

# The Tenacity and Stoicism of the British Ice Cream Van Man

*Shôn Ellerton, June 8, 2022*

*Come hell or high water, rain or snow, or under nuclear attack, the ice cream van man will be there!*



Between the southern coast of Wales and England's west country lies a rather treacherous and muddy inlet of water called the Bristol Channel in which the River Severn flows out into. On the English side just south of Bristol lie a few seaside towns, each uninviting as the last. Portishead, Cleveland, Weston-super-Mare and Burnham-on-Sea, all relics of good times gone by but now tired, forlorn, and largely abandoned as holiday destinations.

I used to live in the UK for many years and remember driving down the M5 on several occasions to reach the West Country, passing road signs leading to such seaside towns wondering what appeal they have but never bothering to find out. On a recent trip back to the UK, I was travelling around the area and decided, after all this time, to explore the area. I took the turnoff to Burnham-on-Sea, leading to what seemed like miles and miles of meandering in slow traffic around small villages on the hope of reaching the esplanade. Finally, I reached it and parked near the seawall overlooking a very flat and foreboding expanse of mud. The esplanade seemed lively enough, but it was the Easter weekend, after all. Much like most English seaside towns, the air had that odd mix of tidal muds, fish and chips and candy floss. I gorged on a very nice large piece of haddock with crispy batter outside in the afternoon sun, although the wind was quite fresh and gusty reminding me to secure my napkins using several items off the table including a greasy bottle of vinegar. I would imagine that the off-season during the colder months, this seaside town would be unearthly quiet except for the usual punters who would make their way into one of the many

noisy amusement arcades strewn along the esplanade. Judging by their looks, the locals looked hardy and tough.

Walking across the road to the seawall, I descended onto the muddy beach using the boat ramp. It was low tide and I walked further out along the eroded concrete boat ramp until I came across a warning barrier not to walk any further. Either side of the ramp was thick oozy mud and straight ahead, and not far ahead from me, was the receding muddy water flowing at a torrential rate towards the vast muddy seemingly unending wastes of the Bristol Channel. Along the shore towards Minehead less than a few miles away, I could see Hinkley Point nuclear power station poised ominously on the horizon. Curiosity aroused; I crossed the warning barrier to get a closer look at the speed of the water only to have someone with a megaphone barking orders at me to remain behind the barrier for safety. Clearly, this is a very dangerous place at low-tide, which I later found out from a combination of fast currents and quicksand-like mud.

Walking back to the seawall, I note how forbidding it was. A massive grey twenty-foot high hulking arc of concrete dwarfing anyone walking underneath it. I wondered what kind of tidal differences and weather conditions would warrant such a wall of such leviathan proportions. I shudder to think.

Very few people were scattered over the beach. An elderly couple each carrying an empty fishing basket seemingly in everlasting hope that they might stumble upon some aquatic lifeform. One boy building a sand..., (*pardon*), mud-castle under the supervision of a bare-armed tattooed man smoking a cigarette. And one woman exercising her Labrador retriever with one of those doggy ball-flicker things. Mud flying this way and that. Yet, in all this 'Britishness' of a desolate seaside scene, what captivated my attention was the presence of a bright yellow ice cream van slap bang right in the middle of the muddy waste, its wheels precisely positioned on four square planks of wood, presumably to stop its small wheels from sinking towards the core of the Earth. Getting stuck here is simply not an option, because when that tide comes in, anything stuck in the mud and anything that might float *will* end up in the Irish Sea.

The immediate thought that came to mind was the sheer persistence and doggedness of it all. The stoic and tenacious lengths required to sell an ice cream. No doubt, positioning the planks of wood in advance and then driving the van onto the beach taking great care not to stop until all four wheels are on

top of them. Any miscalculation would, inevitably, mean driving back onto solid ground and repeating the process. I stood and stared in wonder for quite some time on the lookout for any punters who might suddenly come across all peckish like with an overwhelming desire to eat an ice cream. I saw none.

Yet, on *terra firma*, on the 'safe' side of the seawall on the kerb of the esplanade was another ice cream man in another brightly coloured van brandishing 99s to a couple of children. To those unfamiliar with a 99, it's one of those softy twirly ice creams in a wafer-thin cone which is then stabbed with a stick of Cadbury's Flake chocolate, although, they should be renamed to something like a 399 because, no way will you be able to buy one for 99 pence anymore.

I've yet to come across a more enterprising and enduring breed of salesman than the British ice cream van man. Fleets of ice cream vans with unfeasibly small wheels, bright colours, and strangely loud chimes which can be heard over any surrounding noise. I kid you not. I could be walking up a remote mountain in Wales in a howling gale and pick up the faint sound of a chiming ice cream van between gusts of wind from the other side of the ridge. On reaching the top of the ridge, I could imagine looking down on a vast green valley only to spot, in the middle of it all, a lonely ice cream van painted in some sort of ghastly ultra-fluorescent bright shade of purplish pink. I really don't think I'm exaggerating either. Provided there is some sort of drivable surface and no obstacle in a way, like a good solid Welsh stone wall, I can almost guarantee that there'll be an ice cream man there.

My family and I did a bit of a hike around the Strid Wood, an oak-laden valley in which the River Wharfe flows through not far from Bolton Abbey in Yorkshire. Popular as it may be, it was quite late in the day. There was hardly a soul about. The car park was near empty. It was cold and it was raining. We crossed the stream near to some ancient stepping stones, and sure enough, there he was! My young son's eyes lit up in glee. No doubt, the ice cream van man would have picked up any trace of young children about before any other mortal would in anticipation of selling an ice cream.

I looked into his eyes. I looked into my wife's eyes. My son was open-mouthed and salivating. The ice cream van man claimed victory after we walked away, ice creams in hand. In the cold. In the rain.

The tenacity of the British ice cream van man is second to none.