

## **The IAM test – An associate’s experience**

I decided to take the IAM “Skill For Life” In November 2007, after a work colleague who is an IAM motorcycle member told me all about it. I had been driving for 19 years at this point and thought it was a great idea to learn the advanced skills needed to drive safer and be more observant for the roads these days.

Once I had received all of my information from the IAM, I joined the NW London & Chilterns Group at the beginning of Dec. It was now a case of waiting for an advisor to become free. As this is purely voluntary I had to wait 2 months before receiving the phone call. The date for my first observation run was set for noon on 16<sup>th</sup> Feb.

It was a clear dry winters day, when I met my advisor. We set off on a drive round Hertfordshire, so he could observe my basic driving skills. Then he took me out in his own car over the same route to show me how it should have been done. I must admit, from the marks we agreed on, I hadn’t done too bad. But my biggest issue was with break/gear overlap. At the end of the drive I said, “I’m not sure I’m going to master this”, as I.P.S.G.A. felt really strange trying to do it for the first time. We didn’t cover all of the aspects of the advanced driving skills, this drive was a basic assessment, and lasted around an hour. We agreed the date of the next drive and I went away to practice what I had been shown.

23<sup>rd</sup> Feb., and I’m back. We again drove round Hertfordshire, taking in all kinds of roads. I had been practicing the system of car control, and it showed in my marks, bettering the C from the first drive to a B in the second. We also started to include some extra hazard perception skills, and introducing one of the manoeuvres. But we never covered Driving Plan & Progress.

I must admit, when I first saw the Associate Progress Report sheet for the first time, it was a little daunting, but the skills were introduced gradually over 4 observation runs.

After each run, we spoke about the drive, and what areas we had covered off. We both agreed the level at which each skill should be marked, and which areas needed more work. My advisor was always saying that I was constantly setting my goals high.

Over 2 months and 5 observed runs; my scores became higher, until I was getting A’s down the whole sheet. Thanks to the time and my advisor constantly encouraging me to push myself to apply the skills I had been taught, it was now time to put in for the test. It took 4 weeks for the examiner to contact me and we agreed the date and time. I planned one more observation run with my advisor before the test, just to make sure my standards hadn’t slipped.

### **Test day**

It’s 9am on a glorious May morning, and I’m waiting nervously at the designated meeting point for my examiner to take my advanced driving test. I had had 6

observation runs preparing me for this day. My advisor had really put me through my paces, and my marks had been steadily improving to the point that I was ready. But this didn't stop me from feeling the way I was.

Smack on time, I see this figure walking across the car park, carrying the distinctive IAM bag. I thought "this is it," my examiner had arrived. He introduced himself, and we sat in the car. He started to put me at ease firstly by telling me to call him by his first name. We then proceeded to talk through what was going to happen, and reiterating what my advisor had been teaching me for the past few months. We spoke about my car, and some of the features and capabilities.

We spoke about commentary driving, and that it wasn't mandatory, but he may ask me to do some at some point during the drive. However if I wished to do so, I could commentate at any time if I felt it would help. Well, following a visit from Chris Gilbert on one of our group meetings, where he spoke about this very subject, and after watching the video he was selling (Ultimate Driving Craft). My advisor will be the first to admit, this was a pivotal turning point in my preparation, as on my next observation run, I commentated non-stop for the whole 75-minute drive. Needless to say, my driving skills showed a marked improvement. Anyway, I watched the video again the night before my test, and had decided that I was going to commentate as much as I could, as I knew it improved my overall observation, which is key to passing the test.

We started off, and I was told that the first 5 minutes would not be under test conditions, to make sure I was calm and ready. But I started my commentary from the point I moved forward. We set off towards Heathrow airport, and after a couple of roundabouts on the A4, I was told that the test started there.

I continued to commentate, and as we headed out around the perimeter of Heathrow and headed towards the M25, which we joined heading north towards the M40, at this point I was told that he had heard enough commentary, and I need do no more, unless I wanted to. So I continued. We encountered a small conflict joining the M25 that I probably could have dealt with a bit better. We were joining at a point where the motorway is split, and effectively I was now on the outer lane of the M4, and I had a slow moving car ahead of me with a closing gap, I had traffic in my offside mirror. I was hesitant about undertaking the slow vehicle, but I commentated my driving plan, found a safe place to pull out behind him and then formed a good overtake. This was mentioned in my debriefing, and he put it down as good because I had commentated my plan and executed safely. As it turns out, I could have under taken the vehicle, but even my examiner agreed that is is a grey area.

We exited onto the M40 eastbound, then out toward Denham and then onto Harefield. There was one point along this road where the speed drops from 60 to 30, and I was slightly late seeing the sign, and had to apply harder braking to meet the speed limit. I thought I had blown it at that point, and my commentary started to get less and less as I was convinced it was over, especially as we started to head back to the meeting point and the examiner stopped writing and placed his clipboard against his chest. But I still continued to drive with the same skills that I'd been taught.

We arrived back at the car park, and I was asked to do a reverse park into a bay. I could choose any one I wanted, but I was confident about my skills that I chose to park between two cars. It turned out that one of them belonged to my examiner.

I applied the handbrake, put the car into neutral, and mentally prepared myself for the worst. But he held out his hand, and said that he was recommending me for membership.

The debrief consisted of all the good points of the drive, the handling of the situations that we came across, including the dodgy learner driver who was swerving all over the place in a 40 mph area. Obviously out onto these roads too soon. But I showed restraint, and held back at a good distance, as there was no overtake opportunity, and we needed a safe distance to cover the uncertainty of the learner's actions. He also went through the minor faults, which I've mentioned earlier. He said that the average length of concentration is 45 minutes, and then the mind tends to lose focus. My faults were minor, and I'm reminded of my debriefings with my advisor and the repeated "They're minor" comments. But I do beat myself up, and the skills I have learnt are still the building blocks, and even though I have passed the test, there is always room to improve. So if you see someone driving towards you, constantly checking his mirrors, and seemingly talking to himself, it's probably me, commentating my drive to myself, as I do believe it is one of the best things to do to aid observation.