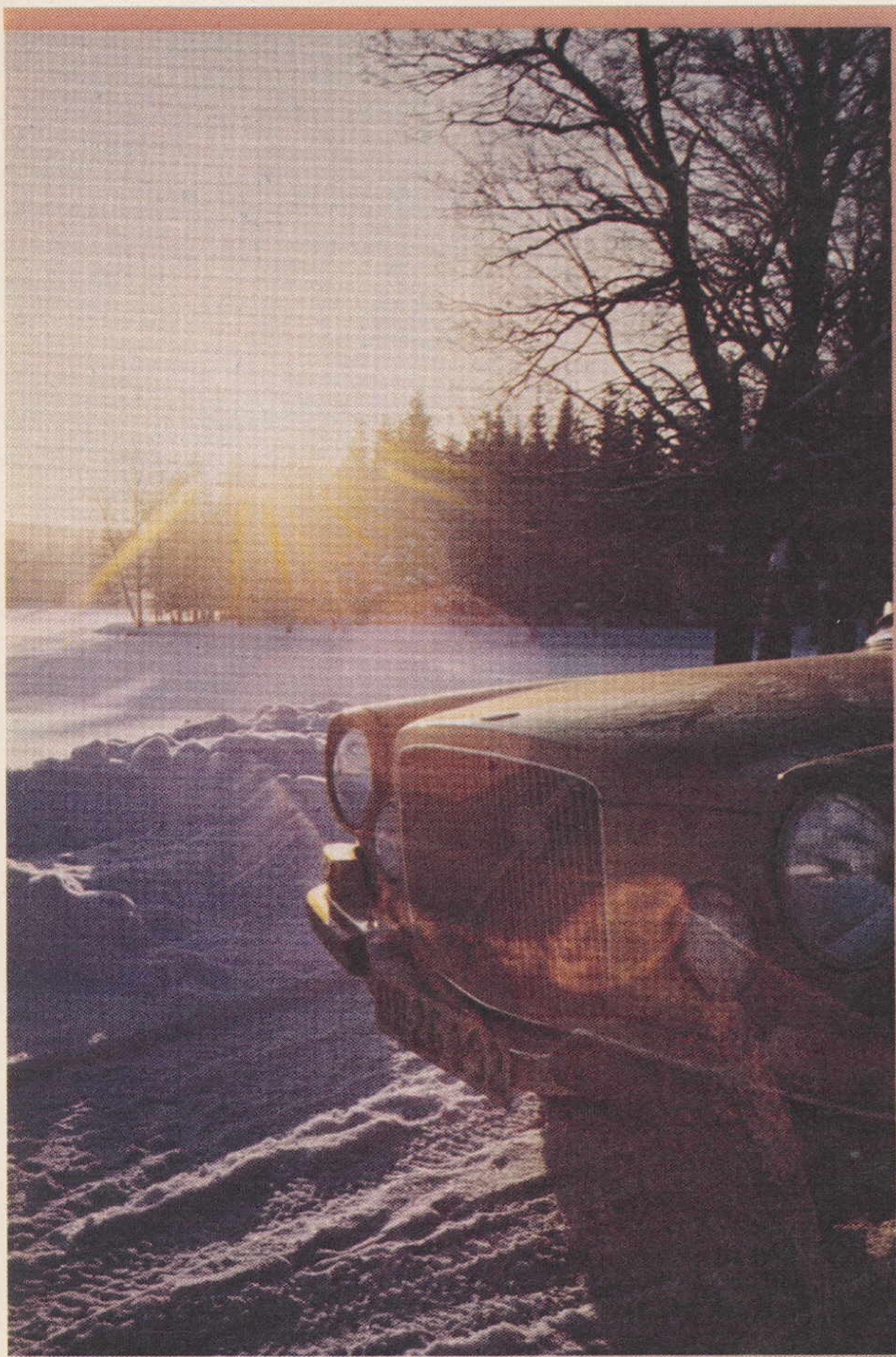
19 NOVEMBER 1970 2s 6d (12½p)

AUTOCAR

READY FOR WINTER?

Road Test: Simca 1204 Special



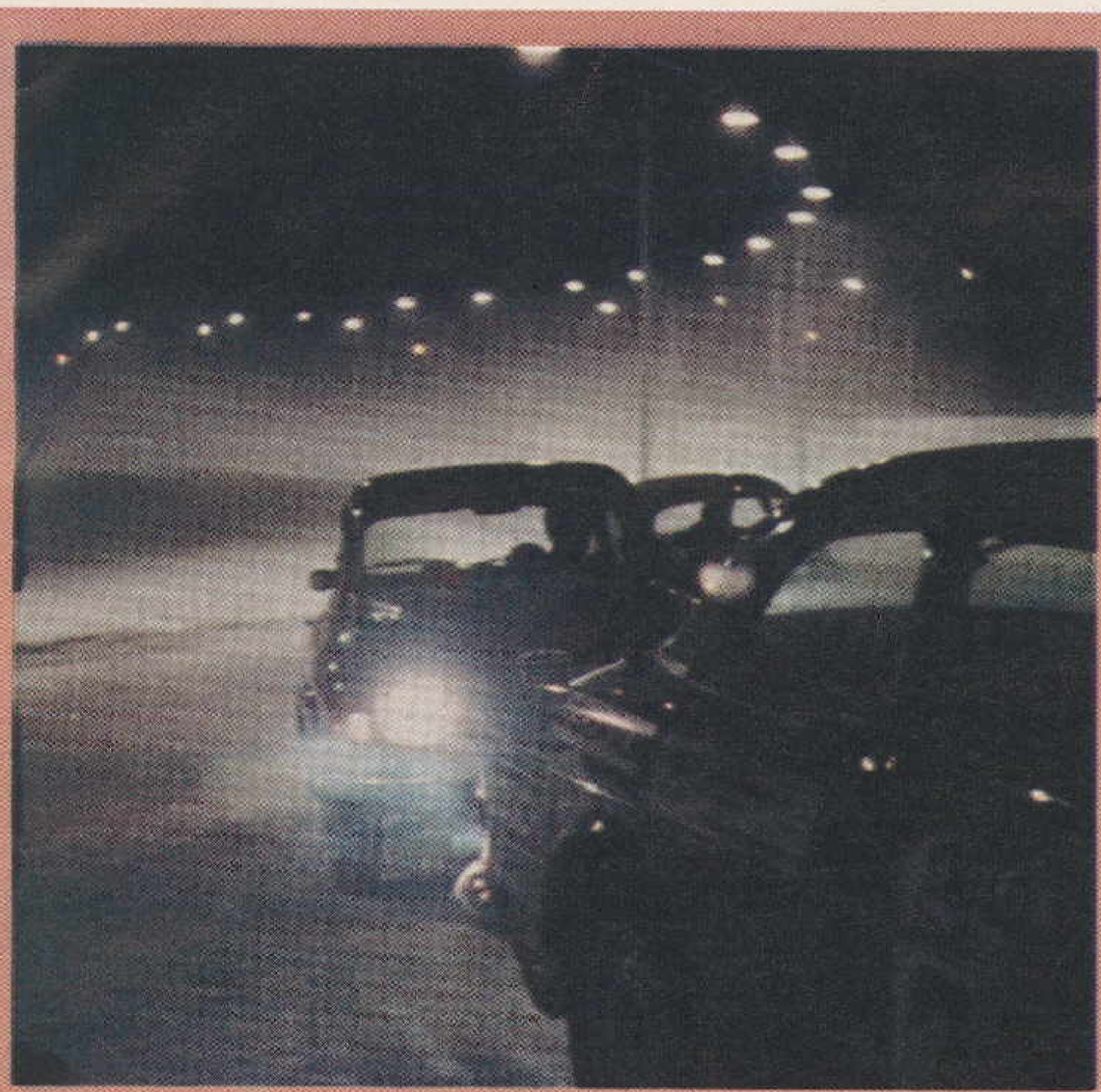
Above: Start of the blizzard in Gothenburg. Below: Skis on the roof are the "tender car" for a Swedish motorist. Right: Scenes from the Swedish rally, which was sunny and comparatively warm by day, but bitterly cold at night. Below, right: Twin parking meters in Karlstad

WINTER MOTORING IN SWEDEN...

Where It's Really Cold. By Stuart Bladon

Starting and driving in conditions of intense cold. Confrontation with Swedish Polis. Effects of an all-day blizzard on Gothenburg.

DRIVING about in the north of Sweden last February we could not help noticing how many cars were carrying skis on the roof. They could not all be on their way to or from skiing, and we presumed it was just a quirk of snobbishness, until the real reason was told us by a Swede. With winter temperatures as low as they are there, the reliability of a car can be as much a matter of life and death as in the Sahara. To break down or go off the road in some remote area can bring a battle for survival and, we were told, although one sees motorists just dressed in a suit, all have winter clothing somewhere in the car against emergencies. The second-line reserve is the skiing gear carried on board, enabling them to leave an immobile car and carry on.



This alertness to motoring dangers and sense of responsibility must play a big part in Sweden's good and enviable accident record. We learnt a lot more about motoring in Sweden during our brief stay for reporting the annual Swedish rally.

Conditions are quite different from anything known in the south in this country, and even the north of Scotland can scarcely suffer such continued intense cold as is normal over there. When we arrived at Gothenburg, in the south-west of Sweden, it was like a very cold day in England. The really low temperatures were not experienced until we had taken over our Volvo 164, kindly loaned by Volvo, and driven north to Karlstad. We had fitted a small air thermometer to the front bumper, and its needle was consistently at or below zero F (—18 deg C) when we went out to the car in the mornings.

Each night the Volvo stood out, since covered parking is much less generally available than in other more temperate countries; and our routine was always the same. First, one would put on full winter clothing in the hotel. In Britain I steadfastly refuse to wear any sort of coat throughout most of the winter, but out in Sweden my normal "garb" comprised two pairs of socks, plus sockets in rubber boots, two pairs of trousers, two thick pullovers and an anorak, gloves and the invaluable Swedish hat with let-down ear muffs. It took several minutes to tog up; all hotels have ample clothes pegs to accommodate such gear, and it was quite normal to change into shoes, leaving boots in the entrance hall.

So togged up, we would then totter out to the car, unlock, pull the mixture control right out, switch off heater fan and electric rear window, depress clutch and work the starter. The Volvo never failed to start, but at the same time the laboured sound of the motor made one realize that even a Volvo is not impervious to 35 deg of frost. It was usually on about the third or fourth try that the engine would fire, and after a few seconds the mixture control could be pushed in a little way. We then left the engine warming up while packing photographic gear and luggage in the boot.

Often there had been a light sprinkle of snow during the night, but the difference out there is that the air is dry. No ice formed on the windscreen during the night, and the light covering of powdery snow could be simply blown off.

After a leisurely start with the engine running for two or three minutes, we would then drive off with the heater at first closed off. After a couple of miles the mixture control could be pushed right in, and the heater be opened up. Another 10 or 20 miles would bring enough heat to begin warming the car up nicely, and we used to make a stop to remove some of the outer garments. Finally, after about three quarters of an hour, one could begin to think about reducing the heater setting. The

continued

WINTER MOTORING IN SWEDEN

interior would then be very comfortable, one could begin daring to touch the steering wheel without gloves on, and yet we were always forming a light layer of ice on the insides of the side windows.

Of course, it is easier to be prepared for weather which one knows will come without fail, than for the "maybe, once or twice every five or six years" winters in Britain. Most of the cars have winter tyres with studs fitted; we saw ordinary tyres about as often as one sees winter tyres in the south of England, which as everyone knows is pretty rare. The result of so much traffic running on studded tyres, is that packed snow simply wears out, as a poor surface would. There was usually a narrow strip of packed snow in the middle of two-way roads, almost like a thick white line. Elsewhere the traffic had worn its way down to the hard tarmac surface again, and a light sprinkling of snow powder would blow about behind the car like dust. At the sides of the road the snow is piled two or three feet deep in an orderly marginal haunch left by the snow ploughs, like a little white wall on each side of the road. If you climb on to it, as we often found when clambering out of the way of rally cars, you sink in up to the waist.

As well as the snow cloud trailing along behind each car, exhaust vapour is also visible all the time, and even one's own vapour trail is seen through the mirror, swirling about behind the car. When parked for short spells it is often normal to leave the engine running to keep everything warm, and cars are seen with engines running all over the place. We even saw one car parked outside our hotel which seemed to be left running all night. Cars are often plugged in to the mains, to keep the water hot through a built-in heater.

More and more tons of salt are being thrown on British roads every year in response to demand by motorists who steadfastly refuse to fit winter tyres. Yet in Sweden there is strong opposition to the use of salt on roads, because of the damage to cars and the dirty roads which result. Salt spray gets thrown on to windscreens, and the roads become much more treacherous at night when the slime refreezes on the roads, than if it had been left to be worn away by the traffic. We noticed how clean the car kept throughout our travels, as a result of the dry roads and lack of salt. There is a lot of talk in Sweden about making studded tyres compulsory on cars, and cutting down on the salt even more; but the authorities hesitate, claiming that the studs damage the roads.

Against such a white background, it seemed odd that so many Swedish cars have white paintwork, and don't show at all well against the surroundings. However, we noticed that the Swede is very "lights conscious", and many of them drive on dipped headlamps by day, especially when the low winter sun is behind them. Speed limits always seemed tolerable, allowing 82 mph on motorways, and urban limits really are confined to the built-up area. So it is understandable that the Swede pays much more respect to them than is given to our muddled and unrealistic limits in Britain.

Many police are seen, usually in Volvo 122s, and we had a little encounter with them on two occasions. The first was when returning to our hotel one night after dinner in Karlstad. The entrance to the hotel was simply a hole in the banks of snow, and I was driving rather slowly so as not to overshoot the turn. Aware of car lights behind, I pulled in and waited for the car to go past so that I could turn as soon as the entrance gap was reached, but as the other car went by a hand appeared from the back window with a "Polis" sign.

Swedish police must be prepared, presumably, for the driver to make a run for it, because by the time we stopped there was almost at once a policeman by the door. No language problem, of course; anyone in any responsible position in Sweden speaks good English. We went through the usual rigmarole of who we were and production of licenses, and then came the key question, had I had anything to drink. On admitting to having taken a little wine with dinner I was promptly asked to sit in the police car and take the breath test. It *had* only been a little wine, and service in Sweden's restaurants is so deplorable that the meal had been spread over about two hours, so it was not surprising that there was no colour change on the Breathalyser at all. The police had stopped me, they said, because I had been driving slowly; I certainly never expected to hear that from a policeman, the usual complaint being exactly the opposite.

We then entered on a long conversation about the drink laws in Sweden. Drunken drivers are sent off to a sort of labour camp, and usually have to pay a stiff fine as well. For foreigners the general procedure is that they go straight to jail after a positive breath test, remain there until the fine (about £60) has been paid, and then are conducted straight to the airport and allowed to leave, with full details endorsed in their passports.

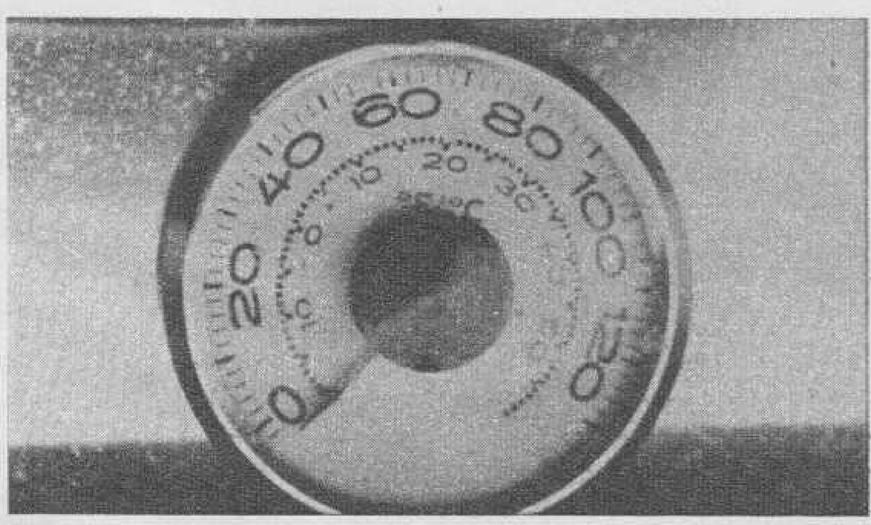
Our other little experience with the police was when taking photographs of the 164 out in the country. A police car appeared like magic, and it turned out that a house we had used as background had belonged to a policeman, whose wife had noticed and telephoned to report it. When reassured that we were harmless and just taking scenic pictures, the police were friendly enough, but they are always a little sinister and I would not like ever to be in trouble with them.

During the special stage of the rally which was held on a frozen, snow-covered river, the police were tearing about controlling the crowd, using a little snow scooter for transport. It has a single rubber track at the back, and is steered by short snow skis fitted at the front. It looked great fun, and is all part of the preparedness of countries that know (as in Sweden, Finland, Canada), that winter will bring snow.

At Gothenburg on the last day, we noticed at breakfast that it was beginning to snow, the first substantial fall we had experienced all the time we were there. Soon it was coming down hard, so we decided to leave early for the airport, allowing over half an hour instead of the 15 minutes normally adequate for the short trip. In spite of this, the traffic was so snarled up in what was by then really heavy snow, that we were hard pushed to reach the airport on time. Our heated back window could not cope, snow built up on all the side windows, and it was extremely difficult to tell in the white confusion what was road and what was snow bank.

We need not have worried about being late for the aircraft, as it was postponed indefinitely, and we had a frustrating day of waiting at the airport, kept there and discouraged from trying some other way out by constant promises that we would soon be able to fly. Eventually we were taken by coach to catch the 5.40 p.m. train, but traffic was in as complete a shambles as is ever seen in Britain. Our 15-minute normal time from airport to Gothenburg centre was extended to over two hours, by which time we had well and truly missed the train and were taken instead to a hotel for dinner. To add to the frustration, the hotel chosen was the very one we had left 10 hours earlier.

So it proved the point that when the blizzard is on, traffic chaos comes even to countries that are well-prepared for a hard winter. The formula which brings complete paralysis is just the same as here: lorries get stuck, everyone has to crawl along, and normal traffic flow breaks down; and in the resulting jams the snow ploughs can't get through. So I never now join the outcry which goes up when a blizzard brings traffic chaos to Britain. □



In the intensely cold air, even a hot exhaust gives off visible vapour clouds. The Renault 16 (below, left) was left ticking over to keep warm while the owner had breakfast. Below: Plug-in heat for a Volvo. Above left: Morning reading of the thermometer, stuck to the front bumper