

Electric shocker



If we expect to power our vehicles with electricity in future, then we need to invest in charging points that are easy to find, welcoming, quick at their job and simple to use. Following a recent week-long electric-powered road trip, **Neil Barrett** was left scratching his head at poor availability and consistency of charging supply...

“After this week, I’m not buying an electric car until I have to.”

I RECENTLY spent the best part of a week driving a loaned electric car some rather long distances around the country, for a work project. The comment I’ve just quoted was made by my co-driving colleague about the experience. That was at the end, so let’s start at the beginning. First, I’ll put my cards on the table. I am a fan of electric vehicles. I own one. I don’t extensively preach the benefits to anyone who’ll listen but I’m happy to answer questions and dispel some of the myths when asked about running one. I’m fine with charge times, enjoy the journey, like the technology and have seen some spectacular-looking parts of the world at a fraction of the cost per mile of my earlier road trips.

So far, so good. However, I now realise that I’ve been wrapped up in triple-layered cotton wool: I don’t usually need to commute long distances, I can top up overnight at home most of the time and the car’s manufacturer has its own charging network. The reality of electric vehicle ownership

for people who are regularly undertaking long work journeys on a tight schedule appears quite different from what I’ve been used to. Here’s what five days on the road looked like.

DAY 1: LONDON TO DUNDEE

The navigation tool suggested that it would be possible to have just two charging stops but we wondered whether that was the right thing to do. It tends to be quicker to charge a battery at lower charge levels, so it’s more efficient to have longer charges from lower starting points, compared with lots of little top-ups. In the end, we settled for three stops. This was partly because, at one of the service stations, one of the two charging points wasn’t working; it wouldn’t accept any sort of card. We had to wait. On arrival, we thought we would get a head start on the following day by charging near the hotel. As a business EV driver, you want to make sure that charging time isn’t dead time, so you multitask. The plan was to top up for a couple of hours whilst unpacking and catching up on work.

The unit we found ran at roughly the same speed as a home charger – nowhere near the rate of rapid chargers you would



see in more prominent locations. It had two outlets (bring your own cable) and one was in use by a taxi driver, who – I would guess – knew that this charger shared power between outlets and was charging his car more slowly now we had arrived. Checking our remote monitoring app later showed that the car had mysteriously stopped charging ten minutes after we left it.

DAY 2: DUNDEE TO GLASGOW

Our first meeting was in the middle of Dundee. We needed the car for the meeting but managed to put in a few miles of range at a local multi-storey, paying for the parking as well as the charging. This policy varies wildly between car parks: many in eco-friendly council areas are free for a while if you're charging.

En route to Edinburgh for our next meeting, we found a fully working, genuinely fast charger at a garden centre surrounded by beautiful countryside. Then, when we arrived at the meeting venue, it was great to see that the owners had embraced the “charge where you park” mindset of EV infrastructure development by providing several private rapid

chargers on site. That's more like it. When it works, it really does work. We headed for Glasgow with a full battery.

DAY 3: GLASGOW TO LINCOLN

We were on a roll. After another meeting with on-site charging, the next stop was Middlesbrough. From Carlisle onwards, the rain set in and didn't leave us for the rest of the day. After the Middlesbrough meeting we faced a journey to Lincoln. The thought of plugging in at our final destination late in the evening was not appealing so we went on a town centre charger hunt. We found a promising-looking outlet inside a soon to be closed car park but it needed me to sign up to a charging network app which I didn't already have. Ten minutes later the app was downloaded, installed and registered for. There was just the card details to enter.

The app didn't support a 2021 card start date nor a 2026 expiry date. We then found one of the most reliable and fast chargers we had access to all week, in a free car park. A Tesco Express picnic, whilst streaming some TV comedy gold through the car sound system, restored the tranquillity whilst passing the time.

(continued overleaf)

ROAD TRIP

DAY 4: LOCAL LINCOLNSHIRE DRIVING

This was a pretty uneventful day, logistically speaking – a reminder of how great local driving with an EV can be. One long session at a state-



of-the-art rapid charger on a brand new, food-focused retail park kept us going.

DAY 5: LINCOLN TO COVENTRY

After our first meeting in Nottingham we were on our way to Wolverhampton. We thought we would go to Norton Canes services on the M6 Toll motorway as we knew there were rapid chargers there. Unfortunately this is where the human factor kicked in. There were four parking spaces, one for each charging plug that was available. One driver was parked diagonally across two spaces and another was at least head-on to the charge point but otherwise unaware

of the concept of parking space markings, so we had to wait.

I did speak to both drivers and was told in no uncertain terms that Mr Diagonal wouldn't move while he was charging. I must mention that almost all EV drivers I meet are extremely considerate because they understand the inconvenience to journeys it can cause otherwise, so this was an exception.

The second driver did reposition to a single parking place on request, so there was enough space for me to get in. Unfortunately, the charge point in question would not share power between its two plugs, only charging whichever car was plugged in first. The need to wait resulted in a wasted hour, on top of the charging hour, meaning that we were late for the next meeting. There was appalling traffic in the area, so our frustration was reduced a little because everyone else attending the meeting was late.

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THE EDITOR ADDS:

My experience of electric cars is limited. I have had the opportunity to test drive a few. So it was with a sense of excitement that I embarked on a similar-length road trip in an identical electric car during the same week, covering much of the south-west of England, the New Forest and South Wales before meeting Neil in Coventry. My feverish anticipation quickly disappeared and I was left severely frustrated at the shocking absence of any cohesive charging network. During my week I encountered chargers that wouldn't work with my car, others that didn't accept the card I had been given... and plenty that just plain didn't work at all. On the first day, the vehicle charge was down to eight miles before I could find a suitable unit that was in working order. Full marks to Holiday Inns in Gloucester and Newport for having fast chargers. Just a shame to have received a £100 parking ticket whilst recharging and grabbing a quick cup of tea inside. James



ON REFLECTION

Did any of this surprise me? Only some of it. I'm used to the time, route and contingency planning that EV ownership needs. You really do need to think differently. I was, however, naive about the extent of unreliability found on some of the charging networks, real versus estimated charge speeds and the challenges that arise from a lack of consideration and courtesy.

I'm still sold on the benefits, not least in terms of running costs, environmental credentials at the point of driving and the ability to top up at home. The infrastructure in the UK is ever expanding and, on the whole, strong compared with many other countries – and there are various incentives for ownership and home charging in place. But I am not the one who needs to be convinced. I think back to my colleague's view of the challenges over the five days - a view shared to varying degrees by the other EV-newbie members of the team who were doing similar work that week – and wonder whether there's still quite a bit to do in terms of the real-world ownership experience, before many long-distance car commuters feel they can make the leap.