combustion engine itself. Since the sales guys coined the phrase “win on Sunday, sell on Monday” car and motorcycle racing has given millions of fans untold hours of fascination, intrigue and suspense throughout the 20th Century. World-wide interest in motor sport, and the engine technology it develops, shows no sign of abating even in these ‘green and mean’ times, thank goodness.

Think about the reciprocation inside a modern high-revving engine, with four or five valves per cylinder, sipping a fuel-air mixture so precisely injected, with ignition process so efficient and an exhaust gas so cleaned and catalysed that in some major cities the exhaust emissions are cleaner than the air going in. Aren’t you amazed at the engineer’s ingenuity in creating this masterpiece of refined design to transport you effortlessly, reliably and safely anywhere you want to go? I am.

I think the green lobby should rethink their attack on it, because the internal combustion engine has given us far more than it will ever take away. It’s my hunch that there is life in the old dog yet. The cleanest greenest small car on the planet is not an hybrid, electric [ask yourself where the electricity comes from] or solar-powered – it’s the Volkswagen Polo ‘Blue Motion’ with, you’ve guessed it, a highly efficient modern internal combustion engine. [No bias – I’m no longer a VW dealer]

Petrol will inevitably run out, but nobody can predict when. Do not listen to any of the current predications about energy – I am old enough to remember the 1973-4 oil crisis when experts confidently predicted that the world’s oil reserves would be completely exhausted by 1985 – this was a ‘fact’. Remember, there are only two kinds of forecasters – those who don’t know and those who don’t know they don’t know.

In fact it’s a ‘fact’ that there are now more known oil reserves available [at a price] to us than at any time in history. Far from running out any time soon, the oil producers keep finding new methods of exploration and discovery. Not a very fashionable view I know, but do not underestimate the power of the market to drive adaptation.

Of course I am aware that ultimately, we will run out of oil as it is a finite resource but again do not write off the internal combustion engine. It was running on ethanol [from plants] before gasoline [from crude oil] was discovered to be the efficient, plentiful and cheap fuel it became. The engineers will adapt accordingly.

So before you join in the popular attack on the motive power in the cars we drive, remember the freedoms that we enjoy because of it. Unless you live in an inner-city area well serviced by efficient public transport, as most legislators against cars unsurprisingly do, you will be seriously disadvantaged without your car.

Petrol or diesel - the internal combustion engine means freedom and fun to the majority of us – so give yourself a break and enjoy a guilt-free drive soon!