The Highway Code – 95 years of safety on Britain's roads.

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Dave Moss tells the story…

Driving licences were first introduced in Britain by the 1903 Motor Car Act, when the fee, payable at Post Offices, was 5 shillings (25p). This and other costs such as registration and the vehicle itself added up to quite substantial amounts of money, ensuring that early motoring was the preserve of the wealthy. Once the dues were paid, however, you were absolutely free to roam the patchwork quilt of poorly maintained mud, potholes and occasional harder surfaces that formed the wild west landscape then passing as Britain's road network. Much like today in fact. Despite this, by 1914, when tarmac was appearing, there were around 265,000 cars in Britain.

Early speed limits were largely ignored, while "rules of the road" in an 1896 Highways and Locomotives act simply required vehicles to "drive on the left", and stop when requested by a police constable. With doubtful reliability, uncertain braking efficiency and design and engineering limitations keeping average speeds low, motorists simply made progress where possible.

By 1921 there were about one million drivers in Britain, and though 1920's economic conditions were not easy for manufacturers, vehicle prices were dropping, and their performance and desirability – and the roads – were improving… but the injury and death

toll was mounting. By 1931 there were almost 2.3 million motor vehicles in Britain, and 7,000 people were dying on the roads each year, with many more injured. The Government of the day concluded that “something must be done”.

Surprisingly, that “something” wasn’t a driving test, to prove competence in motor vehicle control. Instead, on April 14th 1931, 95 years ago, the Government introduced the first edition of its new “Highway Code”, on sale for the sum of one old penny – that’s 0.42 of todays 1p. Driving tests didn’t become compulsory until 1935.

Within its 18 pages there was only a fraction of the information you’ll find in the current edition, though a good proportion of the original topics and themes have survived through the years, being updated in each new version. There have, however been no more advertisements since the seven carried in that first issue, for Castrol Motor Oil, BP, Motor Union Insurance, the RAC and AA, as well as The Autocar and The Motorcycle magazines.

The first edition urged all road users to be careful and considerate towards others, and put safety first, a sentiment unchanged over the years. However, some aspects have changed considerably. and there are topics that are necessarily hugely expanded today, some that have fallen by the wayside as motoring has moved on, some that could never have been imagined over ninety years ago – and yet others that now seem inconceivably quaint by 21st century standards.

Some prime examples here lurk in the “signalling” section of the first edition, which reminded drivers of the 1896 requirement to “sound their horn whenever overtaking”. Drivers of horse drawn vehicles wishing to make a turn were advised to: “rotate the whip above the head; then incline the whip to the right or left to show the direction in which the turn is to be made”. Apparently, over one third of that earliest Highway code covered the various hand signals the police and road users could use in great detail. With appropriate modifications as time passed, these rules and actions formed a key part of driving tests until the 1970s. Coverage of arm/hand signals is less today, but they remain valid for use by drivers and riders, and are vital for cyclists and horse riders – and anyone suddenly facing

major vehicle electrical problems. Whips might be a bit controversial though…

Even as late as 1931 the highway code did not mention vehicle mirrors at all, but if somehow you knew other road users were behind you, hand signals were the only way to indicate you were intending to make a turn – until 1936 legislation required vehicle makers to fit “direction indicators”. Electro-mechanical “semaphore arm” indicators were the manufacturers’ solution, which nowadays are seen only on older classic cars. Let’s just say that they were, ahem, all but invisible – and worse, they demanded endless maintenance, being prone to staying raised but unilluminated after switch off, or not illuminating at all. Many drivers simply carried on using hand signals until the bright orange flashing indicators so familiar today arrived in the 1950s

Within the motor car act of 1903, local authorities gained new responsibility to place a handful of roadside warning signs, amongst them double bends, steep hills, schools and crossroads. Some of them were illustrated in the second Highway Code – which also contained the first warning about the dangers of driving when affected by alcohol or fatigue. Subsequent editions illustrated more signs, but as their numbers, and later, traffic management road markings, started to grow rapidly, a separate complementary book entitled “Know Your Traffic Signs” was published in 1975. It continues today, updated to include examples of most road signs, lines and markings – which now number over 1,000 in total – that you’ll see on British roads.

The third edition brought a new section on cycling, and advice on the distance it takes to stop, but a major turning point came in 1954, when the fourth edition of the Highway Code first included colour illustrations, allowing the expanded traffic signs section to provide much better pictures of road signs in now commonplace formats – mostly triangular giving warnings, and circular giving orders. First aid guidance first appeared, and again remains in the publication today. The fifth edition arrived late in the 1950s, including a new section on motorway driving, coinciding with the opening of the first British motorways. Amongst other things it explained how to join and leave the motorway, and advised drivers to avoid drowsiness by stretching their legs at parking or service areas.

Almost ten years later, the sixth edition appeared in 1968, the first to include both photographs and 3D illustrations make some of the growing number of increasingly complex rules clearer. The new 70 mph speed limit introduced following several serious motorway crashes in fog gets its first mention. Price inflation was taking hold: in 37 years the 1931 price had risen from one old penny (0.42p) to 1s 3d (6p) in 1968.

Decimalisation came along in February 1971, but reprints stayed at 6 new pence – until 1978 when the new 70 page Highway code, now with 185 rules, cost 25p. It included the new “Green Cross Code” for pedestrians, extended advice about driving in fog and a much expanded motorway signage section. It was also the first issue with a rule on using car telephones and microphones, and there was half a page on vehicle security. A highlight was a new Department of Transport chart showing standardised “thinking” and “braking” times, combined into “shortest stopping distances” from 30, 50 and 70 mph. It was on the back cover, where it remained for many years, until more recently moving inside, and expansion to show 20 to 70mph stopping distances in 10 mph increments. Nowadays, although the indicated distances remain similar despite advances in tyre technology and braking system efficiency, it is more realistically headed “Typical stopping distances”. A heavily revised version appeared in 1987; it cost 60p and contained 198 rules and 15 pages of full colour illustrations.

The 1993 version came in a new taller, slimmer format, and was the first with content geared towards the then-new theory test which was now part of obtaining a full licence. It now contained 242 rules, six pages of them offering advice solely for pedestrians – a stark contrast to the first edition with its single paragraph.

The pace of change in the Highway Code has quickened noticeably since then – for various reasons. Amongst them is the growing complexity of learning to drive, the 21st century proliferation of markings, signs and lines to manage rising traffic levels, and the growing application of technology inside and outside the car. It is also the result of a more focussed application of advancing safety techniques to British roads, calling for new understanding by drivers.

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Known for many years now by road safety professionals as the “safe system” approach, this aims to prevent toad deaths and serious injuries, encompassing everything from carriageway design to the “hierarchy of road users”, first brought to public attention – with some controversy – in the latest 2023 edition of the Highway Code. This concept places more vulnerable road users – those most at risk in the event of any collision – such as pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders, at the top of a hierarchy which highlights the greater responsibilities resting on those lower down, such as car, van, and HGV drivers, to keep the vulnerable safe on the road.

The world has moved a long way in the 95 years since that first Highway Code was published, and the safe system affects us all as the 21st century development, reinforcing the overriding message in every issue: we all have a responsibility to keep each other safe on our ever-busier roads.

Further information

The current Highway Code costs £4.99 as a download from

https://www.safedrivingforlife.info/shop/official-dvsa-highway-code/

The current edition of the book “Know your traffic signs” book (172pp) is available as a PDF download (6.95MB) at £5.99, from:

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