

A brief history of The Highway Code

John Dowell takes a nostalgic look through the pages of The Highway Code and charts its passage to the publication it is today

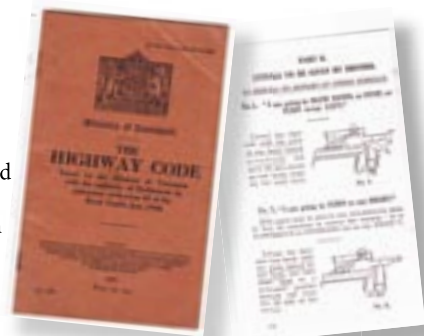
THE first edition of the Highway Code was distributed on 14 April 1931. It was, however, developed from a booklet published in 1924 by the National Safety First Association, which eventually became the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA). A quick comparison over its 80-year history shows the first edition to have 24 pages, with 31 rules of advice and no road signs. The current code (published in 2007) has 145 pages, over 300 paragraphs of advice and 226 traffic signs and road markings. Although historically 15 editions have been

published, only 11 different covers have been used, which means amendments account for four editions. Over 60 variants have been published which would include revision: phone numbers or addresses changed. Between 1918 and 1928 road traffic accidents had increased from 15,000 to 100,000. With fewer than two-and-a-half million vehicles on the road the death toll was running in excess of 7,000. By way of comparison, today, with over 30 million vehicles registered, the death toll has been halved to 3,500. However, one cannot put this figure solely

at the door of the Code. Over the past 80 years the driving test, instigated on June 1 1935, has led to a better educated road user. Better road design and signs and markings have contributed to safer roads. Modern car technology has also contributed to fewer deaths, as have advances in medicine. The Road Traffic Act of 1930 laid down the legal framework for the Highway Code. Then, as now, the Code carried no legal force but could be quoted in a court of law. It was issued by the Ministry of Transport "with the authority of Parliament" and was intended to make the roads safer.

1931

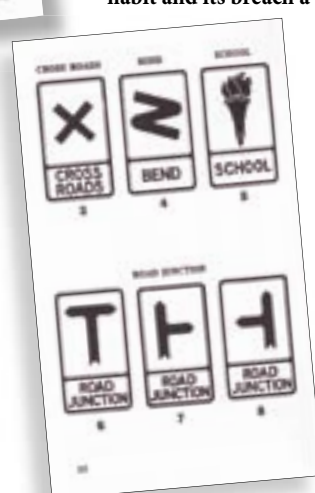
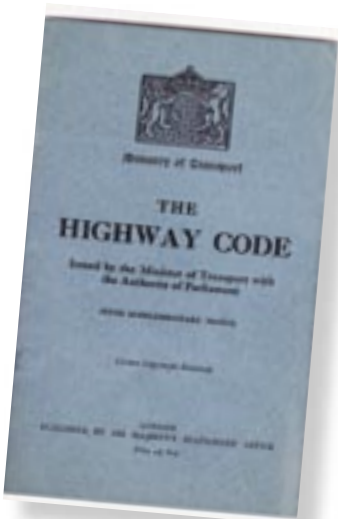
The 1931 first edition contained no road signs and made no mention of traffic lights, which had been in force since 1926. However, its over-riding message was one of safety for all road users and stated that: "good manners and consideration for others are as desirable and as much appreciated on the road as elsewhere." The Code's price, at just one penny, was set as an encouragement for people to buy the Code. It obviously succeeded as it was published four more times up to and including April 1935.



1935

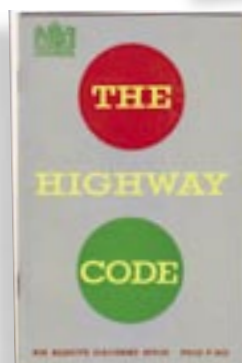
The second edition was published some time after May 1935. A foreword from the then Minister of Transport, Leslie Hoare-Belisha stated that: "Respect for the Code and for the spirit underlying it is so much a moral duty that its practice should become a habit and its breach a reproach."

This edition included traffic signs and the new 30 mph speed limit for built-up areas. Mention was made of tiredness, fatigue and the use of alcohol. This was the first edition to number the rules. The price was kept at one penny. This Code was published through to 1946 and covered the war years, 1939 to 1945. The Code itself did not change, but around 1943 advice was printed on the rear cover relating to 'Salvage' – salvaging paper, metal, rubber, etc, and included 18 points on how to save fuel and tyres on motor vehicles – an early example of recycling and eco-driving! As a first – and hopefully, not to be repeated, it included references to how to react during a bombing raid (sagely, the use of air-raid shelters was advised).



1946

The third edition was published in May 1946. For the first time stopping distances were shown in a table inside the rear cover. The Code now had 32 pages and a new format, showing 15 traffic signs. It included acts and various regulations dating back from 1835 to 1941, covering motorists, motor cyclists, horse drawn vehicles and pedal cyclists and pedestrians. Parents were advised: "Do not let your children play in the streets. Children under seven should be accompanied by an older person when using busy roads." No school run in those days. The price was



1954

The 1954 fourth edition was the first to be in colour. 31 traffic signs were shown and a coloured zebra crossing. Information on first aid was included, as was the Country Code. Advice re the use of signals expanded to include flashing indicators. The price, held for 23 years, was still one penny.



1959

Edition five for 1959 was now priced at sixpence. A new section on motorways explained techniques for entering, using and leaving them. Illustrations were now shown alongside the various rules. Extra advice was offered to pedestrians in the use of pedestrian crossings and crossing the road in general. On roundabouts: "There are no rights of way in general at roundabouts."



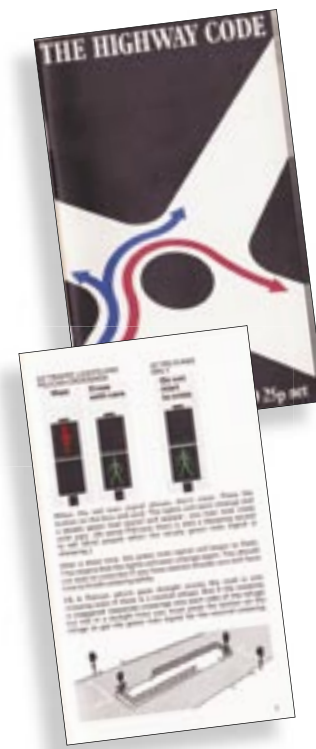
1969

The sixth edition for 1969 was increased to one shilling and three pence (6p new money). This had now grown to 54 pages. It also started the format for future Codes. Illustrations were now in full colour with models and photographs. Advice re breakdowns and accidents was offered. Four further issues were printed and by the time of the final one, dated August 1976, the price had doubled to 12p.

1978

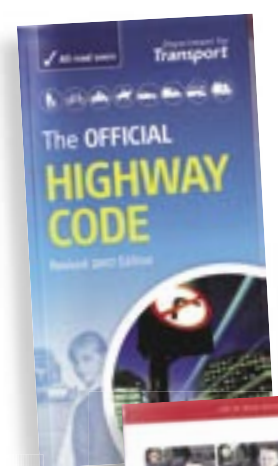
In 1974 a Green Paper was issued by the Department of the Environment entitled: A proposed new Highway Code. This was the first consultation document open to the public to make suggestions for the new Code. The seventh edition of the Code was published in March 1978, priced at 25p. The format was larger, with 70 pages and the illustrations of

signs and markings increased to 179. A multitude of new items appeared: Pelican crossings, the Green Cross Code, child seats, mini roundabouts and, although not compulsory, seat belts being worn to prevent serious injury or death. Eight further issues were published and the final one in 1985 had increased to 50p – giving some idea of inflation.



1987

The EIGHTH edition was published in February 1987 and was priced at 60p. The format was identical to the 1974 edition but pages had been increased to 74. Advice was offered relating to drinking and driving and also the use of seat belts. The dangers of the use of microphones and car telephones were introduced. A grid showing legal maximum speeds for various vehicles on varying roads was published. Overall stopping distances were now shown in metres as well as feet. A full page on vehicle security was included.

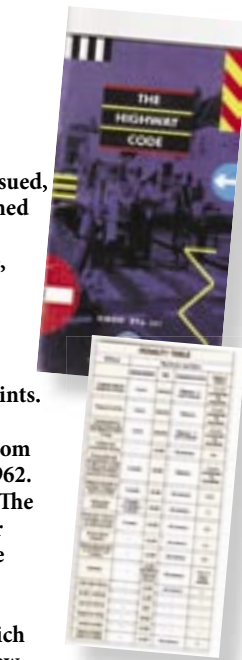


2007

The eleventh edition, published in 2007, had no publication date shown. Price increased to £2.50. Pages increased from 100 to 145 and paragraphs from 287 to 307. This Code seems to have gone from one of using common sense advice to almost being one of instruction. Almost everything is spelled out in detail. A new format makes for easier reading. Pages now have a content title at the top. Advice offered to those using powered wheelchairs/mobility scooters (11 paragraphs). Road users requiring extra care: pedestrians, shopping areas, schools, horse riders, elderly drivers and learner drivers, etc (22 paragraphs). Driving in adverse weather conditions (12 paragraphs). Breakdowns and incidents (26 paragraphs). Traffic signs and markings are increased to 226 and Road User Law increased from 22 to 37 items. A seventh impression of this was published in 2009, and no changes have been made to date.

1993

In October 1991 a further Consultation Document was issued, and the ninth Code was published in January 1993. This was a much larger Code, with a complete new design. Advisory paragraphs had increased from 198 to 242. A penalty table was now issued, warning of fines and licence points. Format was easier to read. The legislation table was reduced from 32 items to 23, starting from 1962. Pages increased from 74 to 76. The price was now 99p. Five further issues were published and these included new legislation introduced in 1994 (the 1995 edition) and a 1996 edition which included information on the new driver theory test and driving test.



1999

A new expanded edition was published in February 1999, the tenth. Updates during the life of this Code referred to changes in technology; danger of using mobile phones and other casualty statistics. For the first time **MUST** and **MUST NOT** were emphasised in red capitals. Red Route stopping controls created problems for both shop owners and shoppers. Pages increased to 100 and paragraphs to 278. This was revised for 2004 and included a new logo for the Highway Code. By January 2006 the cost of this had increased from £1.49 to £1.99. A website was now included on the front.

