

Why do Brits drive on the left?

So, we arrive off the ferry at Calais or Santander and must remind ourselves to drive on the right side of the road because for years, we on our tiny island have been driving on the “proper” side and now have to fall in line with “Johnnie foreigner” but why?

It is widely accepted that it all started because most of us are right-handed so pedestrians and horsemen kept to the left on tracks to have their swords available to fight off passers-by or potential robbers. Apparently, the Romans who conquered a lot of what was then the known world marched to the left and drove their chariots and wagons to the left also.

Not much photographic evidence of this so how do we know? Well, preserved tracks near to a quarry in Swindon, Wiltshire show the ruts created by the wagons are deeper on the left side of the road out of the quarry when the wagons would be fully loaded as opposed to empty on the way in; seems logical. Another report that states that Roman chariot riders held the reins in their right hands and whips in their left so drove on the left so as not to whip into other chariots passing by

So why drive on the right?

It is claimed that driving on the right started with the use of wagons in both France and what is now the USA. Such wagons had no driving position so the driver or teamster rode on the rear left horse of his team in order that he could use his whip over the horses to his front and right. To ensure that he could closely watch wagons going in the opposite direction he kept to the right of tracks. The Yanks after their revolution, probably also drove on the right just because their colonial masters drove on the left. In Canada, French Quebec drove on the right and the Brit bits on the left until falling in line with Quebec and the USA

In France, it was the custom for the nobility to keep to the left side of the track, again in order to defend themselves whilst the peasantry stayed over to the right. After the French revolution, to keep a low profile, the toffs moved over to the right too. It isn't recorded if they dressed in rags and were told to eat cake in case they lost their heads. A simplistic explanation as to why other European countries drive on the right is because of France's major influence over mainland Europe over recent centuries, whereas before many had also driven on the left

British influence

Only about 30% of countries drive on the left, always because of British influence, in most cases as former colonies. The Japanese also drive on the left, not a lot of people know that! This was because the Brits helped to build their railways and so on the supply roads took to the left. In Europe, only 4 countries keep left, the UK, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus. Over the years many countries have switched from left to right with Sweden being a significant one on

3 September 1967. The UK considered it back in the 60's but the cost to change the road infrastructure is just too great so left it will remain, especially post Brexit!

ITV inspectors just cannot understand how we can drive when the steering wheel is on the right, but I repeatedly explain it is because we are used to it so is no big deal for most of us. I have had a number of clients over the years who despite living in Spain source their replacement cars in the UK as they just cannot get used to "left hookers". Yes, overtaking requires more care and toll booths can be a pain unless you have a zapper to open the barrier, but like keeping UK driving licences, it reminds us who we are

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