



MAKING HISTORY ✓

## War and peace on Britain's roads: 1897-1918

With the centenary of the start of World War I, we asked journalist [JD van Zyl](#) to look back at motoring in Britain before, during and after the conflict, and the role the RAC played during that period following its foundation in 1897



Early RAC Patrols rode motorbikes and saluted RAC-badged cars as they passed

It is hard to imagine a life without cars. Precious few inventions have had a bigger impact on Britain, and the world at large, than the advent of the horseless carriage. From transforming our cities, giving birth to road trips, and impacting the way we live, travel and commute, cars have changed the world irrevocably. In 1890, the average distance Britons travelled was 13 miles a year, fast forward more than a century and that increases to more than 13 miles a day – much of that by means of cars.

### Motoring firsts

The end of the 19th century and the early 1900s was a prime time for automotive innovation; after all this was when Karl Benz built the first motorcar. It was just before the turn of the century that the world experienced its first thoroughbred car race – the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris Race in 1895; its first motor show, in Berlin in 1897; and its first land speed record (a dizzying 39.24mph no less) in 1898.



A pre-WW1 Ford Model T. One of the most popular cars ever made

In those early days, British motoring was very much something only pursued by the wealthy and eccentric, while the rest of Britain got around by means of rail, bikes and horse-drawn vehicles. Until 1908 that is, when Ford revealed its “Tin Lizzie” Model T in 1908. With 16.5 million Model T units built between 1908 and 1927, this was the car that mobilised the masses and remained the most popular car in motoring history until the 1970s when Volkswagen’s Beetle overtook it.

**"The first RAC Patrol served motorists by bicycle, but from 1912 they upgraded to motorcycles, saluting drivers who sported the new RAC grille badges"**

Born in 1897 with its aim of helping to establish the horseless carriage’s place in British society and to champion the rights of motorists, the first decade of the 20th century was also an important time for the RAC. Few people today are aware of the impact of the 1,000 Mile Trial had on British motoring.

Launched in 1900, this gruelling endurance race stretched from London to Edinburgh before returning south, and truly put motoring on the map in Britain by showcasing what cars were capable of. The 1,000 Mile Trial continues to this day, making it the longest running motorsport event in the world.



Early driving licences were pioneered by the RAC – as were signposts in 1905

With motoring in its infancy at the turn of the century, the Club played a key role in guiding the industry through a number of other automotive highlights. For example, the RAC lobbied for the introduction of driving licences, and in 1905 pioneered the use of signposts. In 1907, the Club received a royal warrant from King Edward VII, and although the Club was unsuccessful in its early attempts to prevent the taxation of motor vehicles, it did manage to persuade Chancellor David Lloyd George to commit the money raised by taxing car owners to improving the conditions of the roads.

The first RAC Patrols served motorists by bicycle, but from 1912 they began to upgrade to motorcycles, saluting drivers who sported the new RAC grille badges. Alas, the domestic progress made by the RAC came to a grinding halt a few short years later in the summer of 1914.

### A world at war

Britain is commemorating the centenary of the start of World War I this year, a conflict that forever changed the global landscape. Faced by a severe shortage of resources, day-to-day life as Britain knew it came to a spluttering end in the August of 1914. Instead of manufacturing cars, the automotive industry turned its prowess to manufacturing arms, aeroplanes and tanks, with thousands of civilians pitching in to help lighten the workload.



The RAC was quick to join the war effort, encouraging members to join the fight in 1914

Not many people realise that during those bleak years, the RAC encouraged its members to join the newly formed British Motor Service Volunteer Corps, resulting in 12,000 cars and 30,000 individuals signing up to help bolster support for the war through a vast variety of tasks, from ferrying military officials to assisting with the harvest. Patrols also helped the Red Cross to set up an ambulance repair shop in Boulogne and RAC Tour Guides rescued stranded motorists on the Continent at the outbreak of war. Meanwhile, the club sent ambulances to help troops in Russia, and provided food and clothing to British chauffeurs who ended up as prisoners of war.

As soon as the war was over, engineering talent could once again focus on developing cars and the roads they would travel on. In our next issue, we look at the significant changes that occurred on Britain's roads between the wars, from 1919-1939.