

# Road sign symbols were a mystery

By Kirsten Mann

CHRIS BLACK, of Larbert, was driving through the town when he spotted a large yellow sticker with a black square stuck on a road sign giving directions.

A bit further on he saw more of the mysterious symbols.

Each yellow patch featured a black triangle, circle, diamond or square.

Certain he'd never seen them before Chris tried to work out what they meant but no plausible explanation came to mind.

Since then he has seen them in several other locations, not just in his local area but also near Edinburgh.

## Innovation

Family and friends say they've also been spotting them appearing all over since Chris mentioned it to them.

Curious and wondering if the symbols were a new innovation or just something he'd never noticed before, he asked us to find out what they meant.

Turns out the symbols are known as trailblazers and are placed on signs to help drivers when a road diversion is in place.

Deemed to be easier for motorists to follow than traditional arrow signs they are usually put in place by local authorities, utility companies or, in the case of trunk roads, Transport Scotland.

And while they may seem to have been appearing just recently, according to the Department For Transport they've been around since 1994.

A spokesperson for Falkirk Council explained, "Say there's an accident, a section of road flooded or roadworks and a motorway has to be closed, motorists will see a symbol displayed on a sign at the point of diversion.

"Following the same symbol on road signs at roundabouts and junctions will lead them back on to the road they have come off at a different point."

However, she did confirm that in recent weeks there had been more of the symbols put up in Chris's area, so it's not surprising he's just spotted them.

## Trailblazer

A spokesperson for City of Edinburgh Council said, "We have put up trailblazer signs to divert traffic off and back on to the city bypass. These are the only ones we have in use."

A spokesperson for the Department for Transport explained the symbols are either solid black shapes or black outlines. She said, "The four shapes were chosen as they are the most instantly distinguishable from one another.

"The black outline versions allow for eight symbols instead of just four. Although it is highly unlikely that eight would be needed on one sign, the situation could arise where diversion routes cross one another so two squares or two circles may come into play."

She added that they are usually used for diversions on major roads, though they could be used for those on minor roads if necessary.

Chris is glad he now knows what the mysterious symbols are for — he was finding the whole thing rather diverting.

# Then his dog was carried off into the sky

By Collin MacFarlane

LORNA LAZENBY is a vet at Mainshill Veterinary Centre in Coylton, Ayrshire.

Last week a man came in saying he had something to tell her.

Lorna listened as the man described how he'd been out walking on Ayr's Dalnilling Golf Course with two of his dogs, one of them a three-and-a-half-month-old Jack Russell pup.

The man was enjoying the fresh air while his dogs ran about.

## Furiously

Suddenly the older dog started barking furiously behind him. He whirled around to see the animal looking up at the sky.

The man followed its gaze . . . and saw his pup being carried off by what looked like a buzzard.

He ran in the direction the bird was taking and searched all round in case his pup was dropped back to earth.

Sadly, all he found was a clump of the dog's hair.

Now he wanted Lorna to warn all the other dog owners she knew to be wary of the swooping killer.

Lorna was shocked — but not surprised. She's noticed a huge increase in the number of buzzards in the area in recent years.

On the short drive from home to work she'll see three or four. They're known as "telegraph eagles" because they sit on the phone poles.

# We can still treat mystery allergies

By The Doc

MUCH AS we might hate to admit it, there are times in GPs' lives when we just have to hold up our hands and admit, "I don't know."

But that's not always as bad as it sounds, because not knowing what has caused something doesn't always mean we can't treat it.

Take urticaria. I know it sounds like a minor kingdom somewhere near Azerbaijan, but it is in fact the medical term for a type of allergic skin rash.

Now, allergies take a multitude of forms and can cause just as many reactions.

You could be allergic to things you eat or drink (including drugs), things in the atmosphere or things you touch. They could cause swelling, breathing problems, conjunctivitis, polyps or, indeed, rashes.

As you can imagine, unless the connection is very obvious — every time you eat mushrooms your face swells — pinpointing the precise cause can be tricky for a doc.

## Reaction

There are three tests to work out the substance causing an allergic reaction, or allergen.

The most widely used is the skin prick. The skin is pricked with a tiny amount of suspected allergen. If there's a positive reaction, a red, itchy swelling will develop in around 15 minutes, giving the doc an idea what you're sensitive to.

The patch test is used to find allergens that cause contact dermatitis. Possible allergens are added to discs that are taped to the skin for 48 to 72 hours to produce a reaction.

Then there's a blood test, which measures the levels of the IgE antibody. This can check for hundreds of different allergies — but it's expensive and you need an idea of the likely culprit.

Lorna knows they're fearless and can easily take a rabbit. She hadn't heard of a dog falling victim, although even crows can be a problem and seagulls have been known to swoop on small dogs.

The RSPB, however, reckon it could have been a sea eagle or even a golden eagle.

They agree buzzards do kill and eat rabbits, as well as voles, other birds and amphibians. But they say when they kill rabbits they generally eat at the kill site, because they're too small — about two feet tall with a four-foot wingspan — to get airborne with prey.

## Prey

They wonder if it might have been an escaped falconry bird that's used to humans and unafraid of attacking prey so close to one, or a young golden or sea eagle, which could easily kill and fly off with a small dog.

Scottish SPCA Wildlife Rescue Centre Manager Colin Seddon agrees, saying it's mostly likely to have been an escaped falconry bird, because wild birds of prey have a very strong, natural fear of humans.

Whatever it was, the one consolation is that Lorna is sure the pup wouldn't have suffered due to the speed and power of the attack.

But she'd advise dog-walkers in the area to keep scanning the skies.

# People are resigned to spiralling petrol prices

I'M sure that we've all noticed petrol prices creeping up in the last month.

But why are they going up and why is it seemingly being accepted without too much complaining or campaigning?

Ten years ago the UK average was 75p a litre for unleaded. Today we're paying £1.15 — 53 per cent more.

Our petrol prices are primarily affected by VAT and fuel duty.

But the other big factors are the price of oil and, equally important, how our currency is doing in the international market.

## Big impact

Lately we've seen the price of holidays abroad rising as the pound has weakened against the euro and the dollar. This has also had a very big impact on the price of fuel — oil is bought and sold all over the world and the currency everyone uses is dollars.

The actual price of a barrel of oil has also gone up nearly \$10 since this time last month, from \$70 to \$80, so that's also having an impact.

As to why it's happening with a lot less fanfare than in the past? Well, there's a certain sense of resignation.

Everybody realises the country is in a bad state. They want cheaper petrol but they're also worried about how we'll pay for things like hospitals if we cut fuel tax.

But although people may be resigned, it doesn't mean they're

In My view  
By Brendan McLoughlin  
of Petrolprices.com

not campaigning against higher prices. It's just that campaigners are not always heard.

By Friday 68,000 of our members had signed a petition on the Prime Minister's website with a plea to reduce fuel duty.

And what about those large discrepancies in prices? Often two garages a short distance from one another are selling petrol at very different prices.

Well, petrol stations buy fuel by the tanker. When you see a large difference it means one station bought at a higher price than the other and has had to choose either to pass that increase on or take a loss on the whole tanker, which they can't afford to do.

That's where our site really comes in because regardless of what the station can afford, motorists need to realise that only by shopping around can you get the best deals.

Launched in November 2005, we help people find the best deals in their area using their computer, email and mobile phones. We've just launched a new way to access petrol prices with the push of a button if you have an iPhone.

We have more than 1.5 million members and about 10 per cent are in the heavy driver category.

They get daily updates on prices

and shop around every time they need to fill up. For them and people who are travelling over 20,000 miles a year it's important to get the best deals to help keep the economy going.

But it's just as important that the person travelling to support an elderly relative to keep them living in their own home can also get the best deal.

Where you stay, or are travelling to, does matter. Some areas have fewer garages and you end up playing a bit of a postcode lottery for the best prices.

Isolated areas, like in the Highlands, can end up paying as much as 6p more than the rest of the UK because the cost of delivery of the fuel is high.

But the most expensive garage we've tracked down recently wasn't in an isolated area — it was in a posh road in London and the

price was 129.9p a litre for unleaded!

Are high prices here to stay? I do think we should be worried about future price rises.

We have had a great run in our economy for the past 20 years but we are almost certainly going to be paying more for energy and other things now because our currency will get weaker even if we can keep growing.

We should never give up shopping around for the best deals, though. It's just that the bigger picture does not look great at the minute.

I'm sure in the future we will see cheaper electric cars and more reliable public transport.

There are lots of smart people in this country and I'm sure they'll come up with solutions for cheaper personal transport.



■ The cost of fuel has been creeping up again in recent months.

# Scotland players thought piper Hamish was a hero



■ Hamish was worried his piping might have disturbed the other guests.

By John Paul Breslin

HAMISH CAMERON, from West Linton, flew to Rome with his dad Mike a couple of weeks ago.

The two avid rugby fans had tickets to see Scotland play Italy that Saturday as part of this year's Six Nations Championship.

Hamish is a member of West Linton and District Pipe Band and had packed his pipes so that he could gee up his fellow supporters with some Scottish tunes before the game.

While they were checking in at the Cavalieri Hotel in Rome Mike asked the manager if Hamish could play his bagpipes in the building's courtyard.

## Big match

This would allow him to keep the instrument in tune for the big match.

He agreed and so Hamish blasted out a few songs that evening, securing a round of applause from fellow guests.

The next day father and son were relaxing in the hotel's spa when they spotted Scotland hooker Ross Ford getting out of the swimming pool.

Hamish couldn't believe his hero was yards away!

He raced up to his room and grabbed his British Lions rugby top to get it signed.

He knew the shirt would show up any writing better than the darker Scotland top.

Thankfully, Ross was only too happy to oblige.

What's more he told Hamish that the whole team was staying at the hotel.

Before Hamish had time to get his breath back Ross got all of his team-mates to sign it.

The young rugby fan's chance

encounter inspired him to practise his pipes in the courtyard with added gusto that evening.

When he'd finished he began making his way back to his room.

However, no sooner had he stepped back in to the lobby than the hotel manager called him over.

Hamish broke out in a cold sweat as he approached the desk — had his enthusiastic performance been too loud for the other guests?

He began to apologise . . . but the manager just let out a hearty laugh!

Then he explained that the Scotland team was due to board a bus outside the hotel the next day to take them to the game.

## Send off

He wanted to give them a good send off and wondered if Hamish would pipe them aboard.

The young fan couldn't believe his luck — it was a dream come true.

The next morning he was up early and took his position at the hotel's entrance.

The minute he saw a Scotland player coming through the lobby he piped up with a rousing rendition of *Flower Of Scotland*.

The players were overjoyed and gave him the thumbs-up as they filed on to the bus.

Some of them even stopped to take photos of him!

Sadly, Italy beat Scotland 16-12, but that didn't take the shine off Hamish's experience.

He'll always have his signed top and the memory of the day the Scotland squad treated him like a celebrity.

# Fiona is up there with royalty thanks to Dad

By Kirsten Mann

JOHN DONALDSON, a sculptor and carver from Livingston, was delighted when, in 2004, he won his biggest ever commission

As part of a £12 million restoration of the royal palace at Stirling Castle, he was asked to carve wooden replicas of 37 medallions which once adorned the ceiling.

Known as the Stirling Heads, the unique pieces depict kings, queens and courtiers, with King James V and Margaret Tudor thought to be among them.

It has taken John more than five years to complete the project, but then, each piece is a metre wide, weighs around 90 pounds and is hand-carved from solid oak.

While it's not known exactly how many there were originally, John created 37 for the ceiling as well as four "spares".

He recreated 34 of these using templates taken of the originals, which were removed from the ceiling in the 18th Century.

These originals are to be displayed in a new gallery.

While two other medallions kept at Dunstaffnage Castle near Oban were destroyed in a fire, there were sketches of these from which he could work.

That made 36.

But he'd been commissioned to produce 37 — the number needed to fill the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall.

That left a blank canvas for the final one, which he decided should be of a woman.

From fragments of the lost medallions he was able to work out a suitable border.

And he drew inspiration for the woman's costume from a stone statue outside the palace.

But what about her face? Maybe he should look at paintings of the period, or just use his imagination to create a made-up image.

But then he had a thought.

Throughout history, artists have often taken the opportunity to incorporate their own faces into their work. At other times they've opted to include a family member.

That was it!

The image he'd most want to reproduce for posterity was that of his daughter, Fiona Maybin.

She was astonished at the explanation when her dad called to ask if she could supply him with a side-view photograph.

But when you have the chance to be represented in a world famous historical setting — possibly for centuries to come — who would refuse?

The beautiful woodwork will eventually be fixed on the ceiling along with the other 36 medallions, but already it has become affectionately known as The Carver's Daughter.

And needless to say, Fiona is overjoyed with her unique place in history.

After all, not many people can claim, quite literally, to be up among kings and queens in a castle!



■ John and Fiona with her wooden likeness.

# BBC in a pickle over proper English

By David Campbell

REMEMBER NELLIE PLEDGE? She was the vocally-challenged owner of Pledge's Purer Pickles in the 1960s sitcom *Nearest And Dearest*.

Played by the incomparable Hylda Baker, Nellie ran every sentence through a mangle before converting it into speech.

Well, now it seems she's given up the pickle factory to take over the BBC.

That's the only explanation I can think of for the way Auntie's modern-day Nellies use the Queen's English.

Miss Pledge was fond of beginning stories with the words, "There I was, stood standing there . . ." and it always got a laugh, because everybody knew it was wrong.

## Educated

But somehow it's not so funny when you hear a reporter on BBC radio announce that, "I am stood outside the company's office . . ."

I've heard it all too often, from journalists in the world's greatest news organisation, people educated (presumably) at least to college level, many to Oxbridge level.

The fact it keeps happening suggests either nobody at the BBC cares any more, or this usage has become the accepted one.

But if Nellie Pledge is now controller of English at the Beeb, it appears a small child has taken on the same role at Channel 4.

Am I the only one who has managed to get past the legs and other visible accoutrements of new *Countdown* hostess Rachel Riley to notice what she actually says?

Next time she's doing the number puzzle, listen to her describe her working-out. She doesn't multiply numbers, she "timeses" them, as in, "Times the seven and the six to get 42" or "Take the 12 and the seven and times them together . . ."

First time I heard this I thought she was joking. It's how we used to describe multiplying in Primary 1, when we couldn't say "multiply". But by Primary 2 we'd grown out of it. Rachel is an Oxford maths graduate, for goodness' sake! Yet not only does she say it every week, so do many of the younger contestants.

## Cultural

Is it a generation thing? I have children of a similar age to Rachel and I've never heard them "timesing" numbers. Is it a class thing, then? Or a cultural change that's started in England, has reached Yorkshire but hasn't made it over the border yet?

Whatever it is, I don't like it. Just as I don't like people saying *contribute* instead of *contribute* or *sicklelike* instead of *cyclicle* (do they go sickling on their bicks at weekends?).

I realise usage does change, and there's little we can do about it. But that doesn't make it easier for those who spend years learning what they will always think of as the correct usage.

Especially when the changes are, as with those above, so stupid and ugly.

Is there no way to ensure only pleasant, intelligent and useful changes are accepted into the language? Like having the BBC pickle anyone who speaks like Nellie Pledge?



"He does!"