

CROSSING THE ROAD IN BRITAIN, 1931–1976

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the history of crossing the road in Britain from the traffic acts of the early 1930s to the introduction of the Green Cross Code in the early 1970s. It reconstructs this history through the examination of government documents, press releases, newspaper articles, newsreels, public information films, and other road safety materials. Since the interwar period, British governments have become progressively more involved in policing the activity of crossing the road, and there have been two main planks of policy. The first has been to design progressively more sophisticated crossings; the second has been road safety education, including advice about how to use the crossings, disseminated through school crossing patrols, children's clubs, and public information films. Governments have generally relied on appeals to good sense and civic duty rather than legally enforceable rules about crossing the road, and have sought to follow as well as lead public opinion in determining how much to coerce both pedestrians and motorists. The formulation of policy in relation to public attitudes and media responses means that crossing the road during this period has interesting implications for both political and cultural history.*

This article traces the political and cultural history of a mundane practice of British daily life: crossing the road. The forty-five-year period under consideration was marked by the introduction of pedestrian crossings and subsequent experimentation about their design and operation; and a vigorous programme in the education of pedestrians, particularly children, to get them to use these crossings correctly and to cross the road at other points safely. At the same time, crossing the road emerged intermittently as the subject of public controversy and even protest, partly in response to these government interventions, and policy often sought to monitor and respond to these anxieties. In this sense, it followed a historical pattern in British motoring law of seeking to reconcile the competing aims of different interest groups, and working within the constraints of what was deemed acceptable to public opinion.¹

Governments have often appealed to good sense and civic duty rather than the threat of punishment, in response to public fears about the excessive coercion of pedestrians or motorists. One consequence is that there are few legal constraints

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¹ Alan Irwin, *Risk and the control of technology: public policies for road traffic safety in Britain and the United States* (Manchester, 1985), p. 88; William Plowden, *The motor car and politics in Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 342.

on walking across the road in Britain – unlike large parts of North America and western Europe, where red lights and ‘don’t walk’ signs are legally binding, and there are fines for jaywalkers. But there have been several abortive efforts to police the movement of pedestrians in Britain, and crossing the road has often been a problematic endeavour. The relatively informal law and etiquette of crossing roads in this country is a product of the complex history and fraught politics of motor transport, road safety, and urban design.

I

Pedestrian crossings were introduced in the 1930s in the context of growing concern about the rising number of road deaths, particularly of pedestrians, but also of increasing acceptance of the significant role of the car in modern society. For the first few decades of the car’s existence, British law had barely intervened in the power struggle between driver and pedestrian. The road was the ‘king’s highway’ and no person, whether on foot or in a vehicle, could either obstruct it or be denied access to it.² In the early years of the twentieth century, newspapers firmly sided with pedestrians, who made up the vast majority of their readers, in accounts of road accidents. As the car became an increasingly middle-class rather than aristocratic possession throughout the 1920s and 1930s, however, public and press opinion gradually shifted.³ From the late 1920s onwards, as the motorist’s precedence on the highway was increasingly recognized, pedestrians began to be criticized for erratic behaviour on the road, particularly by the police. In 1929, Liverpool’s chief constable described his city’s pedestrians as ‘the worst in the world’, blaming them for three-quarters of road accidents; and in the same year, Salford’s chief constable told a radio interviewer that in the case of many road deaths ‘the inquest should return a verdict of suicide by the pedestrian’.⁴

The traffic acts of the 1930s tried to accommodate two conflicting demands: first, the growing calls for safer roads made by organizations like the Pedestrians’ Association, founded in 1929 to tackle the ‘very serious and crying evil’ of pedestrian deaths on the roads;⁵ second, the unwillingness of an increasingly powerful motoring lobby to accept excessive restrictions on the motorist. The 1930 Road Traffic Act imposed some responsibilities on the car driver – making third party insurance obligatory, careless driving an offence, and disqualification an ultimate sanction – but perhaps its most significant innovation was the Highway Code, published in 1931. The Highway Code was simply that: a code, with little basis in statute law. The minister of transport, Herbert Morrison, wrote in a foreword to the first edition that it was ‘a code of good manners to be observed by all courteous and considerate persons’.⁶ In keeping with this ethics of

² Raymond Flower and Michael Wynn Jones, *100 years of motoring: an RAC social history of the car* (Maidenhead, 1981), p. 20.

³ Sean O’Connell, *The car in British society: class, gender and motoring, 1896–1939* (Manchester, 1998), p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 140.

⁵ ‘The Pedestrians’ Association’, *Times*, 5 Nov. 1929.

⁶ [Ministry of transport], *The highway code* (London, 1931), p. 1.

mutual responsibility, the new Highway Code imposed rules not only on motorists but also on pedestrians. They were told not to ‘make a sudden dash into the carriageway’ and to avoid standing about in groups at blind corners where they might obscure a driver’s line of vision.⁷ The code thus established the important principle that pedestrians as well as drivers were responsible for road safety, and that all persons had ‘a right to use the highway and an obligation to respect the rights of others’.⁸

The growing number of deaths on the roads was a topic of intense public debate throughout the 1930s. Using a common analogy of the time, the *Daily Telegraph* wrote that ‘a year on the roads is more murderous than the three years of the South African War’.⁹ A particular concern was the death of children, 14,000 of whom were killed on the roads between 1927 and 1937.¹⁰ The 1934 Road Traffic Act addressed these concerns in two main ways. First, it reintroduced a speed limit of 30 mph in built-up areas, the abolition of which in the 1930 act had caused great public concern about road safety (although the number of pedestrian deaths actually fell slightly in this period from 3,722 in 1930 to 3,529 in 1934).¹¹ Second, it made legal provision for pedestrian crossings. Crossings had been employed in an ad hoc way since the 1920s, sometimes with illuminated ‘cross now’ signs, but the pedestrian had no legally enforceable right of way on them. Electric traffic lights, or ‘traffic control robots’, which had been installed in British towns from 1927 onwards,¹² provided a pedestrian crossing by default, but people had to judge for themselves when to cross by keeping an eye on the traffic, and there was often no point in the cycle when they were free of the danger of turning traffic. One of the government’s central concerns was how to make the new crossings visible to drivers. The London County Council, which often led the way in pedestrian crossing innovation during this period, experimented in 1934 with kerbside posts with a ‘C’ sign, and ‘checkon’ crossings, so named because they were made up of small black-and-white squares but were also ‘a check on accidents, mortality, recklessness, jay walking’.¹³ Thus began a long tradition of lame wordplay in pedestrian crossing names, which partly functioned as a form of publicity for the crossing itself. But the checks were next to useless, soon becoming dirty and indistinguishable from the rest of the road surface.¹⁴

Convinced that it would need to make the crossings more conspicuous, the ministry of transport decided on pedestrian crossings made up of parallel lines of studs along the road and unlit ‘Belisha beacons’ at kerbside, named after the then minister of transport, Leslie Hore-Belisha. These seven-foot high, striped poles with amber-coloured globes on top produced a great deal of both amused and

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3. ⁹ ‘The worst week on the roads’, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Jan. 1935.

¹⁰ Major C. V. Godfrey, *Roadsense for children* (Oxford, 1937), p. 8.

¹¹ [Department of transport], ‘Road accidents and casualties: 1926–1995’, in *Transport statistics Great Britain, 1996* (London, 1996), p. 184.

¹² Peter Thorold, *The motoring age: the automobile and Britain, 1896–1939* (London, 2003), p. 202.

¹³ S. W. Richards for secretary, the divisional road engineers, London division, ministry of transport, 1934, London, National Archives (NA), MEPO 2/4705.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

hostile public interest, as garish additions to the interwar streetscape and highly visible intrusions by the state into everyday life. They inspired press articles, cartoons, cinema newsreels,¹⁵ a card game called 'Belisha' aimed at teaching road safety to children,¹⁶ and a more anarchic Blackpool arcade game, 'Belisha Beacons', where contestants would throw balls at traffic signs.¹⁷ Some complained that the unlit globes would not be visible enough, to which the ministry replied that lighting them was too expensive, and they would reflect light from nearby street lamps anyway.¹⁸ Others thought them *too* conspicuous, the *Spectator* protesting that they made the city look as if it were 'preparing for a fifth-rate carnival'.¹⁹ They were also targets for opportunistic vandals and revellers who would shoot or throw stones at the globes.²⁰ In the first four months of their operation, 3,000 of the 15,000 beacons installed in the capital had been wantonly destroyed.²¹

The introduction of the crossings only reignited the public controversy about the relationship between pedestrian and motorist. 'If the motorist dared to drive with a fraction of the carelessness and defiance with which pedestrians sometimes walk', claimed one Tory MP in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'the streets would resemble a battlefield. A few fines for "dangerous walking" would be salutary.' Another *Daily Telegraph* correspondent wrote that, on his drive to work over the last year, 301 pedestrians had walked off the pavement without looking: 'The pedestrian must learn the elementary courtesy of looking where he (and still more, she) is going.'²² The *Daily Mail* complained that the motorist was now 'the harassed object of control run riot'.²³ Newspapers with more proletarian readerships, however, still tended to side with pedestrians. Noting that Lord Edward Montagu had been fined only 30 guineas for killing a woman in Hammersmith when driving at 35 miles per hour, the *Daily Sketch* complained that 'this was like reverting to the old Saxon *wergild*, under which the punishment for homicide was a fine varying according to the rank of the person killed'.²⁴

The crossings did not make the issue of legal right of way any clearer, as a number of cases at the law courts in the late 1930s showed. In June 1938, a judge decided a pedestrian knocked down on a pedestrian crossing had no claim for compensation because he had been standing on the pavement a few moments earlier and 'not presenting the appearance of a man about to cross the road'.²⁵ A few months later, the London Transport Board appealed successfully against an award of damages to a boy run over by a bus on a pedestrian crossing, on the

¹⁵ 'Belisha beacons being made', *Gaumont British News*, 21 Jan. 1935, issue no. 111; 'Manufacture of Belisha beacons', *Pathé Super Sound Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1935, super issue no. 35-6.

¹⁶ *Belisha: rules* [rules for a card game made by Castell Bros.] (London, 1937).

¹⁷ Thorold, *The motoring age*, p. 206.

¹⁸ 'Pedestrian beacons: official reply to criticism', *Times*, 20 Sept. 1934.

¹⁹ Thorold, *The motoring age*, p. 206. ²⁰ 'The joke (children's tale)', *Punch*, 21 Nov. 1934, p. 583.

²¹ 'Worst week on record for road deaths: 27 a day during Christmas', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Jan. 1935.

²² Letters in *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Jan. 1935.

²³ 'Road control run riot: motorists' fears, more rights for the pedestrian', *Daily Mail*, 14 Sept. 1934.

²⁴ 'They laugh at him: but the name Belisha is now part of the language', *Daily Sketch*, 14 Jan. 1935.

²⁵ 'They still don't know the answer', *Daily Mail*, 21 Dec. 1938.

similar grounds that he had stepped out abruptly. The judge decided: 'If the pedestrian suddenly embarks on an empty crossing so as to embarrass a car and thereby causes or contributes to a collision, he has only himself to blame.'²⁶ There were no traffic lights at many of the crossings, so the motorist was simply obliged to give way when there was a pedestrian on them – but this gave rise to considerable ambiguity about the point at which the motorist could reasonably be expected to slow down and stop.

II

The 1930 Road Traffic Act had also stipulated that money from the Road Fund should be spent on road safety. Public campaigns to encourage 'roadsense' in the 1930s focused on educating all road users as an alternative to greater legal restrictions on drivers. Since funds were limited, the forms of publicity sponsored by the ministry of transport were relatively informal, relying on the willingness of newspaper editors to run road safety stories, the goodwill of the BBC, and the work of voluntary organizations.²⁷ In particular, the discourse of 'roadsense' was promoted by the National 'Safety First' Association (NSFA), formed in London in 1916 to tackle the rise in traffic accidents during the restricted lighting conditions of the First World War. The NSFA was heavily financed by commercial motoring interests, and they occupied many of its key positions.²⁸ It actually campaigned *against* the introduction of the driving test and reintroduction of the speed limit in the early 1930s, focusing instead on the need to educate the non-motoring public, especially children.²⁹

With more government funding, the NSFA stepped up its activities in the 1930s, making announcements on BBC news bulletins and *Children's Hour*; showing road safety films in cinemas; touring the country with a loudspeaker van broadcasting advice from Gracie Fields, Jack Payne, and Sir Malcolm Campbell; and organizing a 'safety week' each year during which flags, vehicle posters, window bills, and posters were distributed.³⁰ The winning entry by a fourteen-year-old Salford girl in one of the NSFA's essay competitions astutely captured the prevailing ethos of co-operation and consensus. Urging both motorists and pedestrians to 'play up and play the game', she went on:

'More ills are wrought by want of thought than by want of heart', says the poet, and how true to our everyday lives these words are ... We cannot be made safe by Laws and Acts of Parliament alone, these only serve as a guide, we must have the *will* to become safe and each one must shoulder the wheel.³¹

²⁶ 'Don't embarrass motorists! Walkers may face new dangers at road crossings', *Daily Sketch*, 21 Dec. 1938.

²⁷ Plowden, *The motor car and politics*, p. 280.

²⁸ O'Connell, *The car in British society*, pp. 113–14.

²⁹ Plowden, *The motor car and politics*, p. 258; O'Connell, *The car in British society*, p. 126.

³⁰ 'National "Safety First" Association: summary of draft scheme for conduct of an educational campaign against accidents', July 1933, NA, MT 34/142; Godfrey, *Roadsense for children*, p. 33; 'Recommendation of committee on road safety among school children', circular 1449, 1932–4, NA, ED 11/189.

³¹ Godfrey, *Roadsense for children*, pp. 28–9.

After a 1936 inter-departmental committee on road safety among school children recommended road safety training in every school, there began an eagerly anticipated ritual in the life of every child: the police visit. According to Major C. V. Godfrey, the chief constable of Salford in the 1930s, children looked forward to these visits with eager anticipation: 'It is no uncommon thing for these children of working-class parents to ask if they may wear their best clothes on the day when a police lecture is to take place.'³² On these visits, the inspector would give a brief lecture about road safety, and then go over to the piano and conduct the communal singing of the 'safety first' song:

When you cross the road by day or night,
Beware of the dangers that loom in sight.
Look to the left, and look to the right,
Then you'll never, never get run over.³³

Godfrey claims that the song's chorus reached a crescendo which left the children in 'a sort of seventh heaven of concordant ecstasy', and that the visit would conclude with 'three almost hysterical cheers for the inspector'.³⁴ But his 1937 book about teaching roadsense to children also has an authoritarian undertow. Beginning with the assumption that co-operative children are rare specimens, he groups the disobliging ones into categories: 'the showy, aggressive type' keen to show his friends that he can flout danger, 'the dilatory, dreaming type' who does not notice the world around him, and 'the purely thoughtless individual upon whom no amount of lecturing seems to have any effect'.³⁵ He also discusses the difficulty of teaching parents 'in districts where the operative classes predominate': 'Many of these folk do not read the daily papers, and consequently they are unlikely to be so well acquainted with the topics of the day as the more cultured classes.'³⁶

Many road safety experts were unhappy with this kind of approach, however, arguing that it resembled the indoctrination and social engineering taking place in fascist countries. One delegate at a conference of the National Association of Head Teachers said: 'You cannot Hitlerise the British public in this way.'³⁷ Another delegate at a 1936 conference on road safety worried that 'we shall develop a highly-strung, birdlike type of child, swivel-necked with constant practice in looking right and looking left'.³⁸ Even Godfrey accepts that propaganda 'is a hard, unrelenting word that suggests some rather violent school of political origin', but concludes that 'a brief study of the combined efforts of Doctors Goebbels and Frick will reveal the astonishing effect that can be achieved in directing the juvenile mind'.³⁹

³² Ibid., p. 53.

³³ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 57–8.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 37–8.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

³⁷ O'Connell, *The car in British society*, p. 129.

³⁸ *Report of proceedings of the National Safety Congress 1936, held in London 20–22 May, organised by the National 'Safety First' Association* (London, 1936), p. 57.

³⁹ Godfrey, *Roadsense for children*, pp. 17–18.

By the end of the 1930s, both local authorities and the ministry of transport seemed to be moving towards greater restriction on pedestrian movement. Miles of pedestrian barriers were erected in London, making it harder for those on foot not to use the provided crossings.⁴⁰ In a pilot project in the capital, policemen stood on the roofs of police cars in busy streets during the rush hour, shouting advice and admonishments at pedestrians through megaphones.⁴¹ In 1939, a House of Lords select committee set up to look at road accidents came up with what was widely regarded as a motorist's charter. Arguing that there should be fewer prosecutions for drivers, fewer suspended licences and fewer speed limits on main roads, it concluded that road safety could be improved by segregating drivers and pedestrians as much as possible, and educating all road users.⁴² This committee also criticized careless pedestrians who 'are unwilling to sacrifice any of their rights to the common cause of safety'.⁴³ Its report argued that it should be an offence 'for a pedestrian to enter the carriageway heedlessly' and that any fines imposed should receive maximum publicity to discourage other pedestrians from similar behaviour.⁴⁴ These proposals were not implemented because of the outbreak of war, although many of them reappeared in the recommendations of wartime committees.

With the outbreak of war, crossing the road became newly perilous. As towns were blacked out at night, and the suspension of the driving test put more incompetent drivers on the road, the number of pedestrian deaths rose dramatically. In the first four months of the war, it was more dangerous to be on the roads than in the armed forces: 4,133 people were killed in road accidents, 2,657 of them pedestrians.⁴⁵ After the gradual reduction of the petrol ration and the final banning of fuel for private motoring in July 1942 led to a decrease in car travel, the number of accidents also fell, and in 1945 pedestrian deaths were the lowest they had been since the first statistics were recorded in 1927 (2,602).⁴⁶ But the obvious problems of driving and crossing roads in the blackout led to unprecedented government regulation: motorists were only allowed to drive up to 20 mph in built-up areas at night; all car owners had to paint their bumpers, mudguards and running boards white;⁴⁷ and many kerbstones were painted in black-and-white check to make them more visible.⁴⁸

The greater public acceptance of state intervention into daily routines, and of the necessity of government propaganda, in wartime meant that pre-war anxieties about the over-regimentation of children in road safety education were quelled. In 1942, the ministry of transport and the NSFA (now given a royal charter and

⁴⁰ 'A mile of pedestrian barriers', *Times*, 28 May 1936.

⁴¹ 'How not to cross the road', *Times*, 9 Oct. 1936.

⁴² *Report by the select committee of the House of Lords on the prevention of road accidents, chaired by Lord Alness* (London, 1939), pp. 9–13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime: Britain, 1939–1945* (London, 2004), p. 52.

⁴⁶ [Department of transport], 'Road accidents and casualties: 1926–1995', p. 184.

⁴⁷ Gardiner, *Wartime*, p. 50.

⁴⁸ Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain, 1945–1951* (London, 1993), p. 89.

renamed the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA)) devised a 'kerb drill' for children. Betraying its war origins in more than its name, the drill went: 'At the kerb, halt! Look right, look left, look right again. If all clear, quick march!' One British Movietone newsreel from 1945 made the analogy with military manoeuvres quite explicit, intercutting shots of soldiers drilling with those of children looking right and left before crossing a road.⁴⁹

The prominence of road safety campaigns after the war reflected the generally increased role of government propaganda and publicity campaigns. A wartime committee on road safety, which finally reported in 1947, recommended an intensive national road safety propaganda campaign to be planned and run by the RoSPA, and disseminated with the help of the Central Office of Information (COI), newly formed from the wartime ministry of information.⁵⁰ The chairman of the Pedestrians' Association, John S. Dean, published *Murder most foul*, a polemical attack on the report's findings. Before the war, he pointed out, the worst road safety records were held by Italy and Germany, with Britain third. The Nazi regime's vigorous safety campaigns, including on-the-spot fines for 'careless walking', 'pedestrian days', and educational films, were simply the natural corollary of a society bent on the hegemony of the car.⁵¹ 'Scratch a road hog', Dean claimed, 'and you'll find a fascist.'⁵²

Although the COI played an extensive role in promoting road safety after the war, Dean's fears were surely exaggerated. The most hard-hitting propaganda was the 'Keep Death off the Roads' advertising campaign, which appeared in newspapers in 1945 and 1946. These adverts included illustrations of children being knocked over, or of happy, playing children with captions such as 'Killed on the Road – Tomorrow' and 'Tomorrow's Road Fatality'.⁵³ On the whole, though, road safety propaganda relied on gentler warnings and the power of good example. With the help of J. Walter Thompson, the COI launched a 'heroes campaign' in 1947, with sporting and other stars, giving advice on the kerb drill: 'Len Hutton says: "Here's how I cross the roads. In cricket you must sometimes take risks. But in traffic – never!"' There were also cartoon strips in children's comics, entitled 'Ned's last dash' and 'Gordon's grim gamble', about children who take a chance in the traffic and get run over (but never fatally). Another long-running character in press adverts of the late 1940s was the 'traffic jimp', a bad angel who persuaded pedestrians that there was time to dart across the road when there was not.⁵⁴ The public information films about road safety, shown in cinemas after the newsreels, were less preachy than this, perhaps in the expectation that they would be seen by adults as well as children. The writer

⁴⁹ 'Kerb drill', *British Movietone News*, 14 June 1945, issue no. 836A.

⁵⁰ [Ministry of transport], *Final report of the committee on road safety, May 1947* (London, 1947), p. 9.

⁵¹ J. S. Dean, *Murder most foul ... a study of the road deaths problem* (London, 1947), p. 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵³ See ministry of war transport display advertising in the *Times*, 4 Mar. 1946, and 27 Mar. 1946.

⁵⁴ Unreferenced press clippings from the Central Office of Information, 'Ministry of transport, road safety campaign; J. Walter Thompson and Co. Ltd., 1947', NA, INF 2/132.

and filmmaker Richard Massingham, a prolific producer of public information films in this period, made a cinema short in 1948 which cleverly subverts the obviousness of its advice to the viewer. The injunction not to dawdle on a pedestrian crossing (still the only legal requirement made of the pedestrian) is illustrated with the eager but brainless Mr A, played by Massingham, sleeping and having breakfast on it. Mr A finally gets the idea, reaching the kerb-side to the sound of thunderous applause and a sports reporter's excitable commentary.⁵⁵

III

The wartime committee on road safety also recommended that there should be more scientific research into improving safety.⁵⁶ The work of the Road Research Laboratory, founded in 1933, now expanded and began to have a much bigger effect on policy. The laboratory was instrumental in the invention of the zebra crossing in the late 1940s, after a series of studies on the conspicuousness of different road markings and the possibility of standardizing them to take account of different textured surfaces, wet roads, and street lighting.⁵⁷

James Callaghan, then parliamentary secretary to the ministry of transport, came up with 'zebra' as a name for the crossing which it was thought would be easily understood and remembered, particularly by vulnerable groups such as children.⁵⁸ A thousand sets of black-and-white stripes were painted on roads in preparation for 'pedestrian crossing week', held in April 1949 not only to test the new zebras but also to promote more widespread observance of crossings generally.⁵⁹ But a *Times* journalist surveying London's Harrow Road at the beginning of this week found that only 35 per cent of pedestrians who crossed the road within fifty yards of a crossing actually used the crossing itself. 'It seems clear', he concluded, 'that the number of pedestrians who are prepared to go a few yards out of their way is depressingly small.'⁶⁰

The wartime committee on road safety had followed the advice of the 1939 House of Lords committee in arguing for fines for jaywalkers.⁶¹ But the government stopped short of compelling pedestrians to use the new crossings, on the grounds that this would be impossible to police and that the public was not prepared to accept such restrictions.⁶² Instead, they painted whitewashed footprints leading up to the zebras, mutely urging people to follow them. A lyrical

⁵⁵ *Pedestrian Crossing* (dir. Michael Law, 1948).

⁵⁶ [Ministry of transport], *Final report of the committee on road safety*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ George Charlesworth, *A history of the transport and road research laboratory, 1933-1983* (Aldershot, 1987), pp. 104-6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ 'Watch on road crossings: new types tested', *Times*, 5 Apr. 1949.

⁶¹ [Ministry of transport], *Final report of the committee on road safety*, p. 53.

⁶² 'Pains and penalties for pedestrians', *Times*, 17 Nov. 1950.

Times leader on these ‘dashing men’s elevens’ was suspicious even of this level of government intervention:

Some perhaps will see in those appealing prints on the pavement a symbol of all the paths which a fondly paternal State marks out for its children, with the carolled promise that, if only they will tread boldly in the prescribed footsteps, the winter’s rage will freeze their blood less coldly. That, of course, is just one way of looking at it; the perambulating citizen, if he is wise, will look both ways and tread in the proffered footsteps not so much boldly as with a proper caution.⁶³

When the new zebra crossing regulations were introduced in November 1951, many saw them as an attack on the pedestrian. The ministry of transport believed that there were now so many crossings that they were not being widely observed by either motorists or pedestrians.⁶⁴ So the Belisha crossings not converted to zebras were to be gradually abandoned, reducing the overall number of crossings by about two-thirds. In several towns, parents protested against the removal of crossings, forming human barriers and holding up traffic while their children crossed the road to school.⁶⁵ The zebra crossing also did not get rid of the long-standing confusion over rights of way. The 1954 version of the Highway Code informs pedestrians that they have precedence on the zebra but should ‘be sensible; wait for a suitable gap in the traffic so that drivers have time to give way’.⁶⁶ It is not difficult to see how, in heavy traffic, this could lead to confusion. If the zebras were unpopular with pedestrians, the addition of flashing beacons in 1953 tended to anger motorists and motoring correspondents. ‘Flashing beacons are not aids to vision’, a letter to the *Times* protested, ‘they are only a confounded nuisance’.⁶⁷ The *Yorkshire Post* complained that blinking beacons had turned City Square in Leeds into ‘a giant’s Christmas tree with the fairy lights out of control’.⁶⁸ As with the introduction of the Belishas in the 1930s, the conspicuousness of the flashing beacons allowed them to serve as a highly charged symbol of government interference in daily life.

The immediate postwar era also saw a redoubling of government efforts by both the RoSPA and the government to improve the safety of children on the roads. School crossing patrols, used experimentally by the police since the late 1930s, were adopted officially in 1953, with the circular ‘children crossing’ sign, or ‘lollipop’, arriving two years later.⁶⁹ The government also extended its road safety remit to include the education of pre-school children, in response to concerns that they were particularly at risk.⁷⁰ In 1952, the RoSPA founded the Teddy Club to

⁶³ ‘Art for the pedestrian’, *Times*, 3 May 1949.

⁶⁴ ‘Contribution to brief for debate on private member’s motion: pedestrian crossings’, Jan. 1964, NA, MT 112/167.

⁶⁵ ‘News in brief’, *Times*, 3 Nov. 1951.

⁶⁶ [Ministry of transport], *The highway code* (4th edn, London, 1954), p. 5.

⁶⁷ Stuart R. de la Mahotière, ‘Beacons at crossings’ (letter), *Times*, 31 Oct. 1953.

⁶⁸ ‘Let’s have some blinking discipline’, *Yorkshire Post*, 13 Jan. 1954.

⁶⁹ [Department of the environment], *Pedestrian safety* (London, 1973), p. 16.

⁷⁰ See ‘Protecting the children: lessons in road safety’, *Times*, 29 Dec. 1949; and ‘Road safety for children’, *Times*, 27 Mar. 1950.

promote road safety to children under six, and launched the Lookout Club for older children in 1953 with the motto 'always alert'. These were superseded by the phenomenal success of the Tufty Club, launched in December 1961 for under-fives, and expanded to admit older children in 1962. The club enrolled over 53,000 members in its first year,⁷¹ and became a lucrative franchise for the cash-strapped RoSPA, with Tufty featuring on greeting cards, toothbrushes, card games, handkerchiefs, and jigsaws.⁷² In its efforts to educate pre-school children, the RoSPA especially targeted women, urging young wives' clubs to form toddlers' clubs affiliated to the Tufty Club, and encouraging mothers to read the stories to their children.⁷³ The safety materials reinforced this gender division: while the figures of authority in Elsie B. Mills's bestselling Tufty books, like Mr Wise Owl the teacher and Dr White Rabbit the GP, are all male, when Tufty crosses the road he is enjoined to 'always take mummy' with him.⁷⁴

After the Conservatives abolished the Crown Film Unit in 1952, there were fewer public information films shown in cinemas. In the early 1960s, however, the ministry of transport and the Central Office of Information began to exploit the relatively new medium of television advertising for their road safety campaigns, in an effort to supplement what one civil servant disparagingly called the 'parish notice board type of publicity' of the RoSPA.⁷⁵ As always, the ministry was keen to curb costs wherever possible. The BBC and ITV channels agreed to show these TV fillers for free as a public service, although usually only late at night when airtime was less valuable. These road safety adverts had to be shorter and punchier than the longer films used in cinemas, and typically used humour or appeals to common sense rather than the threat of legal punishment or a gruesome accident. Explaining the rejection of 'shock' propaganda, one civil servant told *Safety and Rescue* magazine that 'it is a characteristic of human nature that we tend to shut our minds to things like blood and coffins and the best safety messages are those which teach something positive about road behaviour'.⁷⁶

The TV fillers stressed the importance of good manners as well as following the rules as defined by law. 'How nice it would be if people showed a little more courtesy ... a little more patience', urges a 1960 cartoon advert titled 'Don't be rude on the road', showing an abnormally polite motorist doffing his cap and waving on a group of school children on a zebra crossing.⁷⁷ The comedian Ken Dodd, then at the height of his television fame, starred in a 1963 advertisement about pedestrian crossings in which he plays all the characters, including an upper-class Bentley driver assailing a pedestrian on a crossing, an old lady stopping

⁷¹ Anne Agar, 'Tufty teaches safety', *Daily Sketch*, 15 Nov. 1962.

⁷² [Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents], 'Road safety for the Tufty Club: lecture notes', n.d., NA, MT92/94.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Elsie B. Mills, *Seven day by day stories about Tufty* (London, 1963).

⁷⁵ 'Draft letter to the treasury: road safety publicity', 1967, n.d., NA, MT 92/411.

⁷⁶ 'Parliamentary secretary's meeting with Mr. Huber, features editor, *Safety and Rescue*, on Monday, 17 Apr. 1967: brief for the parliamentary secretary', NA, MT 112/167.

⁷⁷ *Road hog - don't be rude on the roads* (Central Office of Information, 1960).

to search her bag in the middle of the road, and a cowboy urging her not to dawdle. At the end, Dodd swivels round a Belisha pole and comes out of character: 'But seriously folks: *everyone* should use the pedestrian crossings properly.'⁷⁸ In 'comic' form, this was simply a reiteration of the old theme of mutual obligation between driver and pedestrian.

IV

Along with other aspects of road safety, these TV fillers were needed to teach the public how to use the series of trial crossings introduced in the 1960s. As car ownership grew, it was clear that the zebra crossing could not cope with congested urban traffic. So the government experimented in 1962 with a 'hybrid' crossing that would stop cars more emphatically than a zebra but would not disrupt the traffic flow as much as fixed-time traffic lights. Instead of the parallel stripes at zebras, these new 'panda' crossings consisted of triangular black-and-white 'shark's teeth' (supposedly resembling panda markings). The pedestrian wishing to cross pressed a button at the roadside which lit up a 'wait' sign. This produced a flashing amber light followed by a pulsating red light for drivers, warning and then ordering them to stop. A 'cross' sign would then light up, indicating to the pedestrian that it was safe to cross the road. This was a new concept of 'road-sharing', in which pedestrians and cars would have priority on the same section of road at different times.⁷⁹ Panda crossings were introduced at forty-five sites in April 1962, the first one being switched on opposite Waterloo station by the minister of transport, Ernest Marples. There is an unusual piece of BBC news footage of this event in which, deprived of any ribbon-cutting moment, Marples simply walks over the crossing, holding a toy panda presented to him by the wife of the mayor of Lambeth.⁸⁰ Ominously, he has to wave the traffic on again once he has crossed the road.⁸¹

Newspaper motoring correspondents, patrolling the streets on the first day of the panda's operation, found that motorists were baffled by the amber periods and did not realize that, if there was no light, it meant 'go ahead'.⁸² At one Croydon crossing, a half-mile queue formed because, according to an RAC patrol man, 'none of the drivers knew when to move'.⁸³ Pedestrians, meanwhile, felt that they did not have enough time to cross. One elderly lady, who made a panic-stricken dash for the pavement as the flashing 'cross' sign went out, told a reporter: 'That man Marples is up to too many tricks. It is a harebrained scheme and most dangerous.'⁸⁴ Many of the new crossings broke down and were covered

⁷⁸ *Pedestrian crossing – Ken Dodd* (Central Office of Information, 1963).

⁷⁹ [Department of the environment], *Pedestrian safety*, p. 21.

⁸⁰ This footage can be accessed on the BBC 'On this day' website at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthistday/hi/dates/stories/april/2/newsid_2840000/2840919.stm> (accessed by the author on 3 July 2004).

⁸¹ "'Pandas' start pulsating: new crossings', *Guardian*, 3 Apr. 1962.

⁸² 'Drivers hesitate at panda crossings', *Times*, 4 Apr. 1962.

⁸³ "'Pandas' bring road jams: two-pace amber lights confuse', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 Apr. 1962.

⁸⁴ 'Shaky start for panda crossings', *Times*, 3 Apr. 1962.

in sackcloth only hours after being unveiled, which led to more confusion about whether a panda whose lights were not working became a zebra by default. Guildford had all thirteen of its zebras converted to pandas, this stockbroker suburb being selected by the ministry of transport as a show town because of 'the high standard of intelligence of its inhabitants'. But its local newspaper called the experiment a 'farce' and suggested that the 'clumsy contraptions' were 'getting beyond a joke'.⁸⁵

The indignation of London pedestrians about the panda's introduction was intensified as it coincided with a serious attempt to penalize jaywalking in the capital. In September 1962, the ministry of transport proposed an experiment in three London boroughs (Ealing, Paddington, and Tottenham) to make it an offence to cross the road other than at pedestrian crossings.⁸⁶ One correspondent to the *Times* wondered if 'Mr. Marples's next brainwave will be jay-walker wardens on roller skates', and another asserted his 'rights as a freeborn Englishman' to cross the road wherever he liked.⁸⁷ While the panda was quickly abandoned, the experiment of punishing errant pedestrians stuttered on for a few more years. The Metropolitan Police tried again in 1966, this time in the centre of the capital, with red lines painted along the kerb and £20 fines for jaywalkers. In the first month 5,000 people were warned but no one was ever fined, and the police dropped the scheme three months later, claiming it was 'absolutely unworkable'.⁸⁸ The ministry of transport concluded that these experiments were marred by poor compliance and the difficulties of enforcement 'in the absence of an identity card system', and that 'the public are not yet ready to accept such a restriction'.⁸⁹

In any case, the new science of traffic engineering, which emerged in the mid-1950s in America and began to influence transport policy in Britain from the early 1960s onwards, moved the emphasis away from penalizing jaywalkers. Traffic engineering is marked by its 'neutral' emphasis on traffic data and road design over more contentious legal or political issues. With the rise of this new discipline, the trend shifted towards changing the street landscape rather than coercing pedestrians or drivers to behave in certain ways. Colin Buchanan's influential report *Traffic in towns* (1963) was widely interpreted by local authorities as recommending the segregation of pedestrians and traffic.⁹⁰ The journal *Traffic Engineering and Control* conducted a number of surveys about pedestrian behaviour in the 1960s, for example on the effectiveness of guardrails in discouraging jaywalkers.⁹¹ As well as the greater use of guardrails, the late 1960s also saw the

⁸⁵ 'Does a faulty panda become a zebra?', *Times*, 18 May 1962.

⁸⁶ 'London experiment in pedestrian control', *Times*, 6 Sept. 1962.

⁸⁷ Letters in the *Times*, 10 Sept. 1962.

⁸⁸ Martin Wainwright, 'Zebras get the hump', *Guardian*, 19 Aug. 1986.

⁸⁹ 'Comments on the draft Pelican Crossing regulations 1969', 11 June 1969, NA, MT/112/317.

⁹⁰ [Ministry of transport], *Traffic in towns: a study of the long-term problems of traffic in urban areas* (London, 1963).

⁹¹ A. M. Mackie and S. J. Older, 'Study of pedestrian risk in crossing busy roads in London's inner suburbs', *Traffic Engineering and Control*, Oct. 1965, pp. 376–80; G. D. Jacobs, 'Pedestrian behaviour on

construction of more pedestrian subways and overbridges, and more elevated roundabouts, clearways and urban motorways, where access was often restricted to motor vehicles.

The continued experiments with pedestrian crossings focused on simplifying the signifying system to avoid confusion between pedestrian and motorist, without overly impeding traffic flow. The next pedestrian-crossing innovation after the panda, announced in September 1964, introduced shielded lights for pedestrians at kerbside showing the silhouetted figures of a red standing man ('wait') and a green walking man ('cross'). As with the old 'cross' sign, the green man would flash near the end of the crossing cycle. The introduction of these matchstick figures followed the Worboys report, which had recommended using symbols rather than letters in traffic signs, according to the belated adoption of the 1949 Geneva Protocol on Road Signs and Signals.⁹² The new traffic lights were simpler to understand than the pandas, but did not dispense with the central confusion over the hybrid crossings, which was who had right of way when the various lights were flashing or unlit.

The introduction of 'X-ways' in March 1967 only added to the uncertainty. Now a third light for drivers was added, a white X, as a positive indication of when they had total right of way. The media were implacably hostile to the X-way, their main complaint being that an 'X' usually meant stop rather than carry on. 'It took a woman Minister of Transport [Barbara Castle] to dream up such a complicated, obscure and difficult way of getting people from one side of the road to the other', wrote one journalist for the *Reading Evening Post*. 'These carnival lights are quite beyond the average road user.'⁹³ After the panda debacle, however, the media may have been too eager to anticipate failure. When the first X-way was installed in Hammersmith, a reporter from the BBC's *Town and around* programme went down to interview the general public. His slightly desperate line in leading questions ('But isn't it very confusing at the moment to pedestrians and motorists?') was met only by equable replies ('I think it is a good thing myself ... It'll all work out all right. I don't think it will be any trouble.')⁹⁴ Some of the media response to the X-way confirmed the ministry's view that 'the Press had been hostile to panda crossings and would be looking for difficulties in any replacement'.⁹⁵

The ministry of transport canvassed comments from lobby groups and interested parties about the X-way. The AA and RAC were in favour of the hybrid system but the Pedestrians' Association, the Magistrates' Association, the Institute of Advanced Motorists, and the Road Operators' Safety Council 'all think the

a length of road containing guard rails', *Traffic Engineering and Control*, Jan. 1966, pp. 556-65; J. M. Bayley, 'Pedestrians and traffic signals', *Traffic Engineering and Control*, Sept. 1966, pp. 311-12, 323.

⁹² [Ministry of transport], *Report of the traffic signs committee, 18 April 1963* (London, 1963), p. 59.

⁹³ Michael Braham, 'X-ways are diabolical!', *Reading Evening Post*, 23 Mar. 1967, NA, MT 96/168.

⁹⁴ *Town and around*, BBC1, 6 Mar. 1967, transcript in NA, MT 96/168.

⁹⁵ 'Notes on demonstration and discussion concerning modified push button pedestrian crossing equipment', 27 Aug. 1964, NA, MT 112/167.

system is too complicated and are opposed to the hybrid principle as being unsafe'. The report then puzzlingly concludes: 'The hybrid principle has a lot of explicit support and very little opposition. It should be retained.'⁹⁶ The ministry complained elsewhere that the Pedestrians' Association's views on hybrid crossings 'are more or less in line with their view that crossing systems are not safe unless they give an absolutely unrestricted passage to pedestrians'.⁹⁷ Essentially, the government was prepared to dispense with the unpopular 'X' sign, but not to compromise on the basic idea of a hybrid crossing with flashing lights to encourage traffic flow when the crossing was clear of pedestrians.

The suggested name for the new crossings ('pelican' or 'pelicon', a compression of 'pedestrian light-controlled crossing') caused a great deal of discussion in the ministry of transport. After the failure of the panda and the X-way, it was particularly sensitive to press ridicule. One civil servant complained that, with the replacement of the 'o' with an 'a', the name 'did not even have the dubious merit of devious association. ... Before this particular bird starts to nest, can we shoot it down?'⁹⁸ In one MOT file there is a long list of other possible names with waspish handwritten annotations, including greenways ('too rustic'), lightways ('too inter-planatory' (sic)), cross-ways ('risible') and licross crossings ('soon converted to liquorice').⁹⁹ The name 'pelicon/pelican' seems to have been retained *faute de mieux*. But the ministry was nervous enough to include possible answers to hostile questions about it in its briefing to the minister: 'Panda was first attempt at hybrid crossing. Like Chi-Chi and An-An the experiment didn't come off [a reference to a failed attempt to mate giant pandas at London Zoo]. Admit pelican unusual offspring [of the zebra and panda] ... I'm confident pelican will fill the bill.'¹⁰⁰

The name of the crossing was not a trivial matter: it showed how important public relations had become in the formulation of road safety policy. The ministry of transport was increasingly conscious throughout the 1960s that 'the image of the Minister and the Ministry in the public mind is one of restraint and regulation ... Since almost every regulation creates opposition somewhere, it is the opposition which tends to be reported in the Press.'¹⁰¹ The previous minister of transport, Barbara Castle, had come under sustained media attack for a concerted road safety policy including the introduction of motorway speed limits, breathalysers, and the compulsory installation of seat belts in new cars. In this context, the ministry wanted a name that was easily memorable but avoided charges of flippancy. There was by now a great deal of media and public

⁹⁶ T. G. Osborne, 'Views on "X-way" crossings since coming into operation on 6 March 1967', 16 Jan. 1968, NA, MT 96/247.

⁹⁷ 'Views on X-way crossings since coming into operation on 6 March 1967', n.d., NA, MT 96/247.

⁹⁸ J. Mellor to Mr Morris, 9 July 1968, NA, MT 96/247.

⁹⁹ C. Jamieson to J. Mellor, 4 July 1968, NA, MT 96/247.

¹⁰⁰ 'Pelican crossing: brief for minister', n.d., NA, MT/112/317.

¹⁰¹ 'Road safety publicity: a proposal for a sustained campaign: brief for the minister', 9 Jan. 1967, NA, MT 92/411.

scepticism about each new crossing or safety campaign, to the extent that government announcements of policy innovations became as much about news management as the dissemination of practical information.

The pelican not only retained the hybrid system, it skewed it in favour of the motorist. The flashing green man now meant 'do not start to cross' instead of 'cross with care' as it had on the X-way. The pelican, however, did not dispense with the problem of how to interpret the flashing lights. The television fillers designed to educate the public about the pelican focused crucially on rights of way during the flashing green man/flashing amber stage. One 1974 TV advertisement used characters from the most popular sitcom of the period, *Dad's army*, disregarding the incongruity of the Home Guard marching through a 1970s suburban street. The platoon is crossing on a pelican when the green man starts to flash. As Corporal Jones begins to panic, Sergeant Wilson, the embodiment of patrician calm, says 'one continues to cross if one's already on the crossing. There's plenty of time.' He then restrains Captain Mainwaring from stepping out, warning him that 'one shouldn't *start* to cross'. A voiceover instructs the viewer to 'learn your blinking pelican signals'.¹⁰² This film was released five years after pelicans were first introduced, suggesting that the ministry was concerned for some time about how the flashing lights would be construed by pedestrians. Even as late as 1976, there was an advert with a 'pelican crossing song' in the style of an American hoedown:

When the green man's flashing and the amber too
This is what you've got to do
Pedestrians, don't start to cross
Your life's more important than the time that's lost¹⁰³

Despite this ambiguity, the pelican lasted longer than any of its predecessors because it was simpler and more readily understood. It replaced the 'X' with a full green signal showing all the time, except when someone pressed the button to cross the road. The push-button box also had a plaque explaining to pedestrians how to use the crossing, and it made provision for blind or partially sighted people, with an intermittent beeping sound to correspond with the green man stage.¹⁰⁴ In summary, the series of refinements to pedestrian crossings in the 1960s got rid of a certain amount of confusion between pedestrian and motorist, but without dispensing with the 'hybrid' system involving flashing lights. Within this context, one of the ministry of transport's central concerns was to persuade pedestrians that there was ample time to cross the road even if the green man started flashing while they were on the crossing. For example, the ministry often promoted the new crossings by sponsoring inaugural ceremonies or 'switch-ons' in the towns where they were being piloted, as a way of generating free publicity.

¹⁰² *Pelican crossing – pedestrians – cast of 'Dad's army'* (Central Office of Information, 1974).

¹⁰³ *Pelican crossing song – Paul Greenwood* (Central Office of Information, 1976).

¹⁰⁴ 'Pelican crossing: brief for minister', n.d., NA, MT/112/317.

It recommended that, during such ceremonies, the oldest inhabitant of the town should use the crossing, to show that the crossing time was perfectly adequate.¹⁰⁵

V

By the late 1960s, it was clear from a number of studies that the ‘kerb drill’ was outdated. Research now suggested that children learnt it by rote and did not always understand it and that, more damningly, those under nine could not distinguish between the kerb and the gutter, or between ‘left’ and ‘right’.¹⁰⁶ (Tufty Club members were always encouraged to wear their membership badges on their right side, to remind them of this difference.¹⁰⁷) After eighteen months of research, jointly carried out by the Road Research Laboratory, the RoSPA and the department of education and science, the government came up with a replacement for the kerb drill, the ‘Green Cross Code’:

First find a safe place to cross, then stop.
Stand on the pavement near the kerb.
Look all round for traffic and listen.
If traffic is coming, let it pass, look all round again.
When there is no traffic near, walk straight across the road.
Keep looking and listening for traffic while you cross.¹⁰⁸

Launching the code in April 1971, the government promoted it with the most extensive road safety campaign ever. There was an initial three-month saturation campaign costing half a million pounds, with films shown in schools, safety exhibitions, brochures, proficiency certificates, cartoon strips, wallcharts, and promotional tie-ins.¹⁰⁹ Over the next few years, the Central Office of Information also produced an unprecedented number of TV fillers to communicate the code to children. In one series of adverts called ‘Children’s Heroes’ shown on after-school television, children crossing the road absentmindedly would be corrected by sporting and music celebrities who happened to be standing nearby, and who would then address the viewers: ‘Take it from me. Be smart ... be safe.’¹¹⁰ There was also a series of adverts featuring the Green Cross Man, who surveyed traffic troublespots from his high-rise control centre and then used his wristwatch to

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of transport, ‘Minutes of the first working party meeting to discuss publicity arrangements for the “X-way” pedestrian crossing’, 13 July 1966, NA, MT 96/168.

¹⁰⁶ E. M. Cawkell, ‘The green cross code’, *Traffic engineering and control*, July 1971, p. 116.

¹⁰⁷ [Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents], ‘Road safety for the Tufty Club’, NA, MT 92/94.

¹⁰⁸ A. Singh, ‘Pedestrian education’, in Anthony Chapman, Frances M. Wade, and Hugh C. Foot, eds., *Pedestrian accidents* (Chichester, 1982), pp. 79–81.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹¹⁰ *Children’s heroes – Joe Bugner* (Central Office of Information, 1976), *Children’s heroes – Alvin Stardust* (Central Office of Information, 1976), *Children’s heroes – Mud* (Central Office of Information, 1976), *Children’s heroes – Kevin Keegan* (Central Office of Information, 1976).

teleport himself to them.¹¹¹ But the publicity campaign was also somewhat inconsistent. Even though the kerb drill was scrapped because children were learning it parrot fashion, and the new code was never meant to be learnt by rote, another advert came up with a famously impenetrable acronym, SPLINK, which seemed to be based on the random selection of words in the Green Cross Code (safe, pavement, look, if, near, and keep).¹¹² The sheer weight of materials in the campaign to publicize the code often meant that its approach was uncoordinated, unsure whether to get children to memorize the code or simply understand and apply its general principles. There was considerable disagreement among road safety experts about whether the code was sufficiently easy to understand and what effect it had on the reduction of accidents.¹¹³

The key period in the history of crossing the road in Britain ended in the mid-1970s with the tailing off of the Green Cross Code campaign. After this date, there was relatively little innovation in crossing places or conventions: both the pelicans and the Green Cross Code, for instance, have survived to the present day. The 1974 Road Traffic Act also made road safety a statutory duty of local authorities, and they started to produce materials themselves rather than rely on national campaigns.¹¹⁴ There have been relatively few national campaigns about crossing the road safely since then, and these have been aimed mainly at pre-school children. The major recent technological innovation has been the puffin (pedestrian user-friendly intelligent) crossing, introduced in the mid-1990s, which uses infrared sensors to detect the pedestrian, ensuring that traffic is stopped until she has finished crossing, when the lights switch automatically to green. Compared with its predecessors, the puffin generated remarkably little public or media interest, perhaps because its interactivity requires less skill and knowledge from its users, and there is less possibility for confusion between pedestrian and motorist.

The high-tech nature of contemporary pedestrian crossings means that they are, to use a term from actor network theory, ‘black-boxed’. In other words, they seem like an automatic, intrinsic part of daily life, disconnected from historical contexts and debates.¹¹⁵ The practice of crossing the road forms part of hidden governance, in which law, administration, technology, and education intersect to create what Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift call ‘the engineering of certainty’ in everyday life.¹¹⁶ The history of daily routines such as crossing the road is concealed in the long, incremental development of these new laws and technologies.

¹¹¹ *Green Cross Code (1) – Dave Prowse* (Central Office of Information, 1975), *Green Cross Code (2) – Dave Prowse* (Central Office of Information, 1976), *Green Cross Code (3) – Dave Prowse* (Central Office of Information, 1976), *Green Cross Code – Tony gets it right* (Central Office of Information, 1976).

¹¹² *Splink – Jon Pertwee* (Central Office of Information, 1976).

¹¹³ ‘Ministry’s new safety drill is “inadequate”’, *Times*, 11 June 1971.

¹¹⁴ Irwin, *Risk and the control of technology*, p. 102.

¹¹⁵ Mike Michael, *Reconnecting culture, technology and nature: from society to heterogeneity* (London, 2000), pp. 24, 131. ¹¹⁶ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: reimagining the urban* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 26.

In Susan Stewart's phrase, the temporality of the everyday has been 'drowned out by the silence of the ordinary'.¹¹⁷

During the period under consideration, there were two main planks of government policy. The first was to design progressively more sophisticated crossings through a process of trial and error; the second was road safety education, including advice about how to use the crossings. It is difficult to determine how successful specific policies were in reducing casualties. The pedestrian casualty figures often show small, erratic variations from year to year, and it is difficult to separate these out from other factors such as the general increase in traffic, mileage, road density, and population during this period. During the period of intensive pedestrian crossing innovation and child safety education between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, for example, there was actually a slight increase in fatal or serious accidents involving child pedestrians (from 7,936 in 1964 to 8,169 in 1974).¹¹⁸ On a more general level, however, the attempt by successive governments to make it easier and simpler to cross the road could be deemed a success, with an overall pattern of falling pedestrian deaths throughout this period. In 1931, 3,467 pedestrians were killed in road accidents; in 1976, 2,335 were killed, and the number has continued to fall steadily since then.¹¹⁹

In recent years, however, transport historians have questioned what Clive Emsley calls the 'Whiggish' account of road safety history 'which understands laws as logical remedies for readily identifiable problems'.¹²⁰ The policy of teaching road etiquette to both drivers and pedestrians, they would argue, has sidestepped more difficult issues about the role of the car in society. The advantage of the educative approach, as Alan Irwin suggests, is that it is relatively cheap, highly visible (thus reassuring people that something is being done about road safety), and does not upset powerful motoring interests.¹²¹ Governments took action on road safety reactively, and generally assumed that any innovation must take notice of 'public opinion' and the views of different interest groups about the effectiveness, cost, and even the aesthetics of new technologies like signalled crossings.¹²² Motoring groups like the AA and RAC have undoubtedly had stronger links with government and media, and therefore more influence over policy, than organizations like the Pedestrians' Association.¹²³ Historically, car drivers have also belonged to higher income groups and social classes than

¹¹⁷ Susan Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Durham, NC, 1993), p. 14.

¹¹⁸ [Department of the environment], 'Fatal and serious road casualties: children 5-14 years', in *Transport statistics Great Britain, 1964-1974* (London, 1976), p. 137.

¹¹⁹ [Department of transport], 'Road accidents and casualties: 1926-1995', pp. 184-5.

¹²⁰ Clive Emsley, "'Mother, what *did* policemen do when there weren't any motors?": the law, the police and the regulation of motor traffic in England, 1900-1939', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 357-81, at p. 357.

¹²¹ Irwin, *Risk and the control of technology*, p. 95.

¹²² Plowden, *The motor car and politics*, pp. 3, 17.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

pedestrians, and the culpability of members of the 'respectable' middle classes in many road accidents militated against more coercion of the motorist.¹²⁴

But the motives behind government policy are harder to unravel in relation to the specific problem of crossing the road, perhaps because it is the activity which momentarily subverts the 'natural' precedence of the motorist, in charge of several tons of speeding metal, over the more vulnerable, fleshy pedestrian. Apart from the brief period in the 1930s when road deaths were a cause of great media concern, policy innovations seem to have been inspired not by casualty figures or public outcry about them, but by two main factors: popular hostility towards, confusion about, or lack of observance of previous pedestrian crossings or road safety campaigns; and the desire not to impede traffic flow as congestion in town centres worsened.

There was little systematic research about the effect of new crossings or safety campaigns on reducing road casualties, which might have fed into the formulation of subsequent policy. Instead, research focused on whether new crossings were understood, whether rules were being observed, and the impact on traffic congestion.¹²⁵ These aspects were much easier to measure than apparent reductions or rises in accidents, which could be due to extraneous factors such as inevitable teething problems with new crossings, public ignorance that might be expected to decrease over time, and the immediate effects of publicity campaigns. The limited research into the effects of policy on accident reduction often produced inconclusive or contradictory results.¹²⁶ Research into road safety campaigns aimed at children was more systematic, particularly towards the end of this period, but it focused on controlled experiments in which children were tested on their understanding of instructions, rather than the impact on real-life accidents, where many other variables came into play.¹²⁷ The government's policies on crossing the road during this period focused on using new technologies, road design, and safety education to persuade pedestrians to behave in certain ways, on the assumption (partly supported by the fragmentary evidence about public attitudes to new crossings and safety campaigns) that coercion would have been unpopular and difficult to police. The formulation of policy in relation to the monitoring and management of public opinion during this period means that crossing the road represents an interesting point of intersection between political and cultural history.

¹²⁴ See O'Connell, *The car in British society*, pp. 113, 132–3, 218.

¹²⁵ 'Pelican crossing: brief for minister', n.d., NA, MT 112/317.

¹²⁶ See, for example, 'Report on Panda Crossing trials, 1964', n.d., NA, MT 112/167.

¹²⁷ Diane E. Firth, 'Children's knowledge of the Green Cross Code and kerb drill', Transport and road research laboratory technical note no. 791 (Crowthorne, 1973); Diane E. Firth, 'The road safety aspects of the Tufty Club', Transport and road research laboratory report no. 604 (Crowthorne, 1973).