

# 'Healey Highway

We drive the Northern Ireland coastline, in search of 'Healey heritage, long-lost family history and the perfect sports car road

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Goodbye Liverpool...



...hello Belfast



An adorable little bundle of fun. And a dog



'Healey 100, now upgraded to 100M spec, meets Titanic Belfast



The road taking in the Black Arch near Larne calls for busy use of the Austin-Healey's three gears

**W**e might never have taken this turning if we'd had a power socket for the satnav. But instead of heading inland to Ballymena along some computer-selected path, we've grabbed the first road headed in that general direction, and stumbled by sheer good luck across a perfect little jewel of winding hill-country farm lane. And for the 'Healey, it's love at first sight.

It leaps upwards from the coast highway like a jungle cat set loose in a petting zoo, the big four-banger snatching for grip in second gear around the tight, climbing corners. The snarl of the side-exit pipe hurled back at us from the stone farmyard walls is so hackle-raising that I soon time my driving to match. Wait, here's another wall, wait; now nail the throttle. This may not be Nirvana, but it'll do until the real thing comes along.

Chris Everard was absolutely right about the 'Healey. Martyn Goddard and I had bumped into Chris and Dan Everard of specialist JME 'Healeys last November at the Classic Motor Show, on the very day we'd visited the Northern Ireland tourism stand to finalise plans for a road trip on the Causeway Coastal Route. Chris took one look at our stack of travel brochures and said, 'You know, a 'Healey 100 would be perfect for that...'

It surely would. Northern Ireland's coast road is a scenic treasure and quite a sports car treat as well. NI also has motoring attractions and history long obscured behind the sad fog of politics. 'Healey's showing at the notorious 1955 Dundrod Tourist Trophy race with

the 100S was a textbook underdog-makes-good moment, and contributed toward a notable chapter of that obscured history. What else would possibly do except a 'Healey?

Flash forward to yesterday afternoon and we were collecting our ride from JME's home at The Cape in Warwick, on the 'Healey factory site where the 100S series was created. JME builds its painstakingly faithful 100S recreation in the very shop that birthed the originals, in addition to running its restoration, repair and sales operations from there.

For this trip they've provided us with a spotless 1954 'Healey 100 BN1. Prepared to 100M specs, it has an abundance of upgrades, including front disc brakes, an alternator conversion and a gear-reduction starter. Unlike a 100S, it also has a useable boot and hood, and while I'm aware of the utter contempt you Brits have for such deficiency of moral fibre, this fibre-less American fears pneumonia more than your disdain. A bit of weather protection, however minimal, seemed prudent for a Northern Irish spring.

As fate would have it, we were under canvas before we'd even left JME; showers dogged us clear to the Stena Ferry terminal in Liverpool, and on into our early morning Belfast arrival. The 'Healey stayed unexpectedly dry, though, considering we'd abandoned the side curtains to save storage space, and easily handled motorway speeds in overdrive. The overnight Stena with a sleeping cabin is the only way to ferry – a reasonable bed, your own shower, and on the ground before rush-hour traffic.

Anyone of Northern Irish ancestry, like yours truly, will want to make the Ulster Historical Foundation an early Belfast stop. It's a

non-profit genealogy service, particularly relevant to Americans of Ulster-Scots descent, or as we're called in the States, the Scots-Irish. Our ancestors immigrated early and so deeply into the isolated frontier wilderness that many of us don't even know we have NI bloodlines, much less any details, and a morning there is well spent adding leaves to my Drinnon family tree.

Belfast also has some rarely mentioned gearhead charms – Crosslé Cars, probably the world's oldest continuous racing car firm, is based in Holywood, as is the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. The latter includes a vast collection of Irish railway equipment, a Titanic gallery and spotlights the DeLorean project, as well as local boy and four-wheel-drive pioneer Rex McCandless. It's also home to the Titanic Belfast attraction. Located at the Harland and Wolff shipyard that produced the *Titanic* itself, it's not a museum, but a state-of-the-art multimedia experience. Outside, the preserved slipways are regularly used for special events – the 2014 Circuit of Ireland and Giro d'Italia both started here.

From there it's north-east on the A2 toward Carrickfergus, a welcome change because Belfast congestion isn't really to the 'Healey's liking. Despite the Kenlowe electric fan, the temperature needle rises noticeably in traffic, and visibility with the roof erected is nerve-wrackingly poor. With the BN1's cobbled-up gearbox arrangement (it uses only the upper three of an Austin A90's four ratios, and the shift pattern is inverted), the first to second shift is a pain around town, and the engine's timid at low revs anyway.

But we're all much happier by Carrickfergus. With the sky clearing, the roof can finally be stowed, and the road is opening up

## HERITAGE TOURISM FOR THE SCOTS-IRISH AMERICAN

Tracing Irish ancestors can be challenging; older civic records there are often sketchy – if not long destroyed. For Americans tracing Ulster-Scots ancestors, it's harder still – many of them emigrated in the early 1700s, a century before Irish civil registration officially commenced, and even the cemetery headstones are largely illegible by now. Nor is much of the surviving material digitised – the only alternative is poring over original documents such as church registries, or ledgers of the former English plantation estates.

Some pre-travel homework is, therefore, essential to establish a geographical starting point: learn where your antecedents lived, or were born, or married, and under what alternative surnames and when. Knowing their religion is also useful to pinpoint the appropriate churches (the 'Scots-Irish' weren't all necessarily Presbyterians, you know – or Scots, either), as is their

profession. Family correspondence, US regional history accounts and internet genealogy can also yield clues. Consulting the experts in advance is an absolute must; one email to the Ulster Historical Foundation probably saved me from coming home completely empty-handed. For further information go to [ancestryireland.com](http://ancestryireland.com).





Point-and-squirt 'Healey is happiest on these roads



Who needs a roof when you have The Dark Hedges for protection?



Giant's Causeway was built in legend by mighty Gaelic warrior Finn MacCool



The starting point for the North West 200 - only for the insanely brave

nicely too. We take the opportunity to refuel and do a bit of sightseeing. Besides offering a fine harbour-side Norman castle, Carrickfergus hosts a Drinnon in the old cemetery and a museum commemorating my fellow Tennessean and 7th US President Andrew Jackson. Elected in 1829, his parents were from hereabouts. Roughly a third of our Presidents were descended from Ulster-Scots, including Barack Obama. So were Davy Crockett, Mark Twain and Elvis.

Shortly past Carrickfergus is also when the A2's transition to Causeway Coastal Route becomes genuinely spectacular. From Larne northward it skirts the surf for miles, with options to loop briefly inland through the mountainous Glens of Antrim, a pattern of coast and countryside that repeats all the way to Derry/Londonderry. It's a thoroughly delightful drive in every sense, with stunning views and a smooth, swooping road.

For most of this initial leg we're content to let the 'Healey cruise along at 50 to 60-ish, a comfy, effortless one-gear lope for road and vehicle. Slipping tactfully through the occasional village might require a temporary drop out of overdrive, but that's about all. After the rigours of urban Belfast it's a joy to discover there's a deep well of midrange flexibility on the other side of the off-idle stutter that so irritates as you launch from traffic lights.

In the early afternoon, though, we make our lucky turn to Ballymena, through Glenarm, as it happens, southernmost of the Nine Glens. Ballymena is our first overnight stop, at the Galgorm

Resort and Spa, and another chance to hunt family gravesites; it's also my first exposure to Northern Irish golfing culture, and I can understand how Rory McIlroy learned his trade. Golf is a very serious thing here; the resort is huge, casually luxurious, and abuzz with a surprisingly international mix come to play at Galgorm Castle next door, site of the Northern Irish Open. I'm almost wishing I played the game myself.

Fortunately that aberration subsides by morning. Back on the coast, it's a gorgeous, hood-down day. The route heads north, drifting west into the mountains through Ballypatrick Forest, on the way to Ballycastle. It's some of the finest driving of the journey, for which the point-and-squirt character of the 'Healey is a delight. Granted, the pedal spacing doesn't lend itself easily to heel and toe, but in fast road driving the engine torque eliminates much of the gear shifting anyway – just settle into the corner and let the grunt pull you through.

Those travelling directly from the Belfast ferry will find Ballycastle a well-timed coffee stop; look for the Marine Hotel along the lovely seafront. But for lunch you'll want to be slightly west at Ballintoy harbour; while the café there isn't posh, the food is good, the staff are welcoming, and it overlooks one of the prettiest little waterfronts imaginable. Fans of the TV series *Game of Thrones*, I'm told, will recognise it as a filming location; swing south past Armoyn and you'll find The Dark Hedges, an eerie tree-lined avenue also used in the programme.

'With the sky slowly clearing, the roof can finally be stowed'

'Healey 100 drivers will be well-advised to remember that when you engage the clutch on the bomb-cratered Hedges lane, the activation arm sticks out below the alarmingly low chassis – a vulnerability that is exacerbated when you keep having to dip the pedal while easing across lumps and heaves. Not a particularly enjoyable episode, I must say, and what might have happened if I'd been going more than about 2mph doesn't bear thinking about...

Those who don't tarry could probably squeeze The Giant's Causeway into the day. That really deserves more time, though, and we divert instead to Ballymoney and the Joey and Robert Dunlop Memorial. With the North West 200 in Coleraine only days away, paying respects to two of motorcycle road racing's authentic legends feels right. Then we sprint for Bushmills, the 'Healey rushing like a mad thing along the arrow-straight but blind-crested backroads of the inlands – great fun until a bold overtaking attempt sorely tests the front discs. Oncoming lorries, it seems, love these straights too.

So a glass of the town's most famous product is quite soothing before dinner at the Bushmills Inn, a perfectly under-done steak that was completely worthy of Texas, a statement that pleased and amused the hotel crew no end. Indeed, another glass after dinner was better still, and the evening progressed thusly and most pleasantly. Happily, our rooms at the inn were quiet, elegantly understated and within staggering distance.

Nonetheless it's up and rolling in the early AM for The Giant's Causeway. The 'Healey fires promptly and heads off with nominal choke on virtually no warm-up, which is a relief – a little of that side pipe would go a long way for any guest attempting a lie-in.

## CROSSLÉ: STILL MAKING TOUGH RACING CARS AFTER 58 YEARS IN BUSINESS



There may be hidden somewhere another builder of dedicated competition cars that's older than Crosslé, established 1957, but not many that have never made anything else, still do it in the same premises, using the same techniques, and still involving some of the original people. Before his sad passing in August 2014, John Crosslé, MBE, actually still inhabited the family home adjoining the works, and could walk through the kitchen to chat with the machine shop lads – daughter Caroline remains a member of the board.

During that time Crosslé has produced roughly a thousand cars. Early on they were mostly open-wheelers, and their Formula Fords were championship winners so tough and economical they also became favourite driving school cars. Nigel Mansell raced a Crosslé, so did Eddie Irvine and Michael Andretti, and

historic racers love them because they're fast, easily maintained, and you can pick up the phone and order spares for everything.

Modern production is focused on a continuation series of the model 9S sports racer, designed in 1965, and an FIA-eligible version called the HTP. The firm also restores Crosslés. Officially, there are no factory tours. Unofficially, however, current owner Paul McMorran (left), himself a long-time Crosslé enthusiast, usually finds a way to accommodate at least a peek through the door, given enough prior notice. See [crossle.co.uk](http://crossle.co.uk) for details.





Upgrade to 100M-spec  
cost £105 in 1954

Barely five minutes later and we're at the Causeway, a UNESCO World Heritage site and a wonderment of geological marvels and Celtic mythology, then directly on to ruined but breathtaking Dunluce Castle. The pair of them are famous in some circles for things far greater than mere television appearances – they both featured on the same Led Zeppelin album cover.

Afterwards we visit cliff-top Downhill Estate, but resist the temptation for a blast along the beach below and make for early arrival at the Roe Park Resort hotel and a wander in Roe Valley Country Park. Like the Galgorm, Roe Park is another golf venue and a regular waypoint for car club tours. Once the staff see the 'Healey outside, they insist we park up front, pride of place.

But all the bonhomie doesn't deter the rain – our final day begins re-erecting the roof. In this steady soaking it's suddenly not so snug either, and the usual creeping heat from the 'Healey's gearbox tunnel will be welcome for a change; we're backtracking all the way to southern County Antrim, home of the Dundrod circuit.

There, in the 1955 RAC Tourist Trophy, the 100S of Raymond Flower and Mike Llewellyn survived an accident-strewn race that eliminated lead 'Healey driver Lance Macklin and claimed three lives, placing 14th overall. It was the highest-placed ordinary sports car in a field full of full-on racers from Mercedes, Ferrari and Jaguar. After the Macklin 'Healey's involvement in the Le Mans tragedy it was a real shot in the arm for the young company and, behind Sebring, the second highest international finish of the season.

That was the last car race on the track, but motorbikes still compete there. That's a testament to the bravery of Irish road racers,

because Dundrod, just as in 1955, is only a narrow, winding, deadly public road closed off occasionally for the purpose of going insanely fast. The circuit proper is indistinguishable from the area's other obstacle-lined roads, until you notice the occasional marshal's box – even so, the lap record is currently 133.977mph.

As a public thoroughfare, lapping is obviously unlimited and free, so I set off from the start/finish grandstands, fully intending to learn the lines and at least have a respectable go at it. Then I get to Deer's Leap, the corner that contributed two of the 1955 fatalities – hump-backed, camber-changing, devoid of the slightest run-off space and now drenched with a raging downpour. I decide it's time to mosey toward the return ferry. Lots of my ancestors may rest peacefully right here in Antrim, but I'm in no great hurry to join them.

*For further information on exploring the Causeway Coastal Route, visit [causewaycoastandglens.com](http://causewaycoastandglens.com).*

#### AUSTIN-HEALEY BN1 TO 100M SPEC

**Engine** 2660cc in-line four, ohv, twin 1¾ inch SU HD6 carburettors

**Power and torque** 110bhp @ 4500rpm, 143lb ft @ 2000rpm

**Transmission** Three-speed manual, Laycock overdrive on 2nd and 3rd,

rear drive **Brakes** Four-wheel drum (disc/drum conversion as driven)

**Suspension** Front: independent, double wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers, Panhard rod **Steering** Cam and peg **Weight** 2170lb (984kg)

**Performance** Top speed: 109mph; 0-60mph: 9.6sec **Fuel consumption** 25mpg **Cost new** £855 + tax (£750 base price, add £105 for 100M kit)

**Value now** £40,000 to £90,000