

# TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS IN LONDON IN THE LATER 19TH CENTURY

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## SUMMARY

*Systematic recording of traffic accidents in London began in 1865. Unpublished Home Office statistics in the Public Record Office, supplemented by printed Parliamentary Papers, provide details of the incidence and type of accident, and the composition of London's traffic between 1865 and 1881.*

## COLLECTION OF ACCIDENT STATISTICS

In March 1882 Edward Gourley, MP for Sunderland, tabled a parliamentary question on traffic accidents in London.<sup>1</sup> Colonel E. Y. M. Henderson, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, immediately went into action to prepare the information required for the Home Secretary's reply. The resulting file provides an unusually detailed account of the traffic situation in the metropolis during the preceding sixteen years.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Metropolitan Police had been set up in 1829, it was some time before they began to record statistics for traffic accidents. Indeed the initiative for compiling statistics may have come from the Home Office, where W. Harrison was appointed clerk responsible for roads business in October 1864. The earliest surviving police figures are for the year 1865 (Table 1).

Returns for road deaths in London were printed as Parliamentary Papers in 1866, 1870, 1872 and 1873, together providing statistics for the period 1 January 1865 to 30 June 1872.<sup>3</sup> A return of the road deaths in Great Britain as a whole in the year 1869 was published in 1871; the figure was 1,508.<sup>4</sup>

The statistics for the years 1869–1881, prepared to help answer Edward Gourley's parliamentary question, together with two statistical tables from the 1860s containing more information than those published as Parliamentary Papers, are printed here for the first time with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office (Tables 2, 3, 4).

## LAW AGAINST 'FURIOUS' DRIVING

In the late 1780s, *The Daily Universal Register*, which was renamed *The Times* in 1788, reported about 30 street accidents in London per year, of which nearly a third were fatal.<sup>5</sup>

By 1865 there were more than ten times as many fatalities, more than 60 times as many accidents. The newspaper reports of the 1780s undoubtedly under-report the situation, but the population of the metropolitan area was at least four times greater in the 1860s than in the 1780s, and the number of vehicles in proportion to the population had increased markedly.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps more important was the fact that the construction of both road surfaces and vehicles had been greatly improved, so that it was possible to drive appreciably faster.

As early as June 1820 it had been made an offence to cause injury by 'wanton and furious Driving or Racing' or by 'wilful Misconduct' while in charge of a stagecoach or other public carriage carrying passengers for hire.<sup>7</sup> Successful prosecutions however were rare. In 1872, when over 200 people were killed in London's streets, there were only 72 prosecutions, and 41 of those accused were discharged as having no substantial

Table 1. *Traffic accidents during the year 1865 (Parliamentary Papers 1866 LIX p. 1)*

Division	Numbers run over and killed	Whether killed by horses in vehicles being driven or led		Numbers maimed or injured	Whether injured by horses in vehicles being driven or led	
		Number of cases in which driven	Number of cases in which led		Number of cases in which driven	Number of cases in which led
A or Whitehall	2	2	—	95	93	2
B or Westminster	7	6	1	93	89	4
C or St James's	4	4	—	138	136	2
D or Marylebone	5	5	—	83	83	—
E or Holborn	3	3	—	74	74	—
F or Covent Garden	7	7	—	65	65	—
G or Finsbury	10	10	—	83	83	—
H or Whitechapel	4	4	—	86	79	7
K or Stepney	14	11	3	121	116	5
L or Lambeth	2	2	—	140	140	—
M or Southwark	6	6	—	142	140	2
N or Islington	6	6	—	81	81	—
P or Camberwell	9	7	2	101	96	5
R or Greenwich	8	8	—	99	98	1
S or Hampstead	14	13	1	45	42	3
T or Kensington	6	5	1	49	44	5
V or Wandsworth	6	4	2	32	30	2
W or Clapham	6	4	2	31	14	17
X or Paddington	9	8	1	53	51	2
Y or Highgate	12	9	3	96	93	3
Total	140	124	16	1707	1647	60

case to answer; three were acquitted, six imprisoned, and 22 fined.<sup>8</sup>

A memorandum dated 30 December 1870 by Colonel Henderson noted, 'Constables have been placed at many of the principal crossings to assist foot passengers [*ie* pedestrians], but I do not think much diminution of danger in the streets can be expected, in the absence of more stringent legislation.'<sup>9</sup>

Henderson endorsed the suggestion of a correspondent, William Legge, that all commercial vehicles 'should bear a conspicuous number the same as Hackney Carriages and Omnibuses, by which they could be at once identified'. The idea was to have a black oval plate with three digits painted in white.<sup>10</sup>

But for some reason interest in the traffic problem seems to have declined during the 1870s, and a certain fatalism with regard to the subject was evident in a remark by Henderson contained in the paper he prepared in response to Gourley's parliamentary question: 'The numbers of police employed in regulating the traffic & protecting passengers [*ie* pedestrians] has been increased, but it is impossible for any regulations to guard against the carelessness of the passengers

themselves or to prevent the children who are frequent sufferers from playing on the roadways.'<sup>11</sup>

## TYPES OF ACCIDENT THEN AND NOW

Street fatalities in London in the 1860s were about 4.3 *per* 100,000 of population, as compared to a national figure of 9.4 *per* 100,000 in 1986.<sup>12</sup> It seems however that the frequency of accidents was very much smaller in the 1860s than a hundred and twenty years later, and that the level of fatalities gives an exaggerated picture of the traffic situation.

As we go back in time fatalities represented a higher proportion of all injuries. In the 1980s, deaths represented approximately one in sixty traffic injuries, in the 1860s about one in thirteen.<sup>13</sup> In the 1860s traffic accident victims suffering only cuts and bruises were probably less likely to be admitted to hospital, but the different nature of the traffic in the nineteenth century also affected the type of injury suffered. There is a great deal of difference between the effect on passengers of vehicles colliding at 4 mph and at

Table 2. London traffic accident statistics 1866-1869 (Public Record Office HO 45/9619/A 15108, Crown Copyright)

**A 15108**

*Metropolitan Police.*

*Abstract Return of the number of persons killed or injured by vehicles in the Streets during the years 1866, 1867, 1868 and 1869 showing the description of vehicle by which killed or injured:-*

Years	No of Persons Killed over and Street in the Streets:-	Description of Vehicle by which Killed				No of Persons Injured in the Streets:-	Description of Vehicle by which Injured					Remarks.						
		Boats (including launches)	Light Waggon and Cart	See Street Waggon and Cart	See Street Waggon and Cart		Boats (including launches)	Light Waggon and Cart	See Street Waggon and Cart	See Street Waggon and Cart	See Street Waggon and Cart							
1866	102	12	8	5	31	20	23	.	3	13344	3244	172	521	38	215	131	1	10
1867	96	12	7	3	32	12	20	.	9	12344	2877	163	570	56	57	1244	1	6
1868	83	9	2	6	21	14	22	.	8	1265	249	175	1130	89	54	169	4	2
1869	128	15	5	4	31	17	29	.	21	1706	381	205	577	91	72	208	4	63
Total	409	48	12	18	115	63	94	.	41	5589	1291	278	2055	244	202	652	10	36

*John Kite*  
*Superintendent*

*Metropolitan Police Office*  
*20 November 1870*



Table 4. London traffic accident statistics 1869-1881 by type of vehicle (Public Record Office HO 45/9619/A 15108, Crown Copyright)

**A 15108**  
/4

*RETURN* showing the number of Deaths caused by Horse Conveyances in the Streets of London or during each of the undermentioned Years. Information obtained from the Registrar General's Office.

Years	Description of Vehicle by which killed									Total	Estimated Population
	Horse & Carriage	Omibus	Tram Car	Cab	Tram	Tray	Cart	Others not described			
1869	10	6	18	.	26	59	3	70	.	192	3,563,410
1870	10	12	20	.	29	63	8	51	5	198	
1871	9	12	20	.	23	74	4	60	6	208	
1872	8	15	24	.	24	82	7	52	1	213	
1873	13	10	12	17	28	75	4	56	2	217	
1874	28	11	17	14	33	63	4	36	5	211	
1875	11	15	18	9	39	76	6	55	2	231	
1876	13	4	17	12	24	78	6	56	7	217	
1877	16	13	13	4	26	92	5	56	2	227	
1878	17	12	14	10	34	73	11	63	3	237	
1879	16	13	17	18	36	66	8	57	5	236	
1880	12	11	20	17	39	69	7	43	2	220	
1881	13	14	21	23	31	79	9	58	4	252	4,590,022

Metropolitan Police Office  
4 Whitehall Place  
24<sup>th</sup> March 1882

*C. Mansergh*  
Chief Inspector



Table 5. *Traffic accidents in London, Middlesex and adjacent parts of Surrey—present day Greater London (From The Daily Universal Register, renamed The Times in 1788)*

	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789	Totals	%
Pedestrians run over	13	16	17	9	8	63	38.2
Collisions between vehicles	4	2	6	3	2	17	10.3
Collisions with stationary objects	—	1	2	4	—	7	4.3
Falls from moving vehicles	3	3	12	8	4	30	18.2
Runover by own vehicle following fall	1	3	5	2	1	12	7.3
Breakdowns	2	3	4	3	4	16	9.7
Vehicles overturned	2	3	2	4	9	20	12.1
Total	25	31	48	33	28	165	100.00

40 mph but very little difference between the effect of having the wheels of a heavy vehicle pass over one's body at 4 mph and at 40 mph. Henderson noted that, 'About one fourth of the fatal accidents which occur in the streets happen to the persons who are riding the horses or driving the vehicles when the accident happens'.<sup>14</sup> Some of those killed were presumably people riding aboard vehicles but it seems that the majority of victims were pedestrians. In the 1980s only one third of those killed in traffic accidents were pedestrians; fewer than one fifth of all those injured on the roads were on foot.<sup>15</sup> Consequently pedestrian fatalities *per* hundred thousand people were probably only slightly lower in the 1880s than a hundred years later.

Henderson claimed, incidentally, that the 1881 figures showed a slight proportional diminution compared with 1869 (apparently 5.17 deaths *per* hundred thousand from 5.39). However the available figures suggest that the 1869 death toll might have been unusually high for the 1860s.

Comparisons are further complicated by the fact that the figures for 1866–1869 are derived from the records of the Metropolitan Police whereas those for 1869–1881 come from the office of the Registrar General. The second set of figures evidently includes accidents both in the City of London, which had its own police force independent of the Metropolitan Police, and in parts of Middlesex and South-East Essex that were not at that time within the Metropolitan Police jurisdiction, but which formed part of the London conurbation. However the main difference seems to relate to the inclusion of accident victims who were not killed instantly but died afterwards in hospital. The police figures for those 'Run Over and Killed' seems to include only those who were dead by the time the accident was recorded, while the Registrar General's figures include all those who died as a

result of traffic injuries, whatever the interval between injury and death.<sup>16</sup>

### ACCIDENT TYPES IN DIFFERENT LONDON AREAS

Table 3 shows us something about the different composition of the traffic in different parts of London. More than half the accidents in the fashionable St James's district were caused by cabs, which were almost equally a menace in Holborn—an area then consisting mainly of slums, placed strategically across the routes between the commercial and legal offices of the City of London and the fashionable residential quarters of the West End.

In Whitehall, the centre of government, almost a quarter of all accidents involved private carriages. Both cabs and carriages featured much less frequently in accidents in Stepney and Whitechapel, in the impoverished East End; there the principal danger was from carts and vans.

The proportion of those killed to merely injured varied with the type of vehicle involved, and may also have had something to do with variations in traffic conditions. Not surprisingly, the larger the vehicle, the more likely it was that the injury inflicted would be fatal. However one assumes that a light cart would have been about the same weight as a cab, and the reason for light carts being 35% more lethal than cabs in the injuries they caused is most likely to have been related to the age of the people they hit and the kind of speed they were travelling at.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edward Temperley Gourley (1828–1902) was Radical MP for Sunderland 1868–1900.

<sup>2</sup> Public Record Office HO 45/9619/A15108. Edward Yeamans Walcott Henderson (1821–1896) served in the Royal Engineers 1838–1864 and was Commissioner of Metropolitan Police 1869–1886.

<sup>3</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1866 LIX p 1, 1870 LV p 1, 1872 XLIX p 655, 659, 1873 LIII p 459.

<sup>4</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1871 LVI p 591.

<sup>5</sup> A D Harvey 'Georgian Perils' *Care on the Road* June 1991 p 7.

<sup>6</sup> According to *Parliamentary Papers* 1830 XXV p 225 there were 16,184 four-wheel carriages and 27,464 two-wheel carriages in private use in 1810. F M L. Thompson in *Victorian England: the Horse-Drawn Society* 1970 (p 16) estimates 120,000 four-wheel carriages and 250,000 two-wheelers in 1870, with almost no increase in the number of four-wheelers and less than 30% increase in the number of two-wheelers during the next 30 years.

Though the number of private carriages may have reached a peak in *per capita* terms in 1870, with a rate of increase conceivably slowing down for some years previously, there are no grounds for believing this to be the case with commercial vehicles, though there are no statistics for these.

Carriages plying for hire had been known since the 17th Century but would appear to have only become institutionalised as 'cabs' in the 1820s, when the use of the term is first recorded. The word 'van' dates from the same period.

<sup>7</sup> I Geo IV c. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1873 LIII p 459.

<sup>9</sup> HO 45/9619/A 15108/3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, with reference to Legge's letter of 7 Oct 1870, also contained in this file.

<sup>11</sup> HO 45/9619/A 15108/4.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Transport *Road Accidents Great Britain 1986. The Casualty Report* p 122 (Table 47). The U.K. figure, incidentally, is less than half that of France, less than one third that of Portugal.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p 84 (Table 5) and Tables reproduced here.

<sup>14</sup> HO 45/9619/A 15108/4.

<sup>15</sup> *Cf Road Accidents. Great Britain 1986. The Casualty Report* p 84 (Table 5). In 1986 there were 321,451 injuries in traffic accidents, of which 5,382 were fatal: 60,875 pedestrians were injured, 1,841 fatally. About one sixth of all injuries were in Greater London, an area considerably more extensive than the London of 1866–1881.

<sup>16</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* 1866 LIX p 1 for 1865 lists 140 dead and 1,707 injured for the Metropolitan Police area, 14 dead and 207 injured for the City of London Police area. *Parliamentary Papers* 1872 XLIX p 657 lists 13 dead and 289 injured for the City of London Police area in 1870, but of the 13 fatalities, only four are given as 'Run Over and Killed', the remaining nine being included in a figure of 298 'Maimed or Injured', their subsequent death in hospital being indicated by a footnote.