



**A HISTORY OF
MOTOR CAR
REGISTRATION
NUMBERS IN GREAT
BRITAIN**



BY

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MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION AND LICENSING

IN BRITAIN UNTIL THE 1980S

INTRODUCTION

Observation of a sufficient number of modern British vehicle registration plates will suggest a loose association between some of the letters contained in the registration number and the locality in which they are being observed. This is no accident, and is the result of a process of vehicle registration going back almost to the turn of the century.

ORIGINS

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the normal means of conveyance by road was by horse or horse-drawn vehicle. Mechanically propelled vehicles, mainly using steam power, were in mounting evidence—but these were principally ‘locomotives’ (traction engine type vehicles) used for towing trailers or for powering equipment. They were heavy, slow, damaged the roads and were alleged to frighten horses. This unpopularity contributed to the legislation which confined their maximum speed to 4 MPH and required three persons to be in attendance, one of whom had to precede the vehicle and clear the way. Locomotives were certainly not passenger-carrying vehicles, but as practical motor cars began to emerge the locomotive legislation was found to apply, and this adversely impacted on the emerging motoring fraternity.

Although motor cars existed for a while during the last years of the nineteenth century they were not practical vehicles to drive until the immense restrictions of the so called ‘red flag’ Act were removed by the Locomotives Act of 1896. This created a new class of vehicle called a *Light Locomotive*, and these were permitted to travel at up to 14 MPH provided they weighed under two tons, as most cars would have done.

For around six years the development of motor cars proceeded apace. However three principle objections emerged. First, heavier vehicles were demanded. Secondly, it was felt that the speed limit was unnecessarily restrictive, and thirdly there was growing evidence of dangerous or furious driving which was difficult to deal with without an effective means of tracing vehicles or their owners (suggesting widespread failure to stop at the scene of any accident, and other elements of irresponsibility).

The result was the Motor Car Act 1903, which introduced the expression *motor car* (instead of light locomotive), increased the speed limit to 20 MPH and introduced a variety of other measures. For example, in order to clamp down on reckless driving, and detect more readily those infringing the law, the licensing of drivers began (though without tests) together with the application to vehicles of clearly displayed identification marks.

Section 2 of the 1903 Act required that:

- every motor car be registered with a County or County Borough Council;
- every such Council would issue a separate number to every motor car registered with them;

- each motor car would be obliged to display a mark indicating the registered number and the Council with which registered.

Details of the new scheme as applied in England & Wales were set out by the Local Government Board in the form of regulations¹. These stated that:

- each Council would be allocated a distinguishing mark consisting of one or two letters, as set out in the table appended to the Order;
- each Council would maintain a register in which details of every motor car registered with them would be kept;
- each Council would assign an individual 'Registration' number to each car or motor cycle so registered with them, on payment of a twenty shilling fee;
- each motor car would be obliged to display two plates or designs (one to the front and one to the rear) which conformed to a definite specification set out in the order, which included that the plates should be rectangular with 3½ inch lettering in white on black ground; comparable, but slightly different requirements, were imposed on motor cycles;
- arrangements were made to adjust the registration entry in the event of a material change to the vehicle or change of owner, though in the latter case the option of cancelling the registration (for re-registration of the vehicle elsewhere) was an option;
- the Council, if it saw fit, could supply any plates required.
- arrangements were made for the use of manufacturers or dealers plates, which were issued to dealers by the appropriate Councils for use on vehicles as required; dealers had to keep detailed records of their use, and the plates were to be similar to normal plates but had to be a different colour.

Supplementary guidance issued by the Local Government Board stated that regulations comparable to the above were also being issued for Scotland and Ireland (which, of course, have different legal systems) to form something fairly uniform across the British Isles². In particular the guidance notes relating to the English order indicated that the Local Government Board had agreed not to use the registration letters G, I, S, V or Z, either singly or in combination (G, S and V were to be used in Scotland, and I and Z in Ireland).

The guidance added clarity in two particular areas. Firstly it noted that the term Motor Cycle was not defined and suggested that it might credibly be applied to motor cars with not more than three wheels and weighing less than three hundredweight. Secondly it noted that the use of manufacturers plates on otherwise unregistered

¹ The Motor Car (Registration & Licensing) Order, 1903 [SR&O 1903 No. 998], dated 19th November 1903.

² The orders in those countries were the Motor Car (Registration & Licensing) (Scotland) Order, 1903 [SR&O 1903 No. ???], and the Motor Car (Registration & Licensing) (Ireland) Order [SR&O 1903 No. ???].

vehicles were required to be a different colour from normal, and it was suggested that white lettering on a red ground would make the plates readily distinguishable.

The guidance was vague in other areas. The Board, it was said, contemplated that councils would usually assign consecutive numbers to cars registered with them. But they thought that for purposes of ready distinction not more than three figures should be assigned (the regulations themselves did not actually refer to any upper limit). They would consequently be prepared, if desired, to assign a fresh index mark to any council who may require to start a fresh series of numbers under a new mark. This, of course, significantly affected the way things were to develop in the future.

The new Act was to come into force on 1st January 1904, when the following situation pertained.

In England the various licensing authorities were listed in descending order of population and index marks were issued to each of them, in the range A-Y (London-Somerset) and AA-FP (Hampshire-Rutland), in that order, but omitting (as mentioned earlier) the letters G, I, S, V and Z (nor was Q used, probably to avoid confusion with O). The majority of councils started to issue registration numbers, starting at 1, from December 1903 or January 1904 (note that although A1 is the lowest letter/number combination and emanated from London it was not the earliest registration number issued)

In contrast, Ireland issued registration marks in alphabetical order of county licensing authority in the series IA-IZ (Antrim-Mayo) and AI-NI (Meath-Wicklow). In addition the marks OI-WI (Belfast-Waterford) were allocated to the County Borough Councils. The letters G, Q, S and V were nevertheless avoided, as was the single use of the letter 'I' or its combination 'II'. Letter combinations using 'Z' were not issued at this stage, other than as part of an 'I' series.

Scotland, like Ireland, also issued marks in alphabetical order of licensing authority, counties first, with the majority of the series falling in the range SA-SY (Aberdeenshire-Midlothian) and AS-PS (Nairn-Zetland). RS-XS (Aberdeen-Paisley) were issued to Burgh authorities in alphabetical sequence. The letters I, Q and Z were avoided and there were initially many gaps (for example SC, SF, SG, CS, FS). The single letter codes G (Glasgow), S (Edinburgh), and V (Lanarkshire) were also issued. There were no double letter combinations using G or V (except for SV/VS which were really combinations in the 'S' series).

Curiously the mark BF (Dorset) was withdrawn towards the end of 1904, and an order of the Local Government Board (dated 27th December 1904) allocated Dorset the mark FX instead. It has been suggested that the letters "BF" had ungentlemanly connotations, but it is not known what happened to the registration numbers already issued (if any). A little while later a similar thing happened with the "DF" mark for Northampton County Borough, which was issued the mark NH instead.

Dealers marks burgeoned and it was not long before there were problems. Firstly they emerged in a wide variety of colours. Secondly some unforeseen usage arose. It appears that the plates consisted of the usual one or two letter mark from the issuing authority, followed by a further mark (for example 'XA') indicating the trader or dealership, thence a serial number relating to the dealer. It also seems that manufacturers (in

particular) got into the habit of obtaining just one 'dealers' mark and using it for all their agents around the country, creating extensive problems for local police in tracing usage of vehicles and difficulty in pinning down blame for any shortcoming in the dealers record keeping. The 1904 Royal Commission on Motor Cars suggested that all plates should be red and that all dealerships should register locally.

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List of English registration authority marks as first issued:

London	A.	(Dorset)	B.F.	Flintshire	D.M.
Lancashire	B.	Buckinghamshire	B.H.	York	D.N.
Yorkshire (West Riding)	C.	Suffolk, East	B.J.	Lincolnshire, Parts of Holland	D.O.
Kent	D.	Portsmouth.	B.K.	Reading	D.P.
Staffordshire	E.	Berkshire	B.L.	Devonport	D.R.
Essex	F.	Bedfordshire	B.M.	<i>Not issued</i>	D.T.
Middlesex.	H.	Bolton	B.N.	Coventry	D.U.
Durham	J.	Cardiff	B.O.	Newport (monmouthshire)	D.W.
Liverpool	K.	Sussex, West	B.P.	Ipswich	D.X.
Glamorgan	L.	Sunderland.	B.R.	Hastings	D.Y.
Cheshire	M.	Yorkshire (East Riding)	B.T.	West Bromwich	E.A.
Manchester	N.	Oldham	B.U.	Ely, Isle of	E.B.
Birmingham	O.	Oxfordshire	B.W.	Westmorland	E.C.
Surrey	P.	Cardiff	B.X.	Warrington.	E.D.
Derbyshire	R.	Croydon	B.Y.	Grimsby	E.E.
Devon	T.	Denbighshire	C.A.	West Hartlepool	E.F.
Leeds	U.	Blackburn	C.B.	Hanley	E.H.
Sheffield	W.	Cardiff	C.C.	Cardigan	E.J.
Northumberland	X.	Brighton	C.D.	Wigan	E.K.
Somerset	Y.	Cambridgeshire	C.E.	Bournemouth	E.L.
Hampshire (Southampton)	A.A.	Suffolk, West	C.F.	Bootle	E.M.
Worcestershire	A.B.	Derby	C.H.	Bury	E.N.
Warwickshire	A.C.	Herefordshire	C.J.	Barrow-in-Furness	E.O.
Gloucestershire	A.D.	Preston	C.K.	Montgomeryshire	E.P.
Bristol	A.E.	Norwich	C.L.	<i>Not issued</i>	E.R.
Cornwall	A.F.	Birkenhead..	C.M.	Rotherham..	E.T.
Norfolk	A.H.	Gateshead	C.N.	Brecknock	E.U.
Yorkshire (North Riding)	A.J.	Ply mouth	C.O.	Huntingdonshire.	E.W.
Bradford (Yorkshire)	A.K.	Halifax	C.P.	Great Yarmouth	E.X.
Nottinghamshire	A.L.	Southampton	C.R.	Anglesey.	E.Y.
Wiltshire	A.M.	Lincolnshire, Parts of Kesteven	C.T.	Burton upon-Trent	F.A.
West Ham..	A.N.	South Shields	C.U.	Bath	F.B.
Cumberland	A.O.	Burnley	C.W.	Oxford	F.C.
Sussex, East	A.P.	Huddersfield	C.X.	Dudley	F.D.
Hertfordshire	A.R.	Swansea	C.Y.	Lincoln	F.E.
Kingston upon Hull	A.T.	Wolverhampton	D.A.	Merionethshire	F.F.
Nottingham	A.U.	Stockport..	D.B.	Gloucester	F.H.
Salop	A.W.	Middlesbrough	D.C.	Exeter	F.J.
Monmouthshire	A.X.	<i>Not issued</i>	D.D.	Worcester	F.K.
Leicestershire	A.Y.	Pembrokeshire	D.E.	Peterborough, Soke of	F.L.
Salford	B.A.	(Northampton)	D.F.	Chester	F.M.
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	B.B.	Walsall	D.H.	Canterbury	F.N.
Leicester	B.C.	St. Helens	D.J.	Radnorshire	F.O.
Northamptonshire	B.D.	Rochdale	D.K.	Rutland	F.P.
Lincolnshire, Parts of Lindsey	B.E.	Wight, Isle of	D.L.		

DEVELOPMENT OF THE 1903 SYSTEM

Long before any of the three-figure registration number series were exhausted there was a need to introduce new registration marks. The main reason initially was the frequent elevation in status of many Boroughs to that of County Borough, with a consequential need for them to begin to manage the small matter of their own motor car registration. Blackpool and Tynemouth were first, picking up the marks FR and FT by a Local Government Order dated 26th September 1904. FU was for some reason avoided for the time being and FX (as mentioned) was allocated to Dorset. Once Southport had been allocated FY in mid 1905 the 'F' series was exhausted. Since 'G' could not be used the 'H' series was next, first used by Smethwick (HA) in April 1907, and running through to HJ (Southend) by April 1914.

By this time, though, the system had begun to creak. The London County Council (A) had run out of registration numbers before the turn of the decade and had sought new registration marks as a matter of urgency (there had been nearly 7000 cars registered by mid 1904). These new marks all began with an 'L', but were not necessarily used in sequence. LC was issued first, in May 1905. LN followed in

November 1906, LB in March 1908, LD in May 1909, LA in April 1910, LE in July 1911. There was then some order with LF, LH, LK, LL and LM being issued, in order, until July 1914. Similarly, Middlesex County Council had needed to augment 'H' with 'MX' by July 1912; London and Middlesex were the first two councils requiring additional letters, but most other councils had in due course to follow suit.

Some pattern seems to be emerging. Noting also the revised Northampton mark (NH), there is some evidence that registration authorities were now seeking to persuade the Local Government Board to issue letter combinations vaguely suggestive of the area concerned. Kent provides further evidence with KT in January 1913 (and KN in August 1917), as does West Riding (WR), at around the same time. LN and MX have similar connotations.

Notwithstanding the 'guidance' to restrict registration numbers to no more than three figures there is certainly photographic evidence that numbers were frequently of four figures by 1905, when London was already issuing numbers in the A 8700 series. It has seriously to be doubted whether the advice to limit numbers to the range 1-999 was ever seriously heeded. Several authorities behaved a little unconventionally. Norfolk County Council (AH) insisted on issuing four-figure numbers with a leading zero on commercial vehicles—for example: AH 0556, issued in 1916.

ADDITIONAL MARKS IN 1904

Blackpool.	F.R.	1904
Tynemouth..	F.T.	1904
<i>Not issued</i>	F.U.	-
Dorset (<i>reissue</i>)	F.X.	1904
Northampton (<i>reissue</i>)	N.H.	1904
Carlisle	H.H.	1904

ADDITIONAL NEW MARKS FROM 1905

Southport	F.Y.	1905
Smethwick	H.A.	1907
Merthyr Tydfil	H.B.	1908
Eastbourne	H.C.	1911
Dewsbury	H.D.	1913
Barnsley	H.E.	1913
Wallasey	H.F.	1913
<i>Already issued</i>	H.H.	
Southend	H.J.	1914
Essex (2nd series)	H.K.	1915
Wakefield	H.L.	1915
East Ham	H.M.	1916
<i>Not issued until 1921</i>	H.N.	
Hampshire (2nd series)	H.O.	1917
Coventry	H.P.	1919
Wiltshire (2nd series)	H.R.	1919
Bristol (2nd series)	H.T.	1920

Darlington (out of order)	H.N.	1921
Bristol (3rd series)	H.U.	1924
Bristol (4th series)	H.W.	1927

LONDON SERIES MARKS FROM 1905

London	L.A.	April 1910
London	L.B.	March 1908
London	L.C.	May 1905
London	L.D.	May 1909
London	L.E.	July 1911
London	L.F.	May 1912
London	L.H.	February 1913
London	L.J.	<i>Not issued</i>
London	L.K.	August 1913
London	L.L.	March 1914
London	L.M.	July 1914
London	L.N.	November 1906
London	L.O.	March 1915
London	L.P.	September 1915
London	L.R.	July 1916
London	L.T.	July 1918
London	L.U.	April 1919
London	L.W.	May 1919
London	L.X.	July 1919
London	L.Y.	September 1919

VEHICLE LICENSING, THE ROAD FUND AND THE 1920 ROAD ACT

'Carriage Licences' were first required to be obtained by the owners of light locomotives (motor cars) in 1896, though taxes on carriages had existed at least since the earliest days of the century. These were latterly obtainable from post offices and the revenues were distributed by the government to the relevant licensing authorities in appropriate proportions.

The increase in road traffic created a demand for new and improved roads. Funding was clearly going to be a problem and it was expedient to tax the new generation of motorists both on the 'motor spirit' (petrol) sold to them and in accordance with the

horsepower rating of their vehicles. These taxes were consolidated in a 'Road Improvement Fund' (administered by a Roads Board) intended to be used entirely to improve the road system (much to the irritation of the Treasury who preferred taxes to be more versatile). The Road Board was established under the Development and Road Improvement Act 1909, and came into being on 13th May 1910, by which time the number of vehicles in England alone numbered just under 200,000. It also generated what became known as the 'Road Fund tax'. Licences were obtainable in the same way as the former 'Carriage Licences' and local authorities continued to receive a portion of the new licence fee related to the final year in which the Carriage Tax was levied separately.

On 1st July 1919 the responsibilities of the Local Government Board (and hence vehicle registration in England) were transferred—improbably—to the newly formed Ministry of Health. But within a few months, the road and vehicle functions of that Ministry were transferred to the Ministry of Transport, newly established on 23rd September 1919, together with the Roads Board, which thenceforth ceased to exist. The Roads Board had been unable to spend all its money, and in 1915 the government diverted future income into its general taxation funds, though the Roads Board retained interest on its existing capital. From 1919 vehicle licences were generating cash for the treasury purely as additional tax, and vehicle licensing became increasingly an adjunct to the general taxation process.

In 1920 the Finance Bill (Budget) indicated a slight change of direction, with taxation removed from petrol and transferred to a new 'vehicle excise duty' payable in lieu of other vehicle licence fees, though still with a rate of duty related to vehicle horsepower. The Roads Act 1920 set out the new state of affairs and required the excise duty to be levied by the County or County Borough Councils from 1st January 1921; the new process absorbed the former registration fee levied under the 1903 Act. Evidence of the duty paid was now to be displayed on the vehicles by means of a circular label (often called a Road Fund licence). The 1920 Act also facilitated the issuing of new vehicle registration regulations. Two subsidiary orders were now required: the Road Vehicles (Registration & Licensing) Regulations, 1921 (dated 9th March 1921), and the Motor Car (International Circulation) (Amendment) Regulations 1921 (dated 12th November 1921).

The former replaced (in England) the 1903 Regulations. It introduced requirements for a vehicle 'Registration Book' and described the design and conditions of issue and use of the new Vehicle Excise Licence. Each licensing authority was required to issue a licence and registration book upon application, and to register the vehicle (though registration numbers already held as at 31st December 1920 could be retained). The regulations included an updated list of index marks, which indicated that there were in England 23 Counties and 8 County Boroughs using two (or more) index marks. In Scotland the number was two Burgh Councils, and in Ireland just two County Boroughs. Nevertheless the rapid uptake of car ownership was clearly pushing the system and the number of unused index marks was diminishing rapidly.

The Motor Car (International Circulation) (Amendment) Regulations 1921 recognised that vehicles were sometimes imported on a temporary basis, and provided that for a limited period duty would not be levied. Where countries agreed to co-operate it was deemed sufficient that the vehicle could retain its own country's registration plates, with the addition of distinctive letter(s) in black on an oval, white ground. Where,

however, a country was not party to this scheme then temporary British registration plates were required for the duration. These were distinctive in using the letters 'QQ'. Although nominally allocated to the London County Council, blocks of numbers were allocated as follows:

QQ 1-999	London County Council
QQ 1000-1999	Royal Automobile Club
QQ 2000-2999	Automobile Association and Motor Union

The Associations issued registrations as required as agents of the LCC. Strictly tax was only waived for four months, although the temporary registrations lasted up to a year; the authorities were thus strongly encouraged to retrieve the temporary registration when tax became due, and to issue normal registration marks instead. Instead of Vehicle Excise Disks, imported vehicles on which tax was not levied were required to carry circular International Circulation Permits; these were also issued by the LCC or the Associations.

DEVELOPMENT DURING THE 1920S

One hesitates to suggest any firm policies—but tendencies there certainly were. Many of the registration authorities sought to consolidate blocks of registration marks together. The larger authorities (holding the preponderance of single letter marks) tended to use new double-letter marks beginning with the single letter already allocated. Thus Liverpool County Borough (K) additionally used KA, KB, KC...; similarly Cheshire (M) used MA..., Manchester County Borough (N), NA...; Surrey (P), PA...; Derbyshire (R), RA...; Devon (T), TA...; Leeds County Borough (U), UA...; Sheffield County Borough (W), WA...; and Somerset (Y), YA... . In some cases, such as Surrey, the P series got as far as 'PL', whereas in a few cases only one or two 2-letter marks were used. The practical effect was to leave a large number of 2-letter marks available (other than at the beginning of each series) to be filled piecemeal.

The smaller authorities (together with the larger ones using the marks A to J) had to fill in the vacant slots as best they could, though even then attempts were sometimes made to seize marks which bore some similarity with each other. Kent, for example, clearly sought to accompany 'KN' with other marks prefixed 'K' (getting KJ, KK, KL, KM, KO, KP, KR and KT). Other authorities did the best they could. Lindsey, for example, started to use the previously unallocated FW in 1929, supplementing its existing FU; similarly Bradford managed to acquire KU, KW and KY to supplement its existing AK.

Where the authorities did not 'contrive' series of marks, and where new authorities were created, the majority of demand was filled by continuing relentlessly on from within the 'H' series. The 'H' series was exhausted by 1930, as indicated in the table provided earlier.

The 'J' series was issued in the period 1929 to 1934, although JK had been issued earlier. It is a measure of the speed with which the available letter marks were running out to note that virtually all the letter series beyond J were simultaneously filling up as hungry councils consolidated and extended their letter blocks. After 1934 it seems that the majority of authorities got what they could from whatever slots were available, leaving them with a series of marks with no evident relation to anything.

In an effort to make more useable space there were some policy adjustments. By 1929, Glasgow had only managed to use GA and GB in the 'G' series previously denied to English authorities. Most of the remaining 'G' series was rapidly allocated to London or a few other English councils, although GG, GM and (of course) GS remained north of the border. A similar trend followed with the reversed 'G' series with only AG, FG, RG and WG remaining north of the border. It was a similar story with the 'V' series. VA and VD remained with Lanark (whose mark was V), but the rest went south. AV alone from the reversed series stayed with Scotland. The rest were allocated to English councils (VS and SV, of course remained Scottish by virtue of the presence of the 'S').

INTO THE 1930S

As mounting vehicle registrations continued to threaten availability of marks, the next step was to introduce some more combinations by adding an option to use a letter instead of one of the digits. From very early days it had become clear that restricting the registration number to three digits (999 variations) was not going to work, and four digits had been settled upon (9999 variations), though there does not seem to be any statutory authority for this. By substituting a letter for a figure it was possible to generate 21,978 new registration number combinations for each index mark, based on a 22 letter alphabet.

The mechanics of doing this were marginally more complicated than they might otherwise have been (ie a simple letter-number substitution). It was decided to increase the number of index marks allocated to the councils by issuing new marks based on the addition of a single letter in front of the existing 2-letter mark. Thus, for example, Leicester County Borough, whose mark was BC, was initially offered the new marks ABC, BBC and CBC.

The first 3-letter marks were authorised by the Road Vehicles (Index Marks) Regulations 1932—one of periodic revisions of these regulations—and they applied to both England and Scotland; 3-letter marks were first issued from the end of that year. The first council to issue a 3-letter mark was Staffordshire in July 1932, with ARF 1. Initially, not all councils were offered 3-letter marks. By 1935 there were still 21 English councils with only one series of marks (all 2-letter marks), and a further 20 English councils with a pair of 2-letter marks. At these places 4-figure registrations against 2-letter marks continued to be issued where available for many years (Radnor and Rutland were still issuing such marks until well into the mid 1950s, if not longer).

Where 3-letter marks were used to supplement the existing 2-letter series councils were only offered the new blocks sparingly. In other words only a few blocks at the start of the series (typically only the prefixes A-C or A-D) were issued although some smaller councils only had one 3-letter mark (prefix 'A') whilst two had up to eight new marks (up to prefix 'H'), and one had ten (up to prefix 'K'). Its not at all obvious why matters were handled so cautiously but the implication is that derived 3-letter marks might not necessarily be all allocated to the same council if marks began to be used unevenly. Where councils had multiple 2-letter marks then 3-letter marks were issued even-handedly (so Bournemouth received ARU as well as AEL, rather than exhausting one series before starting on the next). As matters subsequently progressed, further 3-letter marks were issued, though the letters I, Q and Z were not used. The letter S was, however, used indiscriminately in both English and Scottish mark prefixes.

Where a 3-letter mark was used, the registration number was limited to three digits. It was not possible to prefix single-letter marks or confusion would have arisen with existing 2-letter marks (eg prefixing the mark 'B' [Lancashire] with an 'A' would create 'AB' which was already a valid mark for Worcestershire).

Ireland continued to need only 2-letter marks. The partition of Ireland in 1922 did not affect the allocation of existing marks (which continued to be issued) with the result that there was now an arbitrary distribution of index marks between the North and the South. The Irish Free State (and later Eire) opted to maintain the existing system for many years.

The use of 3-letter marks made it easier to allocate particular 999 digit registration blocks to particular authorities for special use. For example the mark MAN was used by the Isle of Man from 1935, although East Ham County Borough (mark AN) might reasonably have expected to be using it, while GPO was devoted to vehicles of the General Post Office and registered in London (while PO is actually a West Sussex mark). Middlesex had a variety of blocks only used for certain types of vehicle. London County Council frequently allocated particular marks on a local basis for specialist use: JGF, for example, was 'assigned to government departments'. USN was not used by Dumbartonshire to avoid confusion with US Navy vehicles.

AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

By the early 1950s numbers were beginning to run out again. Even though some authorities had not yet exhausted the original 2-letter marks, there were many authorities who, with vast numbers of 3-letter marks, were going to run out of numbers soon. It was not now possible to generate any new marks. The solution was to revert to the beginning of the registration mark series and repeat the process, but this time the number would precede, rather than follow, the index mark. 'Reversed' numbers and letters first started to appear in 1953, and included four-digit/two-letter options and four-digit/single letter options, which meant the range of each mark was in general nearly 32,000 numbers. It was thus possible to see an enormous variety of registration number formats, for example: A 9999, AB 9999, AB 999, ABC 999, 9999 A, 9999 AB, 999 ABC, 99 A, and so forth. Six characters were nevertheless the limit. Numbers were by and large not automatically re-allocated even when a vehicle was scrapped. The first reversed registration was again in Staffordshire where 1000 E was issued in April 1953.

TOWARDS SEVEN CHARACTER REGISTRATIONS

Towards the end of the 1950s it was obvious that problems would again recur. By 1962—just nine years after reversed marks had become available—the availability of new 2-letter codes was exhausted and many authorities were running out of marks, including reversed marks (although a small handful were still filling up the 1903 allocation with four numbers).

From 1st January 1963 councils were given the option of again reversing the letter/number sequence (restoring the index mark to its leading position), but this time adding the suffix letter 'A' after the number, increasing the total number of characters to a maximum of seven. The suffix would only be used in conjunction with 3-letter/up-to-three digit registration numbers and it was envisaged the suffix would

change annually. The first authority to use the new mark was Middlesex, which issued AHX 1A in February 1963. It was not intended there would be any sequential link between the suffix letter and any other component of the registration mark. While the annual suffix change would more than make up for the loss of 9999 number possibilities caused by avoiding the two-digit marks, the system representing considerable potential waste. It was unusual for a complete block of registration marks to be used each year and the unused blocks were never used with certain year letters. For example the mark DCB might be used during year letter A, and when all the other marks had been exhausted it might come up for re-use during year letter F—the marks and year letter combinations DCB-B, DCB-C, DCB-D not being used.

Irrespective of these minor shortcomings the suffix letters proved popular for reasons unconnected with vehicle registration niceties and became mandatory from 1st January 1965. From that date all new registrations would be in the form Index Mark - Registration Number - Year Suffix. This meant that the original single and 2-letter marks would not again be issued, though, of course, existing single and 2-letter marks already in use remained valid. Although this solved the problem of registration number availability by now there was another problem: new registration authorities were still being created but there were no longer any vacant 2-letter registration marks from which they could derive the new 3-letter marks. The solution was a bit crude. The London marks XA-XF were raided, each with the use of suffix letters. Kirkcaldy was allocated AXA, BXA..., Coatbridge was allocated AXB, BXB..., Solihull was allocated AXC, BXC..., Luton was allocated AXD, BXD... with AXE, BXE..., and Torbay was allocated AXF, BXF... . Until 1965 London still had the use of these marks (in 2 or 3-letter form) but without suffix letters.

In 1967, by which time suffix letter 'E' had been reached, the annual change was shifted forward by popular demand to August each year. Annual changes have been made in August thereafter. The letters I, O, Q and Z were avoided as suffixes.

The English and Scottish systems have remained harmonised, but things took a slightly different turn in Northern Ireland where the pace had been slower. Slack had been taken up by introducing the reversed 'Z' series, with AZ, CZ, EZ, FZ, GZ, MZ, OZ, PZ, TZ, UZ, WZ going to Belfast County Borough. However, as pressure mounted the decision was taken in 1966 to introduce prefix letters for the first time (generating 3-letter marks), but to retain numbers up to four digits. Up to seven characters are thus used, but without a year letter. Northern Ireland does not, therefore use suffix letters and can issue 2 or 3-letter marks, with either with up to four digits.

Middlesex and the London County Council merged to form the GLC in 1965, together with Croydon, East Ham and West Ham County Boroughs. It appears that the index marks unique to those authorities were simply absorbed, like those of the LCC, into Greater London.

IMPORT - EXPORT

After the second world war the number of imported vehicles required some adjustment to the 'Q' series. From around 1953 the prefix marks QA and QB were allocated to the Automobile Association; the marks QC and QD to the Royal Automobile Club, and QS to the Royal Automobile Club, Scotland. The existing mark QQ was retained for use by the LCC (on whose behalf the other authorities

acted as agents). In Eire the mark ZZ was used for imported vehicles from April 1925. Subsequently further marks were allocated to both the AA (“QE-QG”, “QJ-QM”, “QP”, “QT”) and the RAC (“QH”, “QN”), and a further mark “QR” to the GLC.

From 1981 the system was modified such that vehicles carried a three or four digit serial number preceded by a two letter mark comprising the requisite year letter commencing “Q”. From 1984 the number and letter marks were reversed. Different number blocks are issued each year and issuing authorities include London Central LVLO, AA, RAC and (briefly) RAF Mildenhall in respect of United States vehicles. The initial allocations were thus QX nnnn in year “X”, QY nnnn in year “Y”, and thence nnnn QA in year “A” etc.

Vehicles currently produced for export bear normal plates with red edging (before 1973 this used to be yellow edging around the black plates). A special windscreen disc has to be carried. From January 1993, for export of vehicles to EEC countries where VAT will be due a normal year prefix, three number/three letter mark will be issued in the “XP” series, with a prefix of the three letters relating to the month issued, A representing January to M representing December.

CENTRALISATION OF VEHICLE REGISTRATIONS

The Driver & Vehicle Licensing Centre was established in 1971 and assumed control of the registration system, which it began to computerise and centralise. Existing licensing authorities continued to act as DVLC agents and there was at first no change to the 2-letter council codes and their 3-letter derivatives. The system was significantly changed from 1st January 1974, just in advance of the re-organization of local government from 1st April that year (the boundaries of a number of counties were altered, some new ones created, a few abolished, and all county boroughs were abolished). For licensing purposes everything was now centralised at Swansea, though there was a network of 81 regional offices (generally with one or more per county) and so far as convenient the former 2-letter identification marks were distributed among the new offices on a broadly comparable geographical basis.

Using Coventry as an example. The new Local Vehicle Licensing Office (LVLO) was allocated the following marks: AC, DU, HP, KV, RW and VC. These were all previously the Coventry City Council marks (except AC which was Warwickshire).

Hereford LVLO was similar, with the marks CJ, FO and VJ. CJ and VJ were previously Hereford County Council while FO was previously Radnor County Council.

Bournemouth LVLO inherited EL, FX, JT, LJ, PR and RU. Noting that Bournemouth County Borough had been absorbed into the new Dorset County the logic of amalgamating Bournemouth’s EL, LJ, RU with Dorset County Council’s previous FX, JT, PR is clear.

Subsequently a number of LVLOs have been closed, but their two letter marks have been reallocated to neighbouring offices and often reserved for use within the original areas.

While codes were being reorganized on an LVLO basis the opportunity was taken to completely reallocate a number of letter blocks from one area of the UK to another to

balance overprovision in some districts with high demand in another. As Scotland had heavy overprovision many 'S' codes came south, for example GS was allocated to Luton and WS to Bristol. From 1980 29 LVLOs were closed and the codes were reallocated, mainly to neighboring offices. Further closure occurred later and by 2002 only 41 offices remained; again codes were reallocated.

Some typically English aberrations remained until the end. The mark BF (re-introduced in the 1960s) never was used on its own or as ABF. Other marks not used in England or Scotland were: AWC, BAS, BOG, BUB, BUG, BUM, COC, COK, DAM, DUW, DWO, FUK, FUX, GOD, GPO, JEW, LAV, MAN, MOC, NBG, SEX, SOD, SOT, USN, UWC.

SCY (which would otherwise be a Swansea mark) was since 1971 used by Truro for use on the Scilly Isles.

In 1984 the position of registration marks and numbers were again reversed, this time with a prefix letter used, starting at A and changing each year. The form was $Y nnn mmm$, where Y is the year prefix, n is the registration number, and m the registration mark. This time the year prefix letter 'Q' was made available for use on any vehicle where the year of manufacture was doubtful.

Since 1967 newly registered vehicles were able to use registration plates with black lettering on a reflective white ground (front plate), or reflective yellow ground (rear plate). These plates became mandatory for vehicles first registered from 1973 (irrespective of the actual registration number carried), but vehicles first registered earlier may still use white on black plates.

The system described above was superseded from 1st September 2001 by a completely different system although seven characters still form the total mark. Existing vehicles can still use the marks held previously and under the cherished number scheme old marks can still be transferred to new vehicles. Britain is therefore the only country in the world where the system permits marks issued from the outset in 1903 still to be put on new vehicles (though Spain comes a close second).

“SELECT MARKS”

For some years it has been the practice to restrict the numerical part of the index mark to the range 21-998 and leave certain other gaps in the numbering range (the exact numbers have varied). The balance of numbers has then been made available for sale of a registration number at a premium price. This the numbers 1-9 and multiples of 10, 11, 100 and 111 thereof, and numbers 12 to 19 are all available for sale under this system. Examples include P1ABC, P17ABC, P100ABC and P666ABC. The number 666 is not issued although on occasion certain other numbers are. The numbers are made available centrally with a choice of registration letters which are not related to any LVLO.

In addition it is possible to transfer numbers from an old vehicle to a new one, whence the old vehicle will receive an unused number of an appropriate age. On a pre-1931 vehicle this would be a 2-letter/4-digit mark from an unused block; on a 1931-1962 vehicle it would be a 3-letter/3-digit mark from an unused block, starting in the range ASV-YSV, in neither case the mark would be related to location. For later vehicles an

appropriate mark with normal prefix or suffix letter would be allocated. The same system is used for permanently imported vehicles. A Q prefix letter is used if the year of manufacture cannot satisfactorily be established.

TRADE PLATES

In 1903 trade plates were required to be in white on a non-black ground, with red suggested (but a variety of colours and shapes actually employed). From 1921 excise duty was leviable on trade plates which required a special licence to be carried on the front plate, the design of both plates now being standardised as white on a red ground; the serial number of the plate was of four digits starting at 0001, above the issuing authority's one or two letter mark.

In 1923 a second type of trade plate was issued (for limited use) and these were similar to the general series but with red lettering on a white ground. From 1970 the system was again altered with the types of plate reduced to one, but with red lettering on a white ground (edged red) and with three numerals beginning at 001 (and from 1974 the 2-letter marks representing LVLOs rather than registration authorities).

A small number of authorities are known to have used three letter marks, but two are normal. An exception to the entire scheme concerns plates used by the new issuing authorities XA-XF in 1963-75 where two letter trade plate marks could not be used as they were already available (if not already used) in London. In those places (such as Luton, XD) a letter and two numerals (instead of three numerals) was used, followed by a three letter mark ended with XA-XF, as the case may have been. The prefix letter was the "year" letter of the creation of the authority. These marks are currently being phased out, together with any remaining plates including single letter marks.

MILITARY VEHICLES

From 1904 to 1939 blocks of numbers were used in the Middlesex series. However during the second world war military vehicles were allocated numbers by the owning authority according to the standards of that authority. Royal Air Force vehicles bore the letters RAF followed by a serial number. Royal Naval vehicles used the letters RN preceded by a serial number. The army used a serial number (up to seven digits) followed by a class code. (There was no relation with civil vehicles, though it is not clear by what authority they were exempt).

From about 1949 military vehicles were allocated marks not dissimilar to civilian marks but consisting of two numbers, two letters and two more numbers. RAF vehicles used letters beginning with 'A', and Royal Naval vehicles used the letters 'RN'; most other letter combinations were used by the army, with various letter ranges used for particular purposes, some only used overseas. The letters EP were used for Ministry of Supply vehicles, and the series 53ER used for the Queen's baggage transport service.

Since 1990 all new military vehicles have been registered in one combined series beginning at 'KA', 'KB' Most number plates are now the usual black on white/yellow variety, though certain purely military types still use white on black.

DIPLOMATIC PLATES

Vehicles belonging to diplomats were previously given normal registration marks (though frequently embassies sought to procure marks with initials related to their embassies, eg AUS 1). From 1st January 1979 a new series of marks was introduced consisting of a three figure number related to the diplomatic organization concerned, followed by a single letter code, followed by a three digit serial number. The letter code was a 'D' or an 'X', respectively standing for diplomatic personnel or consular and other accredited personnel. Not just embassies and consulates were affected; organizations include the Commission of the EEC and the International Coffee Organization. Plates are the usual black on white/yellow variety, though recently with a distinctive security background and with a modified form of numeral (but with standard style of letter).

Certain semi-diplomatic vehicles (eg third car or more owned by a diplomat) have since 1984 been numbered in the RXS range with the plates otherwise following the normal pattern (RXS was not reallocated in 1974). Unlike proper diplomatic vehicles these may retain the number when sold.

IRELAND

After 1922 the Southern Irish continued to use the former UK system almost unchanged, adding to the South's allocation of two letter marks including the letter "I". The vacant single letter "Z", with up to four digits, was used by Dublin from 1925, with subsequent 2-letter marks introduced with a Z prefix; ZA, ZC, ZD, ZE, ZI, ZJ, ZL, ZO and ZU went to Dublin, and the remainder were distributed around the Country.

From 1954 three letter marks began to be employed by introducing a prefix letter on the model of England in the 1930s, but the use of up to four numerals was retained.

From 1969 reflective plates were permitted as optional, black on white at the front, and black on red at the rear. From 1970 the option of reversing the numbers and letters was utilized as number blocks were exhausted, Dublin was first, using "Z" as a suffix. From 1983 the last temporary plate (ZZ 9999) was issued and numbers were subsequently reversed starting at 1 ZZ.

From 1st January 1987 a completely new system of vehicle registrations was started for new registrations, and this bore no resemblance to the former system. However the existing system of trade plates (similar to England) continued until 1993. Temporary plate numbering continues as before, but from 1989 the numbers and letters were reversed again and started at 10000. From 1992 heritage vehicles (over 30 years old) were allocated old-style plates in the series ZV.