

# British Road Numbering

By Graham Bird and John Mann

*Regrettably, Professor Mann died prior to publication of this article*

Proposals for the classification and numbering of British roads, mainly to facilitate the transfer of funds from the Exchequer to local highway authorities, were being developed by the Roads Board prior to 1914, but the outbreak of World War I meant that these were not implemented.

In 1919 the Ministry of Transport (MOT) was established, and it fell to this body to undertake the task of road classification and numbering. The purpose was twofold: to allow local authorities and the MOT to identify particular sections of road easily for administrative purposes, and to help motorists to find convenient through routes. The power to introduce road numbering was set out in the Ministry of Transport Act 1919, Section 17(2).

In May 1921, the MOT sought advice from the Michelin Tyre Company regarding the system used for numbering of roads in France. However their suggestions were not followed, and it was decided to adopt a simpler system whereby roads linking important towns, and those with exceptionally heavy traffic ('Class I') were prefixed with the letter A, and secondary roads of more than local importance ('Class II') with the letter B. England & Wales was divided into six numbered 'Zones', and Scotland into three (originally only two were proposed) with roads A1–A9 forming the zone boundaries. For other roads, the first digit of the number indicated the Zone in which the road commenced. This is, in essence, the system which is still in use today, although many individual road numbers have since changed.

After consultation with local authorities and motoring organisations, a definitive list of the proposed road numbers was drawn up; this process was completed by February 1923, and County Surveyors were asked to start erecting signposts bearing the new numbers.

## The choice of the primary roads

As noted above, the system was based on a group of nine primary roads, six radiating from London (A1–A6) and three from Edinburgh (A7–A9).

The general rule was that each primary road should run on until it met another primary road, or until it reached the sea. This was applied as follows:

- A1 London to Edinburgh;
- A2 ran to the sea at Dover;
- A3 ran to Portsmouth ferry landing for the Isle of Wight;
- A4 ran only to Bath — an exception to the rule — but later it was extended through Bristol to Avonmouth;
- A5 ran to the harbour at Holyhead;
- A6 ran to meet the A7 at Carlisle;
- A7 ran from the junction with the A1 at the east end of Princes Street in Edinburgh to the junction with the A6 in Carlisle;
- A8 ran from the junction with the A1 and A7 at the east end of Princes Street through Glasgow to Gourock;
- A9 ran from the A8 at North Gyle, just west of Edinburgh, to Inverness, later extended to the sea at John O'Groats, subsequently altered to Thurso.

The line for the A1 chose itself: this could only be the Great North Road, joining the two capitals. The name Great North Road still appears on plans of places along its route — for example at High Barnet, Potters Bar, Hatfield, Newark, Doncaster, Durham, Newcastle and Alnwick. From thence, although Telford had surveyed a route by Wooler and Coldstream which it was claimed would have shortened the stage-coach journey, the delineators of the A1 chose the old route via Berwick and Dunbar.

A number of 'Roads' radiating from the capital were discerned by Londoners — the Dover Road, the Brighton Road, the Portsmouth Road, the Bath Road, the Oxford Road and the Holyhead Road. Five designations, A2 to A6, had to be allotted to these and other possible contenders — such as roads to the north-west. It does seem that decisions were taken with the eyes on the past rather than the future, looking back indeed to the world of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens.

Thus Dover had been, for a long time, the gateway to the Continent. Folkestone, in contrast, was a recent upstart: unlike Dover, it was not one of the Cinque Ports. Yet by the 1920s, the Folkestone–Boulogne route was just as important as Dover–Calais. Nevertheless, it was the Dover Road which was designated A2, running by Shooters Hill, Bexleyheath, Rochester and Canterbury, ignoring Folkestone altogether.

In spite of the prominence given to Brighton by George IV, the designation A3 was given not to the Brighton Road but to the Portsmouth Road — named as such for example in plans of Kingston, Ripley and Guildford. Here again, the view is to the past. Vital as had been this road in maintaining communication between the Admiralty and the naval base (attested also by the semaphore system along its line), by the 1920s Portsmouth was overshadowed by Southampton.

The most important road running west from London in the 1820s was the Bath Road, which became the A4 in the 1920s. The name Bath Road still appears on plans of Hounslow, Maidenhead, Reading and Newbury. The road onwards from Bath to Bristol and Avonmouth was part of the A36 until the 1930s.

With only A5 and A6 left to cover all the north-west, it is perhaps not surprising that the Oxford Road — named so at Uxbridge — has to be content with A40. It is interesting to note that, beyond the Severn, the A40 followed the old coach road by Ross-on-Wye, Abergavenny, Brecon, Llandovery and Carmarthen to Haverfordwest. There the stage-coach route turned south to Milford Haven, and the A40 north to Fishguard. (The A40 did not originally pass through Monmouth; between Ross and Abergavenny it was routed via Skenfrith, now the B4521.)

Perhaps the most interesting road is that to Holyhead. After the Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800, communication between Dublin and London assumed great importance. Early stage-coaches travelled by Oxford or Coventry to Birmingham, then by Whitchurch and Chester to Conway, Bangor and Holyhead. Telford repaired a route by the Great North Road to Barnet, then by South Mimms to St Albans, from there following the Roman road Watling Street to Daventry. From there his route led by Coventry and Birmingham to Shrewsbury, followed by his *pièce de résistance*, the road by Llangollen to Bettws-y-Coed, Capel Curig and Bangor to Holyhead.

Surprisingly, the line taken by the A5 follows the Roman Watling Street the whole way from Hyde Park Corner to just short of Shrewsbury. Only the stretch from St Albans to Daventry forms part of Telford's stage-coach line. Over its whole length, the A5 serves directly not a single sizeable community. Is this merely antiquarianism? Or is it perhaps a pre-motorway attempt to achieve directness and avoid urban congestion? If the latter, it is hardly paralleled by any of A1–A4.

Nor is it paralleled by the line chosen for the A6. Unlike any of the previously mentioned roads (even the name Holyhead Road appears in appropriate places in Coventry and Handsworth), there seems to be no example of a 'Manchester Road' (except southwards at Swinton), nor a 'Carlisle Road', along its line — much less a 'Glasgow Road'. This may be partly due to the fact that stage-coaches for Glasgow seem to have largely followed the Great North Road to Scotch Corner, traversing the Stainmore Pass to Penrith and then on to the north.

Unlike the A5, the A6 does serve directly a number of sizeable communities, including Bedford, Leicester, Derby, Manchester and Preston. Liverpool and all the towns of Lancashire are easily reached from its line. Unlike A1–A5, its route is apparently in no way conditioned or influenced by echoes from a Romantic past, whether Regency or Roman, as viewed from London.

The same is true of A7–A9 in Scotland. There are 'London Roads', 'Glasgow Roads' and 'Edinburgh Roads' in appropriate places in Edinburgh, Glasgow and elsewhere (such as Perth). The routes are straightforward, and unaffected by baggage from the past.

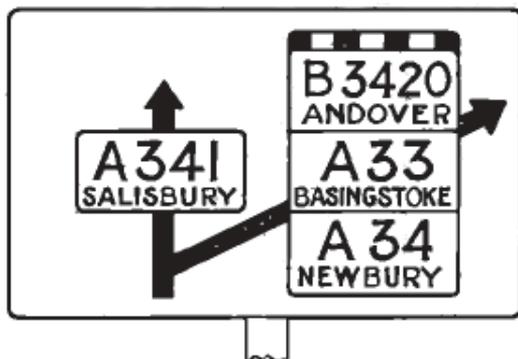
### **The routes of the primary roads in London**

Inevitably, since six of the roads radiated from London, the situation there was somewhat complex. The original situation seems to have been as follows:

- The starting point was apparently the junction where the Mansion House, the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange face each other. From here the A3 set off down King William Street, across London Bridge, down Borough High Street and Newington Causeway, and on to Portsmouth.
- The A2 started where Great Dover Street diverged from Borough High Street, then down Old Kent Road and on to Dover.

- The A4 started from the Mansion House / Bank junction, along Poultry, Cheapside, Newgate Street, Holborn Viaduct, Holborn, High Holborn, then down Kingsway and right into Great Queen Street, Long Acre, Cranbourn Street, Coventry Street, Piccadilly, Hyde Park Corner, Knightsbridge, Kensington Road and on to Bristol.
- The A5 started from the A4 at Hyde Park Corner, then via Park Lane and Edgware Road to St Albans and on to Holyhead.
- The A1 started from the A4 at the west end of Cheapside (this secondary starting point being conditioned by the decision to start the scheme from the Bank / Mansion House junction), then north by St Martin's Le Grand, Aldersgate, Goswell Road and Upper Street to Barnet, Hatfield and on to Edinburgh.
- The A6 started from the A1 at Barnet (now A1081) to South Mimms, then to a glancing junction with the A5 in St Albans, and on to Carlisle.

The numbering in London was later changed. The starting point was moved from the Mansion House / Bank junction to the junction of Cannon Street, King William Street and Gracechurch Street. While the A3, although slightly foreshortened, still ran south over London Bridge, the A4 now ran west along Cannon Street, St Paul's Churchyard, Ludgate Hill, Fleet Street, Strand, Trafalgar Square, Cockspur Street, both Lower Regent Street (northbound) and Haymarket (southbound), Piccadilly and on westwards. Thus the A1 now started from Cannon



*Old-style advance direction sign in Winchester (at SU476299). The road to the right was actually numbered B3045, but was so short that it was not thought worthy of inclusion on the sign. The B3420 had started life as A342; the A341 later became part of the A272 (now B3049). (PRO, MT39/246, November 1934)*

Street and ran by New Change to its existing line northwards.

There were other later changes. The A4 was diverted from Knightsbridge by Brompton Road and Cromwell Road, running parallel to the old line, by Hammersmith and Chiswick to the M4 (the old A4 becoming the A315). The A1 was diverted from the old line (which became the A1000) at the north end of Archway Road on to Watford Way and the Barnet Bypass, and then on to Hatfield, where the A1 and A1000 merge again.

### Road numbering within the zones

The numbers of roads, both A and B, clockwise from each of these primary roads, normally had as their first digit the number of that road; for example, all roads clockwise from the A1 had '1' as the first digit of their numbers. (The exceptions will be noted below.) This divided the country into a number of zones. Road numbers could transgress clockwise into the next zone or zones, but *not* anticlockwise.

The 'A1' zone would have been expected to stretch round clockwise to the A2, but after the A100 (via London Bridge to Bricklayers Arms), A101 (Rotherhithe Tunnel to Jamaica Road) and A102 (Blackwall Tunnel to Woolwich Road) had been listed it was decided that the Lower Thames would become the boundary between zones 1 and 2: thus all the roads in Kent begin with a '2'.

Class I ('A') roads were allotted numbers having one, two, three or four digits; Class II ('B') roads had either three or four, often using identical numbers. Very broadly, the number of digits allotted was in inverse proportion to a road's significance, but there were many exceptions such as A276, a half-mile long link road in Lewes; one wonders why it and similar examples elsewhere were not given four-digit numbers. Likewise, while A30 and A40 are each nearly 300 miles long, other 'two-digit' roads such as A79 are purely local in nature.

Similarly-numbered 'A' and 'B' roads are sometimes confusingly close to each other; thus the A416 and B416 are both within a few miles of Beaconsfield, and the A900 is closely paralleled by the B900 in Edinburgh. Because 'A' and 'B' road numbers are duplicated in this way, the reclassification of roads from 'A' to 'B' and vice versa usually involves the allocation of a new number. An exception is the A1151 near Norwich, which was formerly the B1151, the eastern end of which survives

beyond Stalham. The splitting of roads into separate sections can be particularly confusing; for example, the A379, once Exeter–Torquay–Plymouth, until recently consisted of three pieces separated by the B3264 and the B3199, to say nothing of the Dart Ferry. One of the ‘gaps’ has now been filled by rerouting the A379 to take over a section of the former B3199 between Teignmouth and Torquay.

Road numbers mostly remained within their own zones but, as mentioned above, some strayed (always clockwise) into the next zone, or even the second or third. Thus the A27, Pevensey–Lewes–Chichester, crossed the A3 to Southampton and proceeded to beyond Romsey. The A38, Bodmin–Plymouth–Exeter–Bristol, crosses the A4 and goes on to Gloucester, Birmingham and Burton, originally stopping at Derby, where it met the A61. (Now it goes on across the A6 to Mansfield.)

The A47 ran from Birmingham via Leicester to Peterborough, Wisbech and Downham Market. West of Swaffham it met the A17 coming from Newark, but it was the A47 which pushed on to Norwich and Great Yarmouth — a strong suggestion that the originator of the system worked from the Thames, clockwise around to the North Sea. (The A47 was later amended to go via Kings Lynn rather than Downham Market, the road through the latter becoming the A1122.) The A46, from Bath via Chippenham, Stratford-on-Avon and Coventry to Leicester, then ran by the Fosse Way to Newark and Lincoln, and on to the outskirts of Grimsby. The A52, A57 and A59 all crossed into ‘Zone 1’.

The rule that all the zone boundaries should be formed by primary roads did not quite work at Edinburgh. Here, the boundary between ‘Zone 1’ and ‘Zone 9’ was marked by the A900, which ran north-east from the A1/A7/A8 junction to Leith. Perhaps it was felt that Leith did not form a sufficiently distinctive terminal point to justify strict adherence to the system.

### The development of the system

Perhaps inevitably, it was soon found that a few roads had been incorrectly numbered, and some early adjustments were made. The A2012 in Hampshire, for example, was renumbered A3062 in August 1925, and the B6379 in Yorkshire became B1217. In other cases it was felt that a poor choice of route had been made, encouraging through traffic to follow sections of road which were unnecessarily narrow, congested

or hazardous. This led, for example, to the diversion of A1 away from its initial route through Northallerton in August 1924, with the original section of A1 being redesignated A167. At the same time the southern part of A66, which until then had extended south via York to Hull, was redesignated A1079.

It soon became apparent, too, that the original allocation of numbers had often been made on an overly parochial basis. (In Perth, for example, three very short stretches of link road were separately identified as A920, A921 and A922.) This meant that longer-distance traffic sometimes had to follow a rapidly-changing succession of road numbers in the course of a single journey. In the 1930s, the Roads Classification Section of the MOT undertook a comprehensive review, and many existing numbers changed or disappeared. Examples are given elsewhere in this article.

The original numbering process took place almost simultaneously with the burst of road-building activity which created a new network of arterial roads in the London area during the 1920s. The ‘arterial’ sections of the A106, A108, A118, A127, A2, A20, A22, A30, A4 and A406 in the London area, although numbered, are shown on contemporary maps as ‘under construction’, thereby indicating that provision was made in advance for these roads when numbers were originally allocated. Many of the numbers allotted would be unfamiliar to the present-day motorist; they suggest that the new roads were seen by the Ministry as alternatives to, rather than replacements for, the existing routes which they bypassed. Together with their later and better-known equivalents, the numbers used were as follows:

	<i>Later designation</i>
A106 Eastern Avenue	A12
A108 Great Cambridge Road	A10
A118 East Ham & Barking Bypass	A13
A1009 North Circular Road (from A108 to present A1009)	A406
A1081 A11 (Woodford) to Eastern Avenue	A406 (now A1400)
A22 Croydon Bypass	A23
A295 Bexleyheath Bypass	A2
A403 Western Avenue	A40
A405 North Circular Road (Hanger Lane – Acton)	A406
A4000 North Circular Road (Acton – Gunnersbury)	A406
A5088 Watford Bypass	A500 (now A41)
A5092 Barnet Bypass (northern end)	A555

(now A1)  
 A5093 Barnet Bypass (southern end) A555  
 (now A1)

The North Circular Road did not consist entirely of new construction, and its numbering initially retained in part the identities of existing roads whose routes it took over. The allocation of four-digit numbers to the Watford and Barnet bypasses is intriguing; presumably all available three-digit 'Zone 5' numbers had already been used. However, the subsequent change to A500 for the Watford Bypass — no doubt to reflect its increasing importance — meant redesignating the Hampstead – North Finchley road, which originally carried that number, to its current identity of A598. The 'new' number for the Barnet Bypass, A555, was vacant because the original road of that number, serving Ellesmere Port, had already been merged into the adjacent A5032.

Although the Brighton Road failed to qualify as a primary route, it did achieve distinction in a different, rather odd, way. In early days the A22 ran from the A3 at Kennington Oval by Croydon and Purley to East Grinstead and Eastbourne. The A23 began by branching off from the A22 at Purley, and running by Redhill to Brighton. Before long, however, the A23 was extended northward, superseding the A22 as far as Kennington Oval, but then going on by Kennington Road and Westminster Bridge Road, to finish near the eastern end of Westminster Bridge (in this last stretch displacing part of the A302). The A23 now thus defined, exactly and precisely, the extent and line of the annual London to Brighton Veteran Car Run (before the days of the M23).

The A42 was originally Reading–Oxford–Birmingham. South of Oxford it was superseded by an extension of the A329; north of Oxford it was replaced by an extension of the A34 through Birmingham to Manchester in the early 1930s. This northward projection of the A34, as well as eliminating the remainder of the A42, disposed of the A455, the A526 and the northern end of the A449. As if to compensate, the last-named was extended south from Worcester to Newport, taking over what had been the eastern end of A48. This road in turn was diverted to its present terminal point just west of Gloucester, eliminating the former A437.

The A154 once ran from Mablethorpe, Lincolnshire, southward to Boston and then inland to a junction with A152 at Donington. In the 1950s it was absorbed by a better-known road, the A52, which

was extended 'out of zone' eastward from Grantham, eliminating at the same time all but a snippet of the A152.

At about the same time, both the A176 (Stockton on Tees to Middlesbrough) and part of the A67 were supplanted by an eastward extension of A66 from its former terminal point at Scotch Corner on the A1.

The A9 at first went only from Edinburgh to Inverness; most of its remaining present-day route was covered by A88, although north of Wick this diverged to Thurso via what is now B876. By 1937, however, the A9 had been extended to John O'Groats. When lengthening the A9 the popular appeal of John O'Groats therefore prevailed over the greater real importance of Thurso, which one might have expected to be served by the 'primary road'; however this term appears to have no real significance beyond the tautological one of referring to a road having a single-digit number. The A9 has recently been altered yet again to run from Wick to Thurso; Wick to John O'Groats is now the A99.

The replacement of A88 by A9, mentioned above, was an early example of the 'tidying-up' process which has continued ever since. Whether the benefits justify the associated cost and loss of continuity is very much open to question, but the examples elsewhere illustrate the way in which such changes have occurred.

By the mid 1950s renumbering had been extensive; Hughes' listing in *ABC [of] British Roads* (Ian Allan, 1956) of two- and three-digit Class I roads omits the following numbers which were then no longer in use (some have subsequently been re-used):

- A108\*, 132\*, 135\*, 139, 147, 150, 154\*, 176\*, 180, 194\*, 195\*
- A204, 231, 274, 276\*, 277, 278, 282, 292–294
- A326, 355, 364, 369, 378, 397, 398
- A42\*, 403\*, 430, 437\*, 455\*
- A500\*, 506, 511, 526\*, 555\*, 563, 564
- A601, 648
- A79\*; A717, 720, 729, 731-733, 739, 740, 752-754, 756, 770–774, 777-799#
- A88\*; A802, 804, 805, 813, 817, 818, 825, 829, 840, 842, 872, 874, 877, 878, 893, 896, 898
- A99\*#: A900\*, 922\*, 925, 931, 936, 945, 946, 949, 951, 953, 954, 962, 963, 976, 978, 982, 987–989, 991–993, 995–999#

\* See references elsewhere in this paper.

# It seems likely that these numbers at the upper ends of their ranges, had not, to that date, ever been allocated.

## Other numbering systems

The Trunk Roads Act 1936 made the MOT the Highway Authority for the 4,500 miles of ‘principal through routes’ in Great Britain. (A further 3,700 miles were added in 1946.) Not surprisingly, almost all the newly-designated stretches of trunk road already had ‘A’ numbers, and thought was given by the MOT to the possibility of renumbering them as ‘T’ roads, using either their existing numbers or a completely new series. Experiments were carried out with the use of distinctive colours and symbols for trunk roads, and the introduction of new ‘T’ signs was proposed. In the event it was decided, perhaps wisely, that this would be confusing rather than helpful to the motorist, and it was not proceeded with. Trunk roads (including motorways) were separately numbered for internal purposes; a 1967 list shows TR18 to be Swansea to Manchester, for example.

A further new category of minor road (‘Class III’) was created for administrative purposes in 1943. Although these were not normally shown as such on maps or signposts, each county council issued its own series of ‘C’ road numbers to identify them internally, and these have occasionally appeared — presumably in error — on signposts. Examples are known to have existed in Hull, Norfolk and County Durham.



‘C’ road sign at TF371207 in Lincolnshire  
(Photograph by Richard Oliver, 9 October 1989)

A complementary numbering scheme is used to designate main roads in Milton Keynes, which have numbers commencing with ‘H’ and ‘V’ (for horizontal, that is, east–west, and vertical, or north–south, respectively). This includes certain stretches of A road also forming part of the national network — for example, the relevant portion of the A421 is locally designated H8.

## The motorways

The numbering of motorways followed a broadly similar system, using an ‘M’ prefix followed by the number of the parallel ‘A’ road. However, a notable exception was the Birmingham–Exeter motorway, designated M5 rather than the more logical M38. (There is no exact motorway equivalent to the A5.) This meant that the zone system could not be rigidly applied to motorways, and a number of shorter ones, such as the M49 near Bristol, have been given numbers which do not reflect any relationship with the equivalent ‘A’ road. One example which failed to materialise, however, was M16. Although a short section of motorway bearing this number appeared on OS maps of Hertfordshire while under construction in 1974, it was actually opened as A1178 and later became part of M25.

In some cases complications occurred because more than one motorway paralleled a particular ‘A’ road — for example, the number M1 is based on the roughly parallel A1, but the A1 itself has also been converted in part into a motorway bearing the number A1(M), one section of which joins the M1 near Garforth. Similar examples occur elsewhere. A curious situation has arisen between Glasgow and Carlisle, where the same continuous stretch of motorway is designated M74 north of Abington and A74(M) south thereof. Inconsistencies also arise in relation to short stretches of motorway which lie between the ‘M’ and ‘A’ roads of the same number — for example, the A308(M) and A404(M) are both situated between the M4 and the A4, but are numbered as if they were in different zones.

The numbering of the motorways avoided some of the antiquarian bias of the numbering of the ‘A’ roads. For example, the M3 runs all the way from inside the M25, by Basingstoke and Winchester to Southampton. As to the A3, only a short stretch north of Havant appears as A3(M). The M4 ignores Bath, but connects to Bristol by the short M32, and forges on into South Wales. However, the M2 has the historic but now less important route through north Kent, whereas the M20 serves the Channel Tunnel and Folkestone, with the dual carriageway A20 continuing into the port of Dover.

The arrival of the motorways also began to play havoc with the neat system of ‘A’ road numbering. Chunks have been cut out of the A5, A6, A11, A34, A47 and many other roads, often in a ragged fashion, in order to nudge traffic on to the motorways. Thus, if one drives up the A5 along Edgware Road, on

reaching the A41 the A5 unexpectedly becomes the A5183, and only turns back into the A5 at Junction 9 on the M1. The A11 disappears in east London, and only reappears at Junction 9 on the M11 near Great Chesterford.

The 'clockwise' rule is also now ignored, for example, in the case of the A66, originally running east from the A6 at Penrith, over the Stainmore Pass to Teesside. This has now been extended backwards (that is, anticlockwise) into Zone 5, to run by Keswick and Cockermouth to Workington. It provides a single road-number for through traffic to follow; no doubt this is why it was done.

## Tyneside

One area which has seen particularly radical changes is Tyneside, where few roads still bear the same number as they did in 1950. Many of the alterations stem from the two successive diversions of the A1 away from its original course, firstly to the east of Newcastle via the Tyne Tunnel and more recently to the west via the new bridge at Blaydon. In the period between these two diversions, several minor 'Zone 1' roads lay entirely outside Zone 1 (as thus redefined). The following summary will give a flavour of the process, but is far from being a complete list of all the roads which have received new designations:

### 1950s

A1	Birtley	<i>became</i> A6127
A194	Seaton Burn – Blyth	A189, A192, A193, A1068
A195	Morpeth – Plessey	A192
A1063	Morpeth – Guide Post	A196
A196	Guide Post – Hartford Bridge	A1068

### 1970s

New eastern alignment – part motorway		
<i>became</i> A1 / A1(M)		
A1	Birtley – Darlington	A167
A1	Newcastle	A6125
A1055	South Shields – Boldon	A194
A19	Seaham – South Shields	A1018
A69	Newcastle	A6115
New road:	Seaham – Boldon	A19
New road:	Scotswood – Birtley	A69
New m'way:	Newcastle City Centre	A6127(M)

### 1980s

New western alignment		
<i>became</i> A1		
A1	Earlier 'new' section (part)	A19, A184
A6115	Newcastle (part)	A186
A6125	Newcastle	B1318, A1
A6127(M)	Newcastle	A167(M)
A1(M)	Boldon (part)	A194(M)
A69	Earlier 'new' section	A1, A191

## Recent developments

'A' roads are now subdivided into 'primary routes' and 'main roads'. The Ordnance Survey Road Atlas describes primary routes as forming 'a national network of recommended through routes which complement the motorway system'. Since many primary routes are not trunk roads, it would appear that the former is a non-statutory classification, and it is not reflected by any changes to road numbering. However road signs now display details of primary routes on a green background and those of main roads (and 'B' roads) on white; motorway signs have a blue background. The OS Atlas shows primary routes in green, with 'main roads' in red, but does not separately identify trunk roads, whose status now seems to be of less importance. OS Landranger maps, which until recently identified trunk roads by the addition of the suffix '(T)' after their numbers, now instead show primary routes in green, reflecting the presentation used on road signs.

An unusually radical renumbering has changed the identity of the A14. This number now refers to the M1/A1 link road and its eastward prolongation to Felixstowe; the change involved the elimination of large chunks of the former A45 and A604. The original A14 — a quite different road, although it also served Huntingdon — has accordingly been redesignated, mainly using the number A1198.

In Scotland an equally intriguing change concerns the A90, formerly Edinburgh–Perth, which had largely been supplanted by the M90 motorway and until the mid-1990s survived only for a few miles as far as Inverkeithing. This road has now been given an extension beyond the northern end of the M90, taking it no less than 120 miles via Dundee and Aberdeen to Fraserburgh, including sections of the former A85, A94, A92 and A952. Associated local renumberings have also taken place.

The reasons for some changes are not clear. For example, in the 1980s a short intermediate section of A361, between Swindon and its junction with the A4, was redesignated A4361 although the number A361 was retained both north and south of here.

An interesting development has recently taken place in east London. Perhaps to assuage the hostility aroused by urban motorways, the newly-completed extension of the M11 through Leytonstone has been designated simply A12, and this number has also been applied to the former A102(M) as far south as the Blackwall Tunnel. The short section of the erstwhile A102(M) south of the Thames has become simply A102.

Other stretches of motorway have been similarly

demoted to 'A' rank. Thus the A40(M) from North Kensington to the A5 is reduced to A40; the M41 disappears and becomes merely a northerly extension of the A3220; while the short stretch of A40 parallel to the M41 becomes part of the A219. As a result of all these changes the A40 from Shepherds Bush all the way to the A1 at St Pauls becomes merely an eastward extension of the A402. Similar treatment has been given to the former A41(M) near Tring, which is now simply a part of the A41.

It will be interesting to see if similar short stretches of motorway are also reduced to 'A' rank — for example, the A57(M) in Manchester, the A58(M) and A64(M) in Leeds, the A167(M) in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the A38(M) in Birmingham.

## Notes and sources

This article is based on three Occasional Papers published by the Road Transport Group of the Railway & Canal Historical Society:

- John Mann, *British Road Numbering*, Paper 21, March 1993
- Graham Bird, *British Road Numbering — Some Further Thoughts*, Paper 45, September 1994
- John Mann, *Numbering the Primary Roads*, Paper 186, May 2001

The drawing of a road sign on page 94 is reproduced with permission of the PRO (Ministry of Transport, Roads Division, Drawing Registry SP6/1-5)

### Official sources

Much of the information in the article is based on MOT correspondence held at the PRO. The relevant files are: MT39/235, 241, 245, 246, 770 and 771; MT104/101; MT112/67; and MT117.

A list of 3,980 road numbers was published by the MOT in June 1923, but demand was very limited and it was soon withdrawn from sale. The authors of this paper have not seen a copy of the list. The Ordnance Survey published a series of 'Ministry of Transport Road Maps', with classified roads and their numbers distinctively superimposed in colour (Red for Class I, Green for Class II) on the normal 'half inch' series maps. These were revised regularly until the mid-1930s.

Since the introduction of road numbering it has been normal practice for OS maps to show Class I and II road numbers.

### Commercial

Many road atlases, town plans, maps and guide books indicate road numbers, but their accuracy is sometimes

suspect. They are often undated (an unfortunate but seemingly intentional omission, presumably intended to lengthen their 'shelf-life'), and information is sometimes incomplete or inconsistent.

Those publications which have been found most useful are (in chronological order):

- *Michelin Guide [to] Great Britain*, 8th edition, 1925.
- George Philip & Sons, London: *English Roads at a Glance*. Undated, c1928:
  - Sheet 1 (covers Kent, Surrey, Sussex and part of Hampshire);
  - Sheet 4 (covers the South Midlands).
- *Times Road Map of London*. Undated, c1928.
- G W Bacon & Co, London: *Large Print Motoring & Cycling Map of the Environs of London*. Undated, c1928.
- Leverett Keaton & Co, London: *New Map of England & Wales*. Undated, c1928.
- Ivor Nicholson & Watson, London: *The Roadreader*, 1937.
- *AA Road Book of England & Wales*, 1st edition, 1950.
- J A Hughes: *ABC [of] British Roads*. Ian Allan, 1956.
- *AA Road Book of England & Wales*, 4th edition, 1965.
- *BP Road Atlas of Great Britain*, 1981.
- Collins: *Road Atlas*, 1994.

### Periodicals

*Sheetlines* — the Journal of the Charles Close Society

- letter from Fergus Muir (issue 58, August 2000)
- note by Richard Oliver (issue 59, December 2000)
- note by Brian Hunt (issue 61, August 2001)