



A Brief History of Registration Numbers

At the beginning of the last century mechanically propelled vehicles were rapidly increasing in number on British roads, as a consequence accidents were becoming more frequent and speeding vehicles were also causing alarm amongst the general public.

With no laws to govern these drivers, they could reach frightening speeds of 20 mph and with no visible means of identification on the vehicle, how would they ever be caught?

So what would be the solution to the many problems the 'horseless carriage' was creating?

This was to come in the form of The Motor Car Act of 1903.

This statute meant that every mechanically propelled vehicle would have to be registered and given its own unique registration number.

This registration number would have to be clearly displayed on the vehicle in the form of a number plate.

But there was more to this new law...

the vehicle must have a horn to warn people and animals of its presence

it must have some form of lighting

it must be driven on the left hand side of the road

the driver must stop if requested to do so by a police constable

Compliance with this new legislation did have an upside however, it would now no longer be necessary for a man to walk 20 yards in front of the vehicle waving a red flag.



So number plates displaying the vehicles registration number came in to being...

The first style of registration was to become known as 'dateless'.

Initially it consisted of one or two letters followed by a number between 1 and 9999.

These permutations were soon used up and another system had to be found, this was to be three letters followed by a number between 1 and 999.

Around 1953 these variables were also nearing exhaustion and another system was brought in to force.

This was to be the 'reverse dateless' registration, literally meaning that the old permutations were reversed.

So it was now possible for ABC 123 and 123 ABC to be on the roads.



'dateless'



'reverse dateless'

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Then in 1963 the 'suffix system' was introduced, this was to be the same idea as the old system but with a suffix letter at the end. The first to be used was the letter A, so ABC 123A, in 1964 the suffix moved to B and so on until 1983 when the letter Y was the last to be used.

Not all areas switched over to the new system at once however, as a few areas hadn't used up their allocation of 'dateless plates'. They would continue to issue them until 1965, at which point they switched over to the new system.

In 1983 the system was once again reversed and the 'prefix system' began, meaning there could now be both A123 ABC and ABC 123A on the roads.



'suffix'



'prefix'

This system was used until 2001 when it was discontinued to allow for the introduction of the 'new style' of registration we see today.

However not all of the suffix registrations were used up at this point, many remained unissued and were to become available to buy through the DVLA Personalised Registration Number Scheme.

answers to frequently asked questions:

A registration number cannot be assigned to a vehicle if it will make that vehicle appear newer than it is, you can only make a vehicle appear the same age or older.

Dateless registrations can be assigned to any age of vehicle, as with the absence of a suffix or prefix they are literally dateless.

When a vehicle is officially scrapped and a Certificate of Destruction has been issued then the vehicles registration number dies with it, the registration number will never be reissued by the DVLA.

The DVLA ensure that no funny, rude or offensive registrations will be issued.

Although there are a few exceptions – words, initials, phrases etc that we use today may not have had the same meaning in the past....

Q plates are issued by the DVLA if there is doubt over the vehicles age or identity.

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Since a very young age I've had a keen interest in cars and their registration numbers, being able to tell a cars age and where it was registered was a hobby when I was growing up.

As friends and family know that registration numbers are a big interest for me I've been asked to find or sell them on their behalf.

Then the Pandemic began.... and as a self employed auditor to the Licensed Trade I found myself with no work and a lot of spare time on my hands.

So I started up Radical Registrations, set up a website www.radicalregistrations.com and launched a Radical Registrations page on Facebook.

But I won't be giving up my day job!

Russell Watson

