I hardly noticed the passage of the weeks as I rattled along the moorland roads on my daily rounds; but the district was beginning to take shape, the people to emerge as separate personalities. Most days I had a puncture. The tyres were through to the canvas on all wheels; it surprised me that they took me anywhere at all.

One of the few refinements on the car was a rusty ‘sunshine roof’. It grated dismally when I slid it back, but most of the time I kept it open and the windows too, and I drove in my shirtsleeves with the delicious air swirling about me. On wet days it didn’t help much to close the roof because the rain dripped through the joints and formed pools on my lap and the passenger seat.

I developed great skill in zig-zagging round puddles. To drive through was a mistake as the muddy water fountained up through the gaps in the floorboards.

On joining the Darrowby practice, James is given a tiny Austin 7 car ‘of almost forgotten vintage’ to do his rounds. Like all vets working in rural areas, James spends a great deal of time behind the wheel of a car, coaxing it up the hills of the Yorkshire Dales in all weathers. The car has seen better days: its tyres are worn and every morning it’s touch and go whether it will start, the engine only coughing into life after several turns of the starting handle or a tow from Boardman.

These were still early days for cars – James’s Austin was probably manufactured in the 1920s – and compared to modern cars, they were uncomfortable, noisy and bitterly cold in the winter with no heating. When working in Thirsk Alf also drove a rundown Austin 7 although by then he’d had some experience driving aged cars, getting by in a tiny, old-school Ford during his time in Sunderland. In a letter to his parents in January 1940, he described the experience of driving the Ford, his words infused with the humour he would later utilize to such great effect in his books: ‘The car, using the word in its broadest sense, makes a colossal din and, in the country, the birds rise from the hedges in fright and the cows and horses in the fields look definitely startled. The vibration is terrific over thirty-five miles per hour and my liver will be in splendid condition after a month or two at it.’

Driving the Austin 7 across the rugged landscape of Yorkshire was also something of a challenge in a car that lacked the horsepower to make it up steep inclines. Around Thirsk, the approach to the Hambleton Hills via Sutton Bank was probably the worst – even in first gear the car struggled with its one-in-four gradient and Alf had no option but to reverse up it. In good weather, Alf could slide open the car’s very primitive

sunroof, but in wet weather, rain would leak through it even when closed, so that he had to put plastic sheeting on his knees.

The car's thin tyres were also prone to punctures and positively dangerous in snow or rain and, if the windscreen had iced up, Alf would often have to drive with his head out of the window. Out of desperation, he came up with an ingenious way to melt a few inches of the frost on his windscreen, referred to in It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet.

It was more than ten miles to the Clayton farm and it was one of those iron days when the frost piled thickly on the windscreen blotting out everything within minutes. But this morning I was triumphant. I had just bought a wonderful new invention – a couple of strands of wire mounted on a strip of Bakelite and fastened to the windscreen with rubber suckers. It worked from the car batteries and cleared a small space of vision.

No more did I have to climb out wearily and scrub and scratch at the frozen glass every half-mile or so. I sat peering delightedly through a flawlessly clear semicircle about eight inches wide at the countryside unwinding before me like a film show; the grey stone villages, silent and withdrawn under their smothering white cloak; the low, burdened branches of the roadside trees.

I was enjoying it so much that I hardly noticed the ache in my toes. Freezing feet were the rule in those days before car heaters, especially when you could see the road flashing past through the holes in the floorboards. On long journeys I really began to suffer towards the end. It was like that today when I got out of the car at the foot of the Pike Edge road; my fingers, too, throbbed painfully as I stamped around and swung my arms.

While driving up hills was a challenge for James's car, driving down them was even more alarming. The brakes on the Austin were always ineffective – as James found, violent pressure on the brake pedal would cause the car to stop, but only after a certain amount of veering across the road. But gradually, the brakes grow weaker until they become entirely absent, as one farmer discovers to his cost.

I thought, not for the first time, that if you had to drive a car with no brakes one of the last places in England you'd want to be was the Yorkshire Dales. Even on the flat it was bad enough but I got used to it after a week or two and often forgot all about it. As when one day I was busy with a cow and the farmer jumped into my car to move it so that one of his men could get past with a tractor. I never said a word as the unsuspecting man backed round quickly and confidently and hit the wall of the barn with a sickening crash. With typical Yorkshire understatement, all he said was, 'Your brakes aren't ower savage, mister.'

Without brakes, Alf became adept at descending the many hill roads by putting his car into first gear, yet even this didn't stop it reaching terrifying speeds as it hurtled

round bends, the engine screaming. In It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet, James is forced to run his brakeless car into a wall to avoid a flock of sheep, exactly as Alf did in the Witton Steeps in the Dales. Before launching himself down the hill, James sits for a long time looking down at Mr Robinson's farm, which lies a thousand feet below at the bottom of a steep track 'with two villainous S-bends. It was like a malevolent snake coiling almost headlong from where I sat'. With his heart thumping, he wrestles in his mind over which route he should take: to go back into Darrowby and take the low road into Worton, a safer detour of over ten miles, or to go straight down.

At last, I started the engine and did what I always did – took the quick way down.

But this hill really was a beauty, a notorious road even in this country, and as I nosed gingerly onto it, the whole world seemed to drop away from me. With the gear lever in bottom and my hand jammed against it I headed, dry-mouthed, down the strip of tarmac which now looked to be almost vertical.

It is surprising what speed you can attain in bottom gear if you have nothing else to hold you back and as the first bend rushed up at me the little engine started a rising scream of protest. When I hit the curve, I hauled the wheel round desperately to the right, the tyres spun for a second in the stones and loose soil of the verge, then we were off again.

This was a longer stretch and even steeper and it was like being on the big dipper with the same feeling of lack of control over one's fate. Hurtling into the bend, the idea of turning at this speed was preposterous but it was that or straight over the edge. Terror-stricken, I closed my eyes and dragged the wheel to the left. This time, one side of the car lifted and I was sure we were over, then it rocked back onto the other side and for a horrible second or two kept this up till it finally decided to stay upright and I was once more on my way.

Again a yawning gradient. But as the car sped downwards, engine howling, I was aware of a curious numbness. I seemed to have reached the ultimate limits of fear and hardly noticed as we shot round the third bend. One more to go and at last the road was levelling out; my speed dropped rapidly and at the last bend I couldn't have been doing more than twenty. I had made it.

It wasn't till I was right on to the final straight that I saw the sheep. Hundreds of them, filling the road. A river of woolly backs lapping from wall to wall. They were only yards from me and I was still going downhill. Without hesitation I turned and drove straight into the wall.

There didn't seem to be much damage. A few stones slithered down as the engine stalled and fell silent.

Slowly I sank back in my seat, relaxing my clenched jaws, releasing, finger by finger, the fierce grip on the wheel. The sheep continued to flow past and I took a sideways glance at the man who was shepherding them. He was a stranger to me and I prayed he didn't recognize me either because at that moment the role of unknown madman seemed to be the ideal one. Best not to say anything; appearing round a corner and driving deliberately into a wall is no basis for a rewarding conversation.

The sheep were still passing by and I could hear the man calling to his dogs. 'Get by, Jess. Come by, Nell.' But I kept up a steady stare at the layered stones in front of me, even though he passed within a few feet.

I suppose some people would have asked me what the hell I was playing at, but not a Dales shepherd. He went quietly by without invading my privacy, but when I looked in the mirror after a few moments I could see him in the middle of the road staring back at me, his sheep temporarily forgotten.

James had repeatedly spoken to Siegfried about the dangerous state of his Austin and the more senior vet had told him not to worry and to leave it with him. The problem was he never did anything about it and, as the car was Siegfried's property, there was little James could do but wait for him to take some action. It's only when Siegfried himself experiences the full terror of the car that he eventually does something about its sorry condition.

This occurs when the two vets head to a case together at a farm just outside Darrowby. Siegfried decides to drive them in the Austin, with James 'huddled apprehensively next to him as he sets off at his usual brisk pace.'

Hinchcliffe's farm lies about a mile on the main road outside Darrowby. It is a massive place with a wide straight drive leading down to the house. We weren't going there, but as Siegfried spurted to full speed I could see Mr Hinchcliffe in his big Buick ahead of us proceeding in a leisurely way along the middle of the road. As Siegfried pulled out to overtake, the farmer suddenly stuck out his hand and began to turn right towards his farm directly across our path. Siegfried's foot went hard down on the brake pedal and his eyebrows shot right up as nothing happened. We were going straight for the side of the Buick and there was no room to go round on the left.

Siegfried didn't panic. At the last moment he turned right with the Buick and the two cars roared side by side down the drive, Mr Hinchcliffe staring at me with bulging eyes from close range. The farmer stopped in the yard, but we continued round the back of the house because we had to.

Fortunately, it was one of those places where you could drive right round and we rattled through the stackyard and back to the front of the house behind Mr Hinchcliffe who had got out and was looking round the corner to see where we had gone. The

farmer whipped round in astonishment and, open-mouthed, watched us as we passed, but Siegfried, retaining his aplomb to the end, inclined his head and gave a little wave before we shot back up the drive.

Before we returned to the main road I had a look back at Mr Hinchcliffe. He was still watching us and there was a certain rigidity in his pose which reminded me of the shepherd.

Once on the road, Siegfried steered carefully into a layby and stopped. For a few moments he stared straight ahead without speaking and I realized he was having a little difficulty in getting his patient look properly adjusted; but when he finally turned to me his face was transfigured, almost saintly.

I dug my nails into my palms as he smiled at me with kindly eyes.

'Really, James,' he said, 'I can't understand why you keep things to yourself. Heaven knows how long your car has been in this condition, yet never a word from you.' He raised a forefinger and his patient look was replaced by one of sorrowing gravity. 'Don't you realize we might have been killed back there? You really ought to have told me.'

The experience of driving with Siegfried is just as hair-raising when he is at the wheel of his own car. His cars, in particular his battle-worn Hillman, bear testament to years of hard driving; sitting in the passenger seat requires nerves of steel and a strong stomach.

Outside the house, Farnon motioned me towards a battered Hillman and, as I moved round to the passenger's side, I shot a startled glance at the treadless tyres, the rusty bodywork, the almost opaque windscreen with its network of fine cracks. What I didn't notice was that the passenger seat was not fixed to the floor but stood freely on its sledge-like runners. I dropped into it and went over backwards, finishing with my head on the rear seat and my feet against the roof. Farnon helped me up, apologizing with great charm, and we set off.

Once clear of the market place, the road dipped quite suddenly and we could see all of the Dale stretching away from us in the evening sunshine. The outlines of the great hills were softened in the gentle light and a broken streak of silver showed where the Darrow wandered on the valley floor.

Farnon was an unorthodox driver. Apparently captivated by the scene, he drove slowly down the hill, elbows resting on the wheel, his chin cupped in his hands. At the bottom of the hill he came out of his reverie and spurted to seventy miles an hour. The old car rocked crazily along the narrow road and my movable seat slewed from side to side as I jammed my feet against the floorboards.

Then he slammed on the brakes, pointed out some pedigree shorthorns in a field and jolted away again. He never looked at the road in front; all his attention was on the countryside around and behind him. It was that last bit that worried me, because he spent a lot of time driving fast and looking over his shoulder at the same time.

Despite driving like a whirling dervish himself, Siegfried is disapproving of anyone else who does the same, particularly if they are driving a car he owns. When James's car returns from the garage, Siegfried advises him to take it easy when he drives it – no more 'belting along like a maniac' – although the elder partner does exactly this when he's next at its wheel.

Then there came the day when Siegfried decided to have my car rebored. It had been using a steady two pints of oil a day and he hadn't thought this excessive, but when it got to half a gallon a day he felt something ought to be done. What probably decided him was a farmer on market day saying he always knew when the young vet was coming because he could see the cloud of blue smoke miles away.

When the tiny Austin came back from the garage, Siegfried fussed round it like an old hen. 'Come over here, James,' he called. 'I want to talk to you.'

I saw he was looking patient again and braced myself.

'James,' he said, pacing round the battered vehicle, whisking specks from the paintwork. 'You see this car?' I nodded.

'Well, it has been rebored, James, rebored at great expense, and that's what I want to talk to you about. You now have in your possession what amounts to a new car.' With an effort he unfastened the catch and the bonnet creaked open in a shower of rust and dirt. He pointed down at the engine, black and oily, with unrelated pieces of flex and rubber tubing hanging around it like garlands. 'You have a piece of fine mechanism here and I want you to treat it with respect. I've seen you belting along like a maniac and it won't do. You've got to nurse this machine for the next two or three thousand miles; thirty miles an hour is quite fast enough. I think it's a crime the way some people abuse a new engine – they should be locked up – so remember, lad, no flogging or I'll be down on you.'

He closed the bonnet with care, gave the cracked windscreen a polish with the cuff of his coat and left.

These strong words made such an impression on me that I crawled round the visits all day almost at walking pace.

The same night, I was getting ready for bed when Siegfried came in. He had two farm

lads with him and they both wore silly grins. A powerful smell of beer filled the room.

Siegfried spoke with dignity, slurring his words only slightly. ‘James, I met these gentlemen in the Black Bull this evening. We have had several excellent games of dominoes but unfortunately they have missed the last bus. Will you kindly bring the Austin round and I will run them home.’

I drove the car to the front of the house and the farm lads piled in, one in the front, the other in the back. I looked at Siegfried lowering himself unsteadily into the driving seat and decided to go along. I got into the back.

The two young men lived in a farm up on the North Moors and, three miles out of the town, we left the main road and our headlights picked out a strip of track twisting along the dark hillside.

Siegfried was in a hurry. He kept his foot on the boards, the note of the engine rose to a tortured scream and the little car hurtled on into the blackness. Hanging on grimly, I leaned forward so that I could shout into my employer’s ear. ‘Remember this is the car which has just been rebored,’ I bellowed above the din.

Siegfried looked round with an indulgent smile. ‘Yes, yes, I remember, James. What are you fussing about?’ As he spoke, the car shot off the road and bounded over the grass at sixty miles an hour. We all bounced around like corks till he found his way back. Unperturbed, he carried on at the same speed. The silly grins had left the lads’ faces and they sat rigid in their seats. Nobody said anything.

The passengers were unloaded at a silent farmhouse and the return journey began. Since it was downhill all the way, Siegfried found he could go even faster. The car leaped and bumped over the uneven surface with its engine whining. We made several brief but tense visits to the surrounding moors, but we got home.

It was a month later that Siegfried had occasion to take his assistant to task once more. ‘James, my boy,’ he said sorrowfully, ‘you are a grand chap, but by God, you’re hard on cars. Look at this Austin. Newly rebored a short time ago, in tiptop condition, and look at it now – drinking oil. I don’t know how you did it in the time. You’re a real terror.’

When it comes to driving the practice cars, Siegfried is even more distrustful of his younger brother Tristan, and not without reason. In It Shouldn’t Happen to a Vet Tristan must chauffeur for James, who has his arm in a sling after a bad calving, much to Siegfried’s fury as it’s only been a week since his brother had crashed and written off his Hillman. Their call-out involves taking the still-brakeless Austin across fields to Mr Prescott’s farm, which, like some Dales farmsteads, has neither a road nor farm track leading to it. Now returning home, they have driven up the steep slope again,

James has opened the last gate, where he joins Tristan, who has got out of the car and is sitting with his back against the gatepost. They take in the view of the farm far below and just as Tristan closes his eyes and takes in a long, deep gulp of moorland air and Woodbine smoke, there's suddenly a grinding noise coming from the car.

'Christ! She's off, Jim!' he shouted.

The little Austin was moving gently backwards down the slope – it must have slipped out of gear and it had no brakes to speak of. We both leaped after it. Tristan was nearest and he just managed to touch the bonnet with one finger; the speed was too much for him. We gave it up and watched.

The hillside was steep and the little car rapidly gathered momentum, bouncing crazily over the uneven ground. I glanced at Tristan; his mind invariably worked quickly and clearly in a crisis and I had a good idea what he was thinking. It was only a fortnight since he had turned the Hillman over, taking a girl home from a dance. It had been a complete write-off and the insurance people had been rather nasty about it; and of course Siegfried had gone nearly berserk and had finished by sacking him finally, once and for all – never wanted to see his face in the place again.

But he had been sacked so often, he knew he had only to keep out of his way for a bit and his brother would forget. And he had been lucky this time because Siegfried had talked his bank manager into letting him buy a beautiful new Rover and this blotted everything else from his mind.

It was distinctly unfortunate that this should happen when he, as driver, was technically in charge of the Austin. The car appeared now to be doing about 70 m.p.h. hurtling terrifyingly down the long, green hill. One by one the doors burst open till all four flapped wildly and the car swooped downwards looking like a huge, ungainly bird.

From the open doors, bottles, instruments, bandages, cotton wool cascaded out onto the turf, leaving a long, broken trail. Now and again a packet of nux vomica and bicarb stomach powder would fly out and burst like a bomb, splashing vivid white against the green.

Tristan threw up his arms. 'Look! The bloody thing's going straight for that hut.' He drew harder on his Woodbine.

There was indeed only one obstruction on the bare hillside – a small building near the foot where the land levelled out – and the Austin, as if drawn by a magnet, was thundering straight towards it.

I couldn't bear to watch. Just before the impact I turned away and focused my attention on the end of Tristan's cigarette, which was glowing bright red when the

crash came. When I looked back down the hill the building was no longer there. It had been completely flattened and everything I had ever heard about houses of cards surged into my mind. On top of the shattered timbers the little car lay peacefully on its side, its wheels still turning lazily.

Fortunately, Mr Prescott has a horse that pulls the car upright again, although Tristan and James learn that the hut the runaway car had destroyed was in fact the clubhouse of the neighbouring Darrowby golf course. Thankfully, the sturdy little engine of the Austin starts up again and they are able to return to Skeldale House. Siegfried, however, who is coming down with a summer cold, is less than happy when he sees the car's broken rear light, raging at Tristan that he is a 'bloody young maniac . . . Go on, get to hell out of it. I'm finished with you.'

The following morning, Siegfried, now in bed with laryngitis, reads in the Darrowby and Houlton Times that the golf clubhouse has been mysteriously knocked down. It suddenly occurs to him that Tristan had been at Mr Prescott's but as soon as he mentions this, he slumps back and mutters, in a manner that is quite unlike Siegfried, that it's wrong of him always to blame Tristan for everything. He then gets a call about a cow with milk fever and tells Tristan to drive James straight to it. Tristan informs him the Austin is in the garage, and Siegfried has no choice but to let him take the Rover. In a menacing voice he hisses to Tristan: 'Right, so you'll have to take the Rover. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd let a wrecker like you drive it, but just let me tell you this. If you put a scratch on that car I'll kill you. I'll kill you with my own two hands.'

Undeterred, Tristan is thrilled to have the opportunity to drive Siegfried's Rover. He carefully backs it out of the yard, then on the Sorton road, nestling down into the car's rich leather upholstery, he puts his foot hard on the accelerator and brings it to an effortless eighty miles per hour. Ahead a large square-topped car is trying to overtake a milk lorry, and to James's horror they are thundering side by side towards the Rover. As they shoot past, the large car ends up crashing into one side of the Rover. When they stop, they discover that the entire left side of the Rover has lost its doors and is a 'desert of twisted metal where the old car, diving for the verge at the last split second, had ploughed its way.' They know they're in trouble and Tristan sets his agile mind on what to do next.

It seemed to me after a short appraisal of the situation that he had three possible courses of action. First, and most attractive, he could get out of Darrowby permanently – emigrate if necessary. Second, he could go straight to the railway station and board a train for Brawton where he could live quietly with his mother till this had blown over. Third, and it didn't bear thinking about, he could go back to Skeldale House and tell Siegfried he had smashed up his new Rover.

They bravely – or perhaps foolishly – take the third option and head back to the house.

Siegfried is now very ill in bed, his face red with fever, barely able to whisper. Tristan tells him he has had ‘a bit of a bump with the car’ and that the ‘front and rear wings pretty well mangled, I’m afraid – and both doors torn off the left side’.

As if operated by a powerful spring, Siegfried came bolt upright in the bed. It was startlingly like a corpse coming to life and the effect was heightened by the coils of Thermogene which had burst loose and trailed in shroud-like garlands from the haggard head. The mouth opened wide in a completely soundless scream.

‘You bloody fool! You’re sacked!’

He crashed back on to the pillow as though the mechanism had gone into reverse and lay very still. We watched him for a few moments in some anxiety, but when we heard the breathing restart we tiptoed from the room.

On the landing Tristan blew out his cheeks and drew a Woodbine from its packet. ‘A tricky little situation, Jim, but you know what I always say.’ He struck a match and pulled the smoke down blissfully. ‘Things usually turn out better than you expect.’

Alf had in reality consulted with Brian Sinclair on many of the events related in If Only They Could Talk, including when he pranged his elder brother’s Rover. ‘You bloody fool! You’re sacked!’ is a faithful reproduction of the words used by Donald when he discovered what had happened to his beloved car. The demolishing of the hut was also based on a real incident and to this day Alf’s son Jim still points out where that happened on the Leyburn road in North Yorkshire.

Brian wasn’t the only culprit when it came to giving the practice cars a hard time. Many of the assistants who worked at 23 Kirkgate would drive them at maximum speed, careering across rough farm tracks and shooting around bends, only to end up in ditches. As a result, the cars were constantly in and out of the garage and a substantial drain on the finances of the practice. Cars suffered considerably in the hands of assistant Brian Nettleton, known in the books as Calum Buchanan, the ‘vet wi’ t’badger’, as recounted in Chapter 4. Not only would he drive them at speed, returning one day with the front wing completely missing, but his pet badgers also caused havoc in the back seats.

When he wasn’t crashing cars, Brian, who always delighted in pranks, couldn’t resist having a bit of fun with them, much to the consternation of visitors to the practice. In Vet in a Spin Tristan enacts a well-worn stunt, while James and the local blacksmith Pat Jenner are in the practice yard seeing to a horse.

Some days Pat Jenner came in to check on the shoes and he and I were busy in the yard when I heard the familiar rattle of my little Austin in the back lane. The big double doors were open and I looked up as the car turned in and drew alongside us.

Pat looked too, and his eyes popped.

‘Bloody ’ell!’ he exclaimed, and I couldn’t blame him, because the car had no driver. At least it looked that way since there was nobody in the seat as it swung in from the lane.

A driverless car in motion is quite a sight, and Pat gaped open-mouthed for a few seconds. Then just as I was about to explain, Tristan shot up from the floor with a piercing cry.

‘Hi there!’ he shrieked.

Pat dropped his hammer and backed away. ‘God ’elp us!’ he breathed.

I was unaffected by the performance because it was old stuff to me. Whenever I was in the yard and a call came in, Tristan would drive my car round from the front street and this happened so many times that inevitably he grew bored and tried to find a less orthodox method.

After a bit of practice he mastered the driverless technique. He crouched on the floor with a foot on the accelerator and one hand on the wheel and nearly frightened the life out of me the first time he did it. But I was used to it now, and blasé.

When Siegfried knocks the exhaust off his car while bumping along a farm track, he realizes in The Lord God Made Them All that they need to acquire a spare car for the practice. Heading to Mr Hammond’s garage, he decides to take a 1933 Morris Oxford for a quick spin and gives it a thorough testing before he makes up his mind.

‘Hop in the back, James!’ my partner cried. I opened the rear door and took my place behind Mr Hammond in the musty interior.

Siegfried took off abruptly with a roaring and creaking from the old vehicle and despite the garage man’s outward calm I saw the back of his shirt collar rise a couple of inches above his blue serge jacket as we shot along Trengate.

The collar subsided a little when Siegfried slowed down at the church to make a left turn but reappeared spasmodically as we negotiated a series of sharp and narrow bends at top speed.

When we reached the long straight lane which runs parallel to Trengate Mr Hammond appeared to relax, but when Siegfried put his foot on the boards and sent the birds squawking from the overhanging branches as he thundered beneath them, I saw the collar again.

When we reached the end of the lane Siegfried came almost to a halt as he turned left.

‘I think we’ll test the brakes, Mr Hammond,’ he said cheerfully, and hurled the car suddenly along the home straight for Trengate. He really meant to carry out a thorough test. The roar of the ancient engine rose to a scream and as the street approached with frightening rapidity the collar reappeared, then the shirt.

When Siegfried stood on the brakes the car slewed violently to the right and as we catapulted crabwise into Trengate, Mr Hammond’s head was jammed against the roof and his entire shirt-back was exposed. When we came to a halt he slid slowly back into his seat and the jacket took over again. At no time had he spoken or, apart from his up-and-down movements, shown any emotion.

At the front door of the surgery we got out and my colleague rubbed his chin doubtfully. ‘She does pull a little to the right on braking, Mr Hammond. I think we’d need to have that rectified. Or perhaps you have another vehicle available?’

The garage man did not answer for a few moments. His spectacles were askew and he was very pale. ‘Aye . . . aye . . .’ he said shakily. ‘I ’ave another little job over there. It might suit you.’

Along with bumpy farm tracks, steep hills and the wild weather of the Dales, James and Siegfried often had to contend with packs of dogs chasing and barking at their cars as they drove out of farmyards. Alf frequently had large dogs escorting him as he made his way along tracks, some even dangerously darting close to the car and biting its wheels. This would then send Hector, the noisiest dog Alf owned, quite loopy if he was in the car, as he galloped around the inside defending his territory. If Alf’s children were in the car, their job would be to load up syringes with water and squirt them at any chasing dogs, a tactic that proved remarkably effective.

In Let Sleeping Vets Lie, James meets a dog who is something of a professional when it comes to car chasing.

A lot of farm dogs are partial to a little light relief from their work. They like to play and one of their favourite games is chasing cars off the premises. Often I drove off with a hairy form galloping alongside and the dog would usually give a final defiant bark after a few hundred yards to speed me on my way. But Jock was different.

He was really dedicated. Car chasing to him was a deadly serious art which he practised daily without a trace of levity. Corner’s farm was at the end of a long track, twisting for nearly a mile between its stone walls down through the gently sloping fields to the road below and Jock didn’t consider he had done his job properly until he had escorted his chosen vehicle right to the very foot. So his hobby was an exacting one.

I watched him now as I finished stitching the foal's leg and began to tie on a bandage. He was slinking about the buildings, a skinny little creature who without his mass of black and white hair would have been an almost invisible mite, and he was playing out a transparent charade of pretending he was taking no notice of me – wasn't the least bit interested in my presence, in fact. But his furtive glances in the direction of the stable, his repeated criss-crossing of my line of vision gave him away. He was waiting for his big moment.

When I was putting on my shoes and throwing my Wellingtons into the boot I saw him again. Or rather part of him; just a long nose and one eye protruding from beneath a broken door. It wasn't till I had started the engine and begun to move off that he finally declared himself, stealing out from his hiding place, body low, tail trailing, eyes fixed intently on the car's front wheels, and as I gathered speed and headed down the track he broke into an effortless lope.

I had been through this before and was always afraid he might run in front of me so I put my foot down and began to hurtle downhill. This was where Jock came into his own. I often wondered how he'd fare against a racing greyhound because by golly he could run. That sparse frame housed a perfect physical machine and the slender limbs reached and flew again and again, devouring the stony ground beneath, keeping up with the speeding car with joyful ease.

There was a sharp bend about halfway down and here Jock invariably sailed over the wall and streaked across the turf, a little dark blur against the green, and having craftily cut off the corner he reappeared like a missile zooming over the grey stones lower down. This put him into a nice position for the run to the road and when he finally saw me onto the tarmac my last view of him was of a happy, panting face looking after me. Clearly he considered it was a job well done and he would wander contentedly back up to the farm to await the next session, perhaps with the postman or the baker's van.

In the final book, James is finally able to upgrade to an Austin 10, which is still second-hand but has been well maintained and looked like new with black, sparkling bodywork. When he turns up at farms in a new-looking car, he is invariably met with a certain amount of leg-pulling from the farmers, who joke they are paying too much for his services. Alf similarly used to get a lot of usually good-natured ribbing from farmers if he turned up in a brand-new car and it was almost a relief when he reverted to buying a second-hand one in the 1960s.

As James muses in Every Living Thing, veterinary work is not a path to riches – he works hard seven days a week, in the evenings and often during the night 'rolling about on cobbled floors fighting with tough calvings to the point of exhaustion, getting kicked, crushed, trodden on and sprayed with muck'. Despite all of this, he still has a

hefty overdraft, compensated by the fact he spends much of his time driving around the glorious countryside of the Dales. And for this, he counts himself lucky in whatever car he drives.