

HIGHWAY SIGNS AND SIGNALS AND MARKINGS

by

Sierepeklis Theoharis

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INTRODUCTION

The Romans seem to have been the first people in Britain to make use of "traffic signs", for they are said to have marked their roads with stones which were called "milliaries". Our present mile probably originated from the word milliary although the actual measurement differs. The origin of signposts is somewhat obscure, for few references to them appear in the history books. Most early signposts were erected the expense or private persons and there are still many of these privately erected posts around our country side, but it was not until after the General Turnpike Act of 1773 that these guide became more commonplace. This Act imposed on the Turnpike Trusts the duty of setting up and maintaining signposts on all the roads under their charge.

The advent of the bicycle during the latter part of the nineteenth century brought new hazards to roads users, and a need was felt for a new type of sign. Hills and sharp bends were a source of great danger to the early cyclists, and "danger" and "caution" signs were erected at the top of steep hills. Some local authorities took to erecting their own signs and by 1900 it was estimated that some 4,000 of these signs were in use on our roads, and they began to lose their effectiveness because of over-use.

The era of the motor car began with its "emancipation" from the red flag in 1896 and some motoring organisations took up the business of signposting. It was in the Motor Car Act of 1903 that provision was first made for the erection, by local authorities, of certain warning and prohibitory signs. These were for crossroads, steep hills and dangerous corners. With these signs it was laid down that a hollow red triangle would surmount a warning sign and a solid red disc would signify prohibitions.

The main task of signposting our roads during the first

30 years of this century fell upon the motoring organisations. By 1931 it was realised that our signposting system had not kept pace with the development of the motor car and a committee was set up to consider the system.

As a result, a number of new signs were introduced in 1933 and the committee's report formed the basis of our traffic signs system until the early 1960s, when the current system was adopted.

The origin of carriageway markings is somewhat obscure but, in a publication of 1843, the use of a centre line of white stones and lamps was advocated. However, it was not until after the First World War that white lines actually began to appear on the roads of Britain, and later during the 1920s their use spread rapidly. In 1926 the first Ministry of Transport circular on the subject was issued, and this laid down general principles on the use of white lines. In the 1930s white lines were in use as "stop" lines at road junctions controlled either by police or by traffic lights, for marking the course to be taken at bends, junctions and corners, and also for indicating the proximity of refuges and other obstacles in the carriageway. By 1944, white lines were also being used to indicate traffic lanes and to define the boundary of the main carriageway at entrances to side road and laybys, and in conjunction with "halt" signs. Experiments to control overtaking by the use of double white lines were first made in 1957. These generally proved successful and in May 1959 regulations came into effect giving legal force to the system.

Reflecting road studs (sometimes referred to as "cat's - eyes") first came into use in 1934 and it has been estimated that there are about seven million studs of various types in use at the present time in Britain.

After the Second World War, discussions took place in the United Nations on the introduction of international traffic signs. Most European countries agreed to use these,

but in the United Kingdom we felt some reluctance to change our well-established system. One reason for this was the possibility at that time, that the European system might be replaced by a different "world" one.

Following growing criticism of the inadequate nature of the British Traffic Signs system, set up in 1933, for modern traffic conditions, a new committee was appointed in 1961 under the chairmanship of Sir Walter Worboys to review the complete system of road signs. As a result of their studies this committee concluded that the United Kingdom should adopt the main principles of the European practice on traffic signs. Work began on the conversion of signs in 1965. All the 'regulatory' signs giving commands or prohibitions and most warning and directions signs have now been changed to the new system.

The provision of new signs is a continuous process. As the volume and type of traffic on our roads changes, ways of giving essential information to drivers and improving traffic flow and road safety have to be reviewed. New signs and road markings are well and truly tested at certain locations to demonstrate their effectiveness before their wide scale use is recommended. Such experiments have led to the introduction of yellow box markings at congested road junctions, special signals and road markings at pedestrian crossings, and signs and markings to indicate miniroundabouts and bus lanes.

Developments in other areas also make it necessary to revise traffic signs. Increased tourist traffic has led to the demand for more signs showing the way to specific places of interest and to local facilities. Following pressure from the freight industry and the police, the basis for controlling the movement of heavy goods vehicles was changed in 1981 from unladen weight to maximum gross weight, and at the same time, to continue the move towards the European system of signing, the weights used were changed from the imperial 'ton' to the metric tonne. Consequently existing

signs showing weight restrictions and prohibitions will be replaced gradually by signs showing the gross weight in tonnes, shown on signs by the letter 'T'.

More new signs are being introduced in the 1980s aimed at, amongst other things, increased pedestrian safety and new standards of protection at railway level crossings. In some areas, such as those near ports where there is likely to be a large proportion of foreign drivers, signs showing height and width restrictions in metric units may also appear alongside those showing imperial dimensions.

In some instances it is necessary to make the change to a new system of signing as quickly as possible to avoid confusion to road users. In others, although developments have led to the introduction of new signs and road markings, it is possible to allow a longer change - over period. It is therefore fairly common to see old and new versions of signs conveying the same message at the same time.

Since 1970 there has been provision for the use of both Welsh and English on some signs in Wales. The wording on these signs will therefore differ from that in the illustrations shown in the following pages of this booklet.

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