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The Police and the Practicalities of Traffic Management

Good policing has always been dependent on prioritisation, co-operation and discretion but also innovation. Police resources have never been sufficient to meet all the demands made of them and, as a consequence, choices had to be made about police priorities. Sometimes those choices coincided with the public rhetoric of fighting serious crime; more often they reflect more mundane demands for the regulation and smooth running of everyday life. Thus, the demand for free-flowing traffic in town and country and, increasingly, for safety on the roads involved the diversion of police resources into traffic regulation and control at a time when there were increasing demands being made and when resources were constrained by governments facing difficult economic times. While some senior police figures calculatingly viewed the growth of road traffic work as an ideal opportunity to argue for the maintenance or expansion of establishments, for many chief constables and, even more so for the men under them, this new demand put considerable pressure on their forces. The pressure, however, could have a positive outcome as new technologies (including motor cars) were adopted and new practices developed to make more effective use of available manpower.

In addition, finding a satisfactory solution to the cluster of problems associated with road traffic required effective co-operation with other local and central bodies, particularly when this involved modifications to the built environment and its use. To take but one example: police proposals to improve traffic flow and reduce accidents by changing road layouts or introducing traffic lights and pedestrian crossings depended upon the support of local councils and the Ministry of Transport.

Furthermore, because the control and regulation of traffic was a highly sensitive matter and its mishandling could seriously damage
police/public relations, the police – at all levels – had to be careful in exercising their discretion in the enforcement of the relevant aspects of the law. Even then, police success in reducing accidents depended in part upon the willingness of local magistrates (and indeed the Home Office) to support them particularly when dangerous or careless drivers were prosecuted.

The police response to the traffic problems of the inter-war years was threefold. First, they devised and/or adopted a series of technical solutions, ranging from increased use of manpower on point duty, the introduction of mechanical traffic controls (traffic lights and pedestrian crossings), and improved road layout (roundabouts, one-way systems) and usage (waiting restrictions). Second, they joined others in an educational programme targeted at adults but increasingly focused on the next generation of road users. Third, they used the law in a selective manner, as much to educate as to persecute those who infringed the traffic laws. The response was unco-ordinated and patchy. Police chiefs differed in their analysis of the problem and its solutions and in the urgency with which they felt such solutions should be implemented. Much depended upon local commitment. Also, there was a strong element of learning by doing. Finally, there was a very real sense in which the rapid growth of the number of motor-propelled vehicles on the roads meant that the problem of traffic control and regulation was constantly changing and requiring new solutions. C. D. Buchanan, looking back from the late 1950s, captured the essence of the problem in his book *Mixed Blessing: The Motor in Britain*, when he wrote that ‘[w]e are always seen to have been a lap behind the motor car: by the time we had thought of 30-feet carriage ways, it was dual that we really needed…by the time we had thought of roundabouts it was flyovers that were needed.’ Unsurprisingly, traffic congestion remained a major problem, road accidents remained worryingly high and many chief constables (not to mention other traffic experts) remained perplexed as the solutions they sought constantly eluded them.

The traffic problem was not uniform across the country. It was particularly acute and visible in London, but other cities and large towns suffered in a similar manner, though not all chief constables or watch committees gave it high priority. Smaller towns were not immune, especially if the level of car ownership and the volume of road traffic were relatively high. As early as 1921 the Inspector of Constabulary was drawing attention to the problems created by the growth of ‘mechanical transport’, especially in smaller towns such as Coventry. Even more problematic was Exeter but there were other market towns, such as