

Coping with congestion: responses to urban traffic problems in British cities c.1920–1960

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Abstract

This paper focuses on neglected debates about urban traffic congestion in British cities before this became an issue of major concern from the 1960s. It is argued that conflicts between motor transport (both public and private), trams, trolley buses, cyclists and pedestrians over urban space led to the progressive marginalisation of what were perceived as outdated forms of transport, and to the progressive dominance of the culture of the car. The research is based on archival and oral history data for two British cities, Manchester and Glasgow, and demonstrates the ways in which similar debates between proponents and opponents of different forms of urban transport developed in each town from the 1920s to the 1950s. It is suggested that many of these arguments have a very modern resonance, and that 21st century debates over the development of sustainable urban transport can be traced back to the 1920s.

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Introduction

Concern about urban traffic congestion and associated pollution in western cities is one of the key issues of the new millennium. Most people who commute into large towns have personal experience of the penalties of time, cost, inconvenience and associated frustration associated with travelling to work. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, reducing traffic congestion and effecting a modal switch from private cars to public transport has become a key, but contested, aspect of government policy. Recent British government policy statements, if fully implemented at the local level, have the potential to significantly reduce the volume of traffic in towns. Such schemes include the development of integrated transport systems, the introduction of road pricing and workplace parking charges, the revitalisation of bus

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services and the introduction of new fixed route transport systems in the form of trams and light rail links.¹ Similar schemes have already been developed in many European cities with significant effects on congestion and pollution.²

The negative impacts of urban traffic congestion are well known. There are significant costs to the economy in terms of lost working time; costs to the environment in the form of pollution; and costs to individuals affecting personal health and welfare.³ What is interesting is that, in Britain, such concerns only manifest themselves as a significant national debate in the second half of the 20th century. Tentatively from the 1940s, and increasingly from the 1960s, planning documents and surveys in British cities began to address the problems of traffic in towns as it was increasingly realised that uncontrolled growth of the private car had significant negative consequences.⁴ However, at this time most solutions focused on making it easier for cars to move through cities, through the development of new road schemes, and it was only in the late-20th century that the wider debate about sustainable urban communities focused attention on the restriction of car use and the revitalisation of public transport.

However, although such debates were relatively invisible at the national level before the 1960s, there is considerable evidence that issues of urban commuting, traffic congestion and conflicts between private and public transport caused major concern in London and other urban localities in the first half of the 20th century.⁵ This paper examines local debates about urban traffic congestion and associated pollution as they developed in the context of urban commuting in the British provincial cities of Manchester and Glasgow from the 1920s to the 1950s. Attention is focused especially on battles between conflicting cultures of transport. These are viewed from the perspectives of both travellers and operators, focusing especially on conflicts between proponents of trams and trolley buses on the one hand and road transport on the other, and on the solutions put forward to ease urban traffic congestion in the period before it became an issue of major national concern.

Conflicts over urban space

The history of debates about urban traffic congestion can be set within the broader framework of power relations within the city, and the control of urban space. These themes have been explored in a number of historical contexts, including the policing of urban streets and parks, the restriction of access to residential areas and the protection of economic interests in city centres.⁶ It can be argued that debates over traffic in towns represent just one of several areas in which there has been continuing conflict over the control of public urban space. Different groups of road users have each wished to exercise their rights to use the streets to travel to work and other destinations quickly, cheaply and conveniently. However, the interests of different groups of travellers, using varied transport modes, have rarely coincided. Urban authorities have been faced with the task of reconciling these conflicts through transport and urban planning.

Prior to the 1940s walking was the single most common means of travelling to work in British towns, with over 40% of all commuters walking to work prior to 1920. Those who did not walk either travelled by bicycle or on public transport. Commuting by bicycle was particularly important for men in the 1930s and 1940s, but the proportion commuting by public transport remained quite stable from the 1920s to the 1960s. Prior to the second world war cars were rarely used to commute to work, with even those who owned cars often restricting their use to leisure travel, but from the 1940s car use amongst men increased rapidly with commuting by car becoming the most common means of travelling to work by the 1960s.

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