

Stick Shifts Aren't Great Because Granny's On The Road

Shôn Ellerton, July 29, 2026

Why it's a damned good thing that most cars on the road are automatics and not manuals.



I like to think myself as a seasoned driver.

I've driven a wide variety of cars since I was sixteen ranging from old beat-up gas-guzzling hand-me-downs like the Ford Granada and the Rover SD1 to fancy company cars like the BMW 330d, which I attest, was the best-handling car I've ever driven.

However, I've driven my share of manual cars as well. I learnt to drive on a manual and the very first time I took my test, I failed. I thought it was the end of the world at the time! I took my test on my mother's Volkswagen Golf, which, oddly, they called a Rabbit in the United States. Someone in the marketing division thought that the name 'Rabbit' would appeal more than 'Golf' for the American market. The driving instructor looked like he came straight out of the military, not too unlike the sergeant dude who played in that film *Full Metal Jacket*.

He, having chosen the most vicious uphill intersections, while coffee in hand, ordered me to proceed when the traffic light changed to green without spilling his coffee.

Nerves on edge, I jerked and stalled the car, not being in the right gear. The coffee splashed down the side of his cup, and he gave me a glaring look suggesting that I better brush up on my gear-handling techniques before re-taking the test in two weeks' time.

Two weeks is a long time for a sixteen-year-old anxious to get his car licence!

But yes, it didn't take too long to master a manual and, to this day, I have absolutely no problems driving them.

I'd just like to point out that when I mean manual, I mean *synchromesh* manual, the manuals used in *all* modern cars. I've tried out driving *non-synchromesh* or Road Ranger crash boxes in 18-wheelers, and I struggled big-time with them. Yes, I *do* have a heavy rigid driving licence but only for autos. Double-clutching manuals is another level of experience which I wished I mastered when I was younger.

Speaking to a lot of car enthusiasts, most, if not all of them, men, they often pine for the old days of the manual car. That playful movement of using the clutch and having complete control of the car, and all that jazz.

Well, I for one, *love* automatics because they're so damned effortless for the majority of us that have to sit around traffic light after traffic light being herded around like sheep on busy urban streets. How often in our everyday lives are we going for a sporting little drive around the hills in our sports manual car?

Not often.

But, you see, I still want my son, when he grows up, to learn on a manual, because I think it's important to know how to drive one. I've been on country site visits for work going to hilly places installing telco towers requiring the use of manual gearbox four-wheel utility vehicles. Even in England, hiring a car, you'll often find that quite a few cars are still manual and are much cheaper to hire, probably because fewer people know how to drive manuals these days.

But, I do not lament the near demise of the manual car.

Oh no! Not at all!

Do you know why?

I'll tell you.

Grannies!

Now, please accept my overreaching generalisation to my reaction, but, in general, yes! Grannies! Old women behind the wheel of a car.

Step back to the 80s and the 90s. A time when light-weight automatics were kind of crappy. When full size automatics were big and expensive. And when cheap fuel-efficient manuals were in abundance.

What did most of our grannies have?

For the sake of not being sexist, I should probably include grandpas as well!

That's right!

They had small little manual cars. That's what they had.

My nana had one. And she could not, for love of money, understand how gears worked. She drove in her little Mini Metro in England in the lowest gear possible with revs screaming much like that of a Formula One car but only going at forty to fifty miles an hour. My grandfather was the polar opposite keeping the car in inordinately too high of a gear stating that it saves fuel, which is a fallacy by the way, and then stopping the car often by stalling it. He never drove trucks so why he felt the need to immediately go into third gear at ten miles an hour was beyond comprehension.

It was painful being a passenger with *any* of my grandparents.

I'll state for the record that my mum, who's now approaching her 80s, has dodged the category of old person's driving habits. But kudos to her having had delectable cars in her history including Audis, Chevrolet Camaros and Ford Mustangs, although she was disappointed with her 80s Mustang because it wasn't the real McCoy like the stuff in the 70s.

I agree.

So, let's remember what it was like driving in the 80s and 90s in the city with a bunch of, usually older people, who can't get their car in gear when the traffic lights change.

Remember that time?

You're there behind someone who's clearly flailing around fishing for gears trying to get the car to move. It's cringeworthy and ultimately frustrating. Sometimes, you can hear the gears grinding if you have the windows open.

Forget the romanticism of manual cars!

Automatic cars have almost completely solved the problem of inept drivers not knowing how to start their cars in a timely manner when the traffic lights change to green.

Sure, there are slow drivers out there and those who are utterly clueless, but, in general, I think traffic would be a lot worse if we still had manual cars, because so many out there simply would not know how to drive them properly.

Stick shifts are fun to drive, granted. However, thank goodness most of the cars we have on our roads today are automatic, because, let's face it, there are so many out there on the roads who would have absolutely no clue how to drive a manual.

Long live the automatic!