

WASHING YOUR CAR

CLEANING UP

If You're One Of Those People Who Don't Bother Much About Washing Your Car, You Need To Think Again...



Mucky motorists who rarely clean their cars could be putting themselves at risk of a serious accident or falling foul of the law. In a recent survey of two hundred motorists, conducted by the RAC Foundation, it was found that the traditional Sunday wash and wax is now declining as Sunday shopping is increasing.

Many motorists don't clean their cars regularly, according to the survey, and others only clean the windscreen when visibility becomes dangerously obscured. Some claimed to never clean their car at all.

While dirty windows can compromise road safety and constitute an offence when they become obscured, the legal implications of having mucky number plates have also become more significant as GATSO speed enforcement devices have spread while, in the future, congestion charging systems will also work on registration recognition.

Vehicle construction regulations state that motorists must ensure that they have full visibility through their windscreen and that their number plate must be clear. Whilst motorists will usually be encouraged to clean their vehicle if stopped by the police they can, in the worst-case scenario, be issued with a fixed penalty notice and fine of £40 if their vehicle is filthy. The maximum penalty for having a number plate that is not visible is £1,000.

The combination of dirty windows with low morning and evening sun in the autumn-time can completely obscure a driver's view and frequently causes accidents. Moreover, in times of more uncertain weather, vehicles will become dirty and dusty very quickly. When asked how often they clean their vehicles, sixty per cent of the drivers in the survey said that they clean their cars at least once every two months. A further twenty eight per cent said that they would only have their car cleaned once every three to four months. Two per cent owned up to never cleaning them. Ten per cent of the motorists surveyed said that they only ever give their car a ' cursory clean ' when they found that their windscreen visibility was severely diminished.

While there is still a proportion (20 per cent) who clean their car, or take it to the car wash, regularly on a weekly or fortnightly basis, the days of spending a Sunday morning cleaning the family motor seem to belong firmly in the past. For this group, pride in their vehicles seems to be the spur to car cleaning, but the reasons that prompted others to wield a sponge were more varied:

"When I can't see through the windscreen, I know it's time."

"When the mother-in-law is coming to stay."

"When I pick up my girlfriend/ boyfriend/ boss."

"When someone nags me into it."

The survey also found that the motorists who rarely clean their vehicles were overwhelmingly either company car drivers or owners of cars that were over five years old. Of those who admitted to only washing their cars infrequently, the majority said that their cars were regularly parked outside overnight - on the road or in a drive - rather than kept in a garage.

Edmund King, Executive Director of the RAC Foundation has strong views on the whole subject of car cleaning: "Car owners who don't keep their cars clean could be compromising their own safety and that of other road users. There are also legal reasons why motorists need to keep their cars clean, not least that much new camera technology works on number plate recognition."



Clearly visible number plates are also important for your safety and the security of your vehicle, in case of theft, collision or a hit and run accident. Dirty or smeared windscreens and windows can reduce drivers' visibility and contribute to collisions. Equally, dirty or obscured lights or brakes will stop you seeing and being seen. Many accidents are caused when other road users don't realise that you may be braking or signalling to change direction.

"There seems to be less pride in cars these days," he says. "Most people regard them as household tools rather than status symbols. With many two and three-car households, the likelihood is that at least one of their vehicles will 'live' outside all year round - which means it also gets dirtier faster.

"We can all remember family members spending Sunday afternoons cleaning the family car. Many of us have neither the time nor the enthusiasm for the job any more but car washes are cheap and plentiful. Cleaning a car of muck, salt and grit will also ensure that it lasts longer and keeps its value."

So where are the cleanest cars in Britain? Well, according to recent research, the Welsh shampoo, Hoover and polish their cars more often than anyone else. On average, owners fill the bucket and wring out the chamois 6.1 times a year more than residents within Greater London (3) and Scotland (2.9) collectively spend cleaning their cars. Just behind Wales in the sparkling stakes is the West Midlands (5.5 washes per year), the South West (5.2) and the South East (5.1).

Despite a rapidly ageing vehicle population (55 percent are 6 years or older today compared to just 44 percent in 1990) requiring an extra dose of TLC, more than 1 in 10 (13 percent) admit to never cleaning their cars. Of those who did, an estimated £100m is spent on cleaning products annually, the equivalent of £3.70 for every car registered. Alarming though, 1 in 2 of those questioned in the recent Comma-sponsored survey admitted to using household washing up detergent as opposed to proper shampoo formulas.

Car owners aged between 45 and 54 admit to spending the most time with sponge and bucket in hand, followed by 55 to 64 year olds. By comparison, newer-qualified drivers, those falling into the age bracket 17-24, are the least likely to be seen on the driveway on a Sunday morning.

In terms of which part of the car (exterior or interior) takes priority, 73 percent of men admitted they spent more time cleaning and polishing the exterior of their cars. Conversely, the majority of women (61 percent) said they preferred to make sure the inside of the car was cleaner.

In recent times, many people have invested in high pressure washers, widely available at DIY stores for domestic use. These can force water into parts of the car and engine where water shouldn't be. The electrical connectors under the bonnet are highly protected by the manufacturer, but they are not designed to withstand being blasted by high pressure washers. Typical faults which can develop can range from the car simply not starting after having been washed, to warning lights appearing on the dashboard, windscreen wipers operating when not expected to, or the car's lights not coming on at all.

The danger of using high pressure washers to wash the car does not stop at using them to clean the engine. They can also cause problems when cleaning the outside of the car. The high pressure can force water through seals into the boot or interior. AA patrols have found water in CD multi-changers which can cause warning signs to be displayed on the dashboard.

Today's cars are much more complex than 20 years ago when they simply had one computer to run them. Modern cars tend to have 40 or more computers, meaning that there are more possibilities for complex problems. High pressure power washers can force water into fuse boxes, relay boxes and connectors which can be found all over modern cars, and can cost hundreds of pounds to repair.

Basically, a bit of grime on the engine does the car no harm. It is safer to leave it there than to risk short circuiting expensive electronic components.