

A brief history *of Registration*

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The early days

Prior to the appearance of the first railways in Britain, there was a brief development and interest in steam powered road going vehicles. In 1834, a Mr Hancock started a steam coach called the “Era”, carrying up to 14 passengers from Paddington to Regents Park and the City at 6d a head. And in the following year, a Mr Church built an omnibus capable of carrying 40 passengers for the London and Birmingham Steam Carriage Company.

However, the success of the railway movement drove all such traffic off the roads.

A Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry in 1836 reported “strongly in favour of steam carriages on roads”, but subsequent Acts of Parliament tended to have a discouraging and restrictive effect. **The Locomotive Act 1861** limited the weight of steam engines to 12 tons and imposed a speed limit of 10 mph.

The Locomotive Act 1865 set a speed limit of 4 mph in the country and 2 mph in towns. The 1865 Act also provided for the famous “man with a red flag”. Walking 60 yards ahead of each vehicle, a man with a red flag or lantern enforced a walking pace, and warned horse riders and horse drawn traffic of the approach of a self propelled machine.

The Locomotive Amendment Act 1878 made the red flag optional under local regulations, and reduced the distance of warning to a more manageable 20 yards. But this did not make life much easier for the motorist. Although British engineers were working on electrical and combustion engines, and motor vehicles had been patented as early as 1882, they were never developed.

The arrival of the modern motor car

The Locomotive and Highways Act 1896 enabled faster and more popular light motor vehicles to be used. Around this time Britain saw its first ever petrol driven car, either the 1888 Benz now in the Science Museum in London, or the Benz imported by Henry Hewetson in 1894. 1896 saw the first British built Daimler – it looked more like a carriage than a car, but it was the forerunner of the modern motor car.

The 1896 Act was the first improvement in the motoring laws to encourage motor vehicles. Vehicles under 3 tons were exempted from the requirements of the 1878 Act and the speed limit was raised to 14 mph, or to a lower limit prescribed by a local government board. Lights also became compulsory along with “an instrument capable of giving audible and sufficient warning”. Every heavy locomotive (with certain exceptions) had to be licensed by the County or County Borough Council. The excepted cases, however, still had to be registered.

Regulations passed soon afterwards also provided for a speed limit of 12 mph; keeping to the left when passing on-coming carriages, horses and cattle and to the right when overtaking; and stopping the vehicle at the request of any police constable or person “in charge of a restive horse”.

To celebrate the lifting of the restrictions the newly formed British Motor Car Club staged an informal drive from London to Brighton. Fifty eight vehicles entered, thirty five started, and twenty five arrived safely in Brighton. Before the start, the Earl of Winchester solemnly tore up a symbolic red flag – this event is still commemorated in November each year (the London to Brighton run).

The introduction of licensing and registration

By the turn of the century, interest in the motor car was increasing, but there was widespread dissatisfaction with the poor state of the roads. Indeed, the report on the Emancipation Run had stated that “the roads were filthy, and the cars progressed through a deep sea of mud, over surfaces of the most sodden and heavy going character”. Soon the number of vehicles in use had reached 5,000, creating ever more hazards for other road users. And it was difficult to identify the offenders of the few regulations that existed.

Consequently, **The Motor Car Act 1903** introduced measures to help identify vehicles and their drivers. All motor vehicles were to be registered, and to display registration marks in a prominent position. All drivers were to be licensed annually. County Councils and County Borough Councils were made **Registration and Licensing Authorities**; the vehicle registration fee was twenty shillings and the drivers licence fee was five shillings. The Bill also raised the speed limit to 20 mph, with a limit of 10 mph fixed by the Local Government Boards, and introduced heavy fines for speeding and reckless driving (the offenders could now be identified more easily). Fines were also introduced for driving unlicensed vehicles.

But the growing popularity of motor vehicles continued to take its toll on the road network, which clearly needed greater investment. **The Finance Act 1908** passed responsibility for collecting the revenue from Excise Licensing from the Commissioners for the Inland Revenue to the County and County Borough Councils. A 3d tax was also levied on a gallon of petrol. In 1909, the Development and Road Improvement Funds Act provided for grants to local authorities for approved highway works. **The Finance Act 1909–10** based vehicle taxation on the horsepower of the vehicle (and so it remained until 1949), and stated that the revenue would be used for road improvements only.

The hypothecation of vehicle excise duty was abolished in the 1930s, although the excise licence is still sometimes mistakenly referred to as a “road fund licence”.

By 1919 it was evident that reform was needed and the Road Board was abolished and its functions transferred to the Ministry of Transport. The tax on petrol was abolished, but higher rates of excise duty were introduced.

The Roads Act 1920 required Councils to register all vehicles at the time of licensing and to allocate a separate number to each vehicle. The number was to be displayed in the prescribed manner. People were also required to notify the local Council when they bought a vehicle. There were also licensing provisions for manufacturers and traders – a General Licence was the forerunner of the present trade plate system. Hackney carriages were required to be fitted with a distinctive sign, and to indicate how many persons the vehicle could seat.

By now it was apparent that there were legal difficulties with the term “owner” and it was decided that the name and address of the person “keeping” the vehicle should appear on the logbook.

The Road Traffic Act 1930 abolished the 20 mph speed limit and set a variety of limits for different classes of vehicle. There was no speed limit for vehicles carrying less than seven persons. The Act also introduced new requirements for driving licences and a licensing system for Public Service Vehicles.

Registration formats

The first registration marks were made up of one letter with one number, the first (A1) being issued by London County Council in 1903. Later formats were comprised of two letters and four numbers. These series were replaced as and when they were exhausted. So, whilst the Liverpool series KA lasted for only two years between 1925 and 1927, the series SJ was still being issued by Bute Council in 1963!

By the mid 1930s, the two letter/four number series of registration marks were exhausted in some areas, and new three letter/three number series were introduced. AAA 1 was issued (by Hampshire County Council) in 1934 through to AAA 999 and the commencement of the BAA series in 1936. This process continued until the mid 1950s when marks were reversed to three numbers/three letters.

Between 1963 and 1965 councils began to issue “suffix” registration marks – three letter/three numbers and a year suffix. The registration year ran from 1 January–31 December until 1967, when the suffix change was moved to 1 August.

Centralised registration

By the 1960s the licensing and registration system was beginning to show signs of strain and breakdown, mainly due to the ever growing numbers of vehicles and the increasing mobility of their keepers. When vehicles were sold, or keepers moved house, logbook details had to be transferred from one area to another. Also, it was far too easy for a disqualified driver to apply for a new licence by making a false declaration to another area. The system could not cope with the millions of documents passing backwards and forwards. In 1965 the Government decided that a new system should be administered centrally, with automatic data processing. It was decided that the **Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre** should be situated in Swansea, supported by 81 **Local Vehicle Licensing Offices**.

The Centre is responsible for maintaining the central vehicle record, issuing Registration Certificates and licensing reminders, paying vehicle excise duty refunds and enforcing payment of vehicle excise duty. It also supplies vehicle registration details to the police and ensures that the Police National Computer is updated promptly.

The Local Office network is responsible for the registration of new and imported vehicles; and the issue of vehicle licences to those vehicles not dealt with by Post Office® branches. Applications must be accompanied by certificates of insurance and, where appropriate, MoT certificates. The offices also carry out local enforcement work and various other services – including vehicle export licensing arrangements, trade registration plates and cherished transfers.

Gradually, the number of local offices needed to support the centralised function was reduced. By 1985, the network had been reduced to 53 offices, partly due to the 3,000 Post Office® branches authorised to undertake vehicle licensing work. To reflect the different character of their work, local offices are now known as **Local Offices (LO's)**.

The introduction of automated first registration and licensing procedures facilitated a further reduction in the size of the network, to 40 offices, by 1998.

Registration developments since centralisation

Number plates – In 1973 the appearance of registration plates was changed for the first time since 1903. From 1 January, vehicles were required to have reflective number plates – black on white at the front and black on yellow at the back. Reflective plates were introduced so that unlit vehicles could be seen more easily at night. The regulations also provided for the size, shape and character of registration marks.

The conversion of vehicle records – In 1974 DVLC began registering and licensing all new vehicles and also began converting the old style log book (VE60) registered vehicles onto the computer, a process which continued until 1983. By then, the Department was facing grave problems associated with the forgery of old style log books and fraudulent claims to attractive registration marks. The solution lay in calling a halt to the continuing registration of old vehicles under their original mark.

The closure of the vehicle record – A major publicity campaign was launched regarding these intentions, which included advertisements in the national newspapers. Reports also appeared in specialist magazines and information was also circulated to all known vintage vehicle clubs and societies. To be able to retain an original mark registration had to be effected by 30 November 1983. More than 200,000 motorists took advantage of this opportunity. After the closure of the record vehicles were only able to reclaim their original registration marks if they could show that they were rare or in some way historically significant.

Suffix and Prefix registrations – 1983 also saw the completion of the suffix format of registration marks. After extensive consultation, it was decided that there should be a simple and straightforward change – a reversal of the suffix format. Prefix registrations, eg A123 ABC lasted until 2001. Additionally, in 1998 the Government announced that vehicle age identifiers would change six monthly, every March and September. This hastened the expiry of Prefix registrations.

“Q” marks – At the same time, Q marks were introduced. These are issued to vehicles of indeterminable age, eg kit conversion vehicles which are built of major components from more than one donor vehicle, or imported vehicles where the date of first registration cannot be established. Q marks were introduced as a significant step in protecting the used car buyer and they received widespread support from the police and the motor trade.

Sale of Marks – In 1989, DVLA extended its traditional core business by offering for sale certain unissued registration marks through its Sale of Marks scheme. Registrations are sold by two distinct methods. The more valuable and prestigious, usually without a year identifying prefix/suffix, are included in DVLA Classic Collection auctions held about four or five times a year. More affordable registrations taken from certain prefix series, DVLA Select Registrations and DVLA Custom Marks, are sold through a telesales facility on a “first come first served” basis.

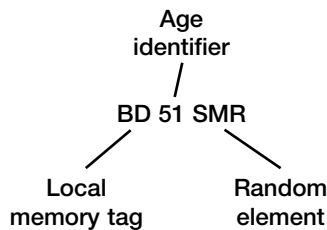
Non-transferability – The rules applied to the registration of older vehicles after the closure of the vehicle record in 1983 worked reasonably well. But they were perceived to be working against more common marques, and vehicle enthusiasts felt unable to restore their vehicle’s historic authenticity. In 1990, after approaches from representatives of the vehicle enthusiast movement the re-assignment of original marks was allowed, on a “non-transferable” basis. It was considered that non-transferability removes the financial incentive to make bogus claims for numbers. In 1991, non-transferability was also applied to “age-related” registration marks. These are the marks assigned to older vehicles where the original mark is not known or is no longer available.

Cherished Transfers and Retentions – Since the early days of vehicle registration, the idea of having a personalised number for their vehicle has appealed to many individuals. The arrangements which allowed motorists to transfer and retain the use of attractive registration numbers have continued to develop and modify over the years. At the heart of these procedures lay the need to safeguard the vehicle register so that its primary function is not compromised by the changes in vehicles' identities resulting from the transfer and retention of registration numbers.

SORN – The Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN) scheme was introduced on 31 January 1998 and applies to vehicles where a licence was in force on or after that date. When a vehicle licence expires, or when a refund is applied for, the keeper of a vehicle is required by the law to notify DVLA if he does not intend to re-license his vehicle and is taking it off the public road. Similarly, a new keeper of an unlicensed vehicle must either re-license or make a SORN.

The New Vehicle Registration Mark Format – A new number plate format was introduced on 1 September 2001.

The new format comprises seven characters and includes local and age identifiers as shown below. The local memory tag is linked to the DVLA Local Office where the vehicle was first registered and is intended to help witnesses recall details of the number plate.



The age identifiers will change every six months in March and September.

Dual Notification – A new three part vehicle registration document incorporating Dual Notification procedures was introduced by the DVLA on the 24 March 1997. This is the first major change to the vehicle registration system for twenty years and applies when a vehicle changes hands. It places the responsibility for notifying the DVLA on the disposing keeper and requires both parties to provide details on the same form (the vehicle registration document). The disposer must also ensure that both parties sign the document before it is sent to the DVLA.

Harmonised Registration Certificate – A new style of Registration Certificate (V5C) was introduced in January 2004 to comply with a European Directive to harmonise Registration Certificates across the EU. The data contained within the Registration Certificate is displayed in a common format, which will help with the identification of vehicles in international traffic and assist the free movement of vehicles within the Community.

Automated First Registration And Licensing (AFRL) – The purpose of the electronic AFRL system is to enhance the accuracy, speed and efficiency of the First Registration and Licensing process for the benefit of the motor industry, the public and DVLA. Although participation in the scheme is not mandatory the majority of the major car manufacturers have joined. An internet version of AFRL for low volume car manufacturers, motorcycle manufacturers and independent importers has been developed and went live in April 2002.