

Parp-parp: Personal Transport in Modern London

by David Long

It's one of those many little things which Londoners take for granted, a handy but unremarkable refuge for pedestrians, strategically placed midstream between the lines of traffic trundling one way and the other. But have you ever stopped to wonder who it was who invented the first ever traffic island?

One of several significant 'firsts' for London, it was actually a Colonel Pierpoint who came up with the idea, in 1864 placing his prototype just south of Piccadilly in St James's Street in order that he could cross the road safely to his Club. Unfortunately the Colonel, understandably proud of his creation, was in the habit of turning round to admire his pride and joy and one time missed his footing as he did so and was promptly run over and killed by a cab.

In those days of course his nemesis arrived with a horse up-front as the first mechanically-driven versions didn't make their appearance until 1897. But even when they did, and despite their very considerable novelty value at the time, these comparatively quiet early motorised cabs were far from successful, proving much too heavy thanks to the weight of the batteries needed to power their electric motors and so considerably slower than even their horse drawn competitors.

As a result, having led the world with this new technology in the closing days of the Victorian era, by 1905 there were still only nineteen of the novel electric cabs up and running. That's compared to 10,361 of the conventional horse drawn ones on London's streets, by the way, the last of which - incredibly - remained in service around Victoria Station until 1947.

The first ever multi-storey car park made a surprisingly early debut too, opening for business in 1901 when cars were still a real rarity. Located immediately behind Piccadilly Circus in Denman Street (where today NCP offers a similar service) and covering more than 19,000 square feet, it had no fewer than seven storeys, the upper ones being reached via an hydraulic lift capable of raising a three-ton vehicle. More than anything though, the existence of such a facility so early on suggests that almost a century ago parking in central London was already quite a considerable problem.

Which begs the question, why did it take so long to introduce the parking meter? In fact, first seen sprouting out of the sidewalks of Oklahoma City in the US, it wasn't until 1958 that British motorists got some of their own. Once again London led, those first few appearing on the pavements of Mayfair and at a time when 1/- (5p) would be sufficient to keep the authorities at bay for a full one hour.

London can lay claim to Britain's first self-service petrol station too (at least if one discounts an unsuccessful experiment nearly 30 years earlier at Patcham in East Sussex) as well as to this country's first genuine drive-in bank. Designed with passing motorists in

mind, the latter was installed by the venerable Drummond's Bank, a branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland housed in a building by Admiralty Arch on Trafalgar Square.

Roadside petrol pumps of course were in themselves nothing new (another American innovation, the first in this country was installed in Shropshire before the First World War). But self-service stations were decidedly novel, the first one commencing business in November 1961 at the foot of Southwark Bridge - but not before its operators had taken steps to resolve the shortcomings of the earlier one in Sussex where a primitive 'shilling-in-the-slot' pump installed in the 1930s had proved highly unreliable and, more significantly, far too easy for dishonest motorists to fiddle.

London can also lay claim to the first dedicated club for automobilists, the lavishly appointed RAC Club at 89 Pall Mall. Locally it's still known as the Chauffeurs' Arms, a sneering reference to it being by far the least exclusive of the traditional gentlemen's clubs of St James's. That said, with its Turkish baths, squash doubles court, a private post office and what is still the capital's most beautiful swimming pool, its facilities are the best of any West End club and its neighbours know it. Occupying the site of the old War Office - some internal features of which were reconstructed within the clubhouse - it was completed in 1911 by Charles Mewes and Arthur J. Davis, the medal-winning star pupils of the École des Beaux Arts in France and architects of the Ritz Hotel. The building was hugely



RAC Club, Pall Mall.

continued...

Parp-parp: Personal Transport in Modern London (cont.)

advanced for its day - those early motorists were naturally more technically minded than most - and built on an heroic scale with 60' foundations and an eight-storey, 2,000 ton steel matrix supporting the immense Portland stone façade. Its arrival on such a prominent site was not entirely welcomed in clubland, however, with members of older and grander establishments deploring what one of their number described as 'a 'furred, goggled, spare-tyred and cigar-smoking' crowd'.

As to the reason for all this, the car itself, London cannot claim to have built the first but it has certainly been responsible for some pretty odd examples. Willesden was home to the Iris factory, from 1905 until the outbreak of the Great War, churning out a cumbersome and rather crudely-made tourer named for the goddess of the same name. She was known as the Speedy Messenger of the Gods, although the name was also said by the factory to indicate (somewhat optimistically) that 'It Runs In Silence'.

Then there was E. H. Owen of Kensington, a shadowy outfit which from 1899 until 1935 advertised in *The Autocar* and elsewhere. It claimed to be a car manufacturer, but no such car as an 'Owen' was ever seen and nor has the precise location of the factory ever been discovered.

And finally, a major player still with us today and which was first established just over the river in Lambeth. Its original factory took its name from the home of a medieval warrior who once lived there, and when the company relocated to Luton, coincidentally where the warrior had his country seat, it took his heraldic emblem to use as the company logo. The warrior was called Fulk Le Bréant, his home was Fulk's of Fawke's Hall, and the logo is still the one found on the front and rear of every car Vauxhall Motors builds today.

About David Long

An award-winning ghostwriter, under his own name David Long has written and illustrated many books on London with a particular emphasis on its more curious corners. Murders of London: In the Steps of the Capital's Killers was published in 2012, as was: The Animals' VC: For Gallantry and Devotion. For more on David's car-related writing, try Blood, Sweat and Tyres: the Little Book of the Automobile. (www.davidlong.info)

