
How to save £3000 in 1999-2000 when buying a new car

It was in 1999, I was working for a large software organisation based in the Netherlands and had been working for ten years as a contractor to Philips – the global Dutch lighting and consumer electronics company, properly known as NV Philips Gloeilampenfabrieken. I imagine that the name is something of a give-away, courtesy of Anton Philips back at the dawn of the 20th Century.

Commuting weekly to the Netherlands was quite a trial, and over the eight years that I had already been doing it I had honed it down to a fine art, having evaluated direct flights from Gatwick to Eindhoven or indirect flights via Amsterdam Schipol, or using a combination of plane and train. Finally I realised that an opportunity to save “loads of money” was available to me in the shape of importing a new car from the EU and only registering it in the UK. (Unhappily that option disappeared a few years after I had taken advantage of it.).



The ever popular
Ford Focus

I explored the options in depth and found the **Canada Garage** – an unlikely name for a Ford distributor based in Bruges. They were very happy to supply me with a right-hand drive Ford Focus; to deliver it unregistered to Dover, and in the process, to save me around £3,000 against purchasing the same car in the UK. This looked too good to be true. However further investigation confirmed it, and so I set about purchasing the vehicle, at which point the fun started.

Canada Garage took the full payment in advance and kept me well informed about delivery, which would be to Dover docks, where I could simply fetch up with a copy of their email and collect the car, or so they intimated. So far so good.

I was told by my normal insurer that you may only drive a car in the UK if it is both registered and insured, but to get a car insured you need to know the registration number. But what happens if it is unregistered? This foxed every insurance provider, who wouldn't touch me with the proverbial bargepole. I despaired. Further enquiries with DVLA ensued, and a light was cast into my darkness: they advised that I only needed the VIN number to give to the insurer. This narrowed the field somewhat: I found just one insurer prepared to play ball, but only long enough for me to get the vehicle home and off the road. The next problem arose – you must not drive a vehicle on UK roads without a registration plate. Further discussion with DVLA determined that an unregistered vehicle could be driven – just ONCE - from the port of entry to the home address, once insurance had been

arranged. I didn't see the need to ask any further about the need for red 'Trade Plates', which nearly proved to be my undoing. Thereafter the vehicle had to sit uninsured in limbo-land off the public highway until registered as a UK vehicle. Phew! Canada garage provided the VIN number, so I was now street legal.

The vehicle was duly shipped to Dover and sat happily insured awaiting collection. I drove down to Dover accompanied by my wife. Once in the docks she would take over the car we had driven down in, and I would drive the new car. We would then leave the docks. Simple, or so we foolishly believed.

We arrived at the docks and were directed to the police station close to the entrance. I knew that I had first to produce my identity to be allowed into the dock area. But Judith was with me, and they wanted to see hers as well. Luckily she had a driving licence with her, which satisfied the police. We were then issued with a (single) plastic entry/exit card which we would need to surrender on leaving the restricted dock area.

As a normal traveller I had been on both cross channel ferries and hovercrafts on numerous occasions. But unless you have been in the docks on some real business you can have little idea of how massively complex an operation it is. Indeed they have had to reclaim so much land in extending the docks seawards that some wags claim it won't be long before you can walk to France.... Having no idea of the size or layout of the docks we casually asked the policeman where Gate 31 was, because that is where we had to collect the car. Effectively, and unknown to us, the complete dock is largely a one-way system: Gate 31 was way around the docks – nearly at an exit point - and we needed to find our way there. This was where our trials and tribulations began in earnest, because we had no map of the dock area, which is very large indeed - covering several square miles. Within two or three minutes we were lost and had been directed (incorrectly) into the queue for a ferry shortly to be leaving for Calais. Fortunately, we realised shortly before our wheels hit the boarding ramp and a swift U-turn enabled us to fetch up in some desperation at a ticket office, where the staff proved much more helpful. We were directed to drive all around the port to find Gate 31, effectively from say 06:00 to 15:30 in clockface terms. We then saw our first glimpse of our shiny new Focus, just a few metres away, stored behind an impossibly high chain-link fence. But just prior to gate 31 we needed to surrender the precious pass to a ticket barrier machine and our hopes started to drain away. We needed to lose our card to get the barrier opened. At gate 31 we arrived next to a control point having a guichet some three feet above the car – clearly intended for truck drivers to communicate to the person behind the window. The controller within leant out and asked what on earth we were doing there as no doubt he only ever had trucks passing through. We pointed through the chain link fence at the new Focus and said that we had come to collect it. "Great" he said, "Please may I have your papers?". This left us nonplussed, as we had only a grubby printed copy of the email sent from Canada

Garage, which of course proved inadequate, but fortunately he knew how to solve the problem. We needed to collect the authorisation documents and the all-important ignition keys from the “Freight Forwarding Office”. He let us through his barrier; lowered a special vehicle weighbridge and told us to U-turn and drive across it and back ANTI-clockwise through the port to find the appropriate office. Recall that at this point we had no access card, no documents, no map, and we were driving through the port in a counter clockwise direction. We drove for about half a mile and found what we assumed was the correct office. We stopped the car and climbed up around twenty steps to open the door of a grubby office with the word “Freight” emblazoned above it, occupied by about a dozen people hacking away at computer terminals. They looked surprised, and when we explained our mission, there was a “Not here, sir. Keep driving right through the port until you meet the sea wall. Follow to the left and the office you want is there at the top of another flight of steps”. We returned to the car and continued our trip. We now found that we had to cross at ninety degrees about four separate queues of motorists lined up boarding or disembarking from four different ferries. This obviously puzzled the police or dock operatives supervising loading or unloading, but they eventually parted the way to allow us through. We blindly followed the instructions, only to have precisely the same “Not here, guv!” experience at the second freight office! I refused to leave until they had given clear instructions of how to drive to the “real” Freight Forwarding” office, which proved to be almost within smelling distance. They advised us exactly where we needed to go: it was only about another two hundred yards, and we could even see it. But that two hundred yards proved to be several one-way streets away, and without a map, faced with a myriad of NO ENTRY signs I smelt disaster again. Gathering up my strength I eventually broke the law and drove a short distance past one of those forbidding signs to access the office we really needed. Success at last!

We joined the queue, produced our email evidence, and requested our documents and keys. The clerk concerned then asked us to produce our ID (no problem – my passport sufficed) and trade plates. Gulp! He needed us to be in possession of those red and white plates you see lashed onto cars being driven around by garages. He wasn’t prepared to cough up the goods until we produced the plates, and clearly had never been in this situation before. We politely explained the insurance position and showed him the evidence of insurance and correspondence from DVLA. There was much sucking of teeth and shaking of head in disbelief, but it did the trick: thank goodness he just wanted to get onto the next client and didn’t call up a senior staff member. We left with documents and keys. Triumph!

So – we drove back in the right direction, but having no card, how were we to exit Dover port once we had possession of the new car? The man at Gate 31 saw us arrive for the second time. Judith was driving behind me in our old SAAB and a couple of gestures and a friendly wave got us both out of the port at last. Apparently there was a manual override for the barrier. Huge relief!

Next problem – petrol. Canada garage had decanted a litre or two of petrol into the tank and we were well into the red, about to join the M20, and service stations on the M20 are few and far between. We limped to the first station on the M20, desperate neither to run out of fuel nor to meet up with the boys in blue. Then after filling up, a careful journey up M20 and M25 ensued without any red delivery plates. We didn't fancy having an argument with a member of the Kent, Surrey, or Sussex police. Finally at home with the new car parked securely off road we were able to apply to the office in Brighton to get the vehicle registered and the outstanding import duty (VAT) paid.

The car was then used for weekly commuting to and from Eindhoven via the Channel Tunnel and the French/Belgian/Dutch motorway network – a four-hour journey if commenced at 05:00 am, and driven to the legal limit on the motorways – basically 90-100mph most of the way. I used to hit the Antwerp morning rush hour when the speed dropped to an M25-like crawl, but could still be in the office enjoying my first cup of Dutch coffee by about 9:00 UK time.

On one occasion, as I drove down the French motorway at about 85 mph in the fast lane I was confronted by an errant cast iron drain cover – about three inches thick – which had appeared from nowhere. It was impossible to avoid: there was a loud bang and some very distressed noises from the nearside front wheel – (the nearside in the UK but the offside in France). I pulled over onto an extremely narrow hard shoulder and risked my life to jack up the car with trucks whistling past a couple of feet away. The tyre was ruined and there was some underbody damage, but the wheel proper was OK. I fitted the emergency low speed wheel as a temporary replacement and drove slowly off towards the Netherlands with flashers going. Suddenly I had an inspiration: I could detour to Bruges, where Canada Garage was located and cry on their shoulder. Happily it was but a short detour and I soon found the garage. They were pleased to see me and couldn't do enough to help. The car rapidly disappeared into the workshop for a safety check and a replacement tyre. I sat down to have a well-earned cup of coffee and within half an hour a loud voice proclaimed in perfect English that the car was repaired and awaiting me at reception.

Roll forward twenty years and I am attending a silver wedding celebration. I have a double-take when I see that one of my friends has a car with just one digit difference from the dear old Focus – now long since traded in. It transpires that he went through exactly the same process as me to import his car, but still had the car concerned – a Volkswagen Polo I believe. We must have very nearly bumped into each other at the registration office! But, he had imported his car from Denmark – where the purchase tax on cars was then 155%, and where the manufacturers cut the intercompany transfer price even further than the Belgians to encourage sales, so he saved even more money!

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