

'S'-type British Number Plates

by

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Have you ever wondered what the British license plate on your 'S'-type means? Well, the British call them 'number plates' and they stay with a car for its life, so they can tell you where the car was originally registered - and often how old it is. The following is a potted (British for condensed) guide to deciphering that hidden message.

Early Number Plates

THE very first automobile number plate was issued in Paris on August 14, 1893. The British, being firm believers in taxing motorists, implemented their number plate system in January 1904 with a registration fee of £1. Earl Russell queued (lined up) all night to get the first London number plate - A 1 - for his Napier.

The British continued using the system of 1 letter followed by up to 4 numbers (1 to 9999) until they ran through the alphabet as the car population swelled from 28,842 registrations that first year to 66,703 in 1905. So, a two letter system was instituted with the letters indicating the local licensing authority that issued the registration. This system of two letters followed by up to 4 numbers lasted until 1934. It was succeeded by three letters (the first being 'A' and progressing serially and the last two now indicating the local licensing authority) followed by up to 3 numbers. From about 1960 - 61, when these combinations began to run out, the sequence was reversed and became 1 to 3 numbers followed by three letters (again, the last two letters indicate the local licensing authority).

If you come across an older Jaguar with one of these plates, you can always tell where the car was first registered. For example, my 1931 Austin Seven Swallow was registered OU 8234 (OU denotes first registration in Bristol) and my 'daily driver', an Open Tourer was KR 9277 (KR is a Maidstone, Kent registration) while my old BSA motorbike carries CJB 507 (JB is for

Reading). The licensing authority codes are extensive and included as an attachment to this note. On these early number plates there was nothing to indicate the year of first registration - you could only tell that from the log book.

1963 - 1983 Number Plates

In the early-sixties, the larger local authorities again began to run out of available registration numbers, so the decision was taken (the British don't make decisions, they take them) to add a letter to the three-letter 3-number system that could be changed every year and eliminate the problem of running out of combinations. In January 1963, the first yearly suffix letter appeared. Unfortunately it was not implemented uniformly across the country because, while the larger licensing authorities had run out of the old numbers, the British are a thrifty race and the smaller ones kept issuing the non-suffix plates. So this is why you will find some 1963-64 cars from country licensing authorities that have non-suffix number plates. An unforeseen result of the new system, which made the year of the car obvious to all, was to create a rush of new car sales, as every Englishman wanted to one-up his neighbours by flaunting a newer-registered vehicle. This created turmoil in the British motor industry that continues today, but more of that later.

So, in 1963 vehicles began receiving number plates with three letters (the second two of the three letters still denoted the local vehicle licensing authority) and 3 numbers followed by the year-letter suffix 'A'. This progression of year-letters continued yearly through the alphabet, omitting I, O, Q, U and Z, therefore ending with 'Y'.

The year-letter suffixes are:

A 1963

B 1964

C 1965

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D 1966
E 1967
F 1967-68
G 1968-69
H 1969-70
J 1970-71
K 1971-72
L 1972-73
M 1973-74
N 1974-75
P 1975-76
R 1976-77
S 1977-78
T 1978-79
V 1979-80
W 1980-81
X 1981-82
Y 1982-83

The date of first issue of the new year-letter was changed from New Year's Day to August 1st in 1967 (when E became F), at the request of the motor industry in an effort to forestall the yearly January rush to buy newly-suffixed cars. However this demand just migrated to August with the change, to the ongoing despair of Britain's car dealers.

But not all local licensing authority letter combinations are sequential. Let's take London Central as an example. There are 25 two-letter combinations allocated to the office, beginning with HM, then skipping to HV (the intervening combinations belonging to Middlesborough, Salisbury, Coventry, Swindon, Glasgow, and two to Bristol), followed by HX (HW belongs to Bristol) and finally ending with YY. The sequence of issue in 1966 (D year-letter suffix) would have been strictly alphabetical - AHM 1D to AHM 999D, AHV 1D to AHV 999D, etcetera through to AYY 1D through AYY 999D, then BHM 1D through BHM 999D, and so on.

For example, our Jaguar 3.8 'S', which Patricia and I picked up at the Jaguar factory at Browns Lane on September 1, 1966 was registered HRW 667D. The 'RW' shows that it was registered in Coventry and the 'D'

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indicates that it was first registered in 1966. Actually, our car was registered to Jaguar Export Sales Ltd. on August 31, 1966 and then transferred to us. Does this mean we are not the original owners as we have been saying for thirty-odd years?

The Modern Era

The suffix letter-years were exhausted in 1983, so again the system had to be changed. It was reversed in August, with the year-letter now becoming a prefix. So, cars built since 1983 will have a number plate consisting of a prefix year-letter, followed by 1, 2 or 3 numbers from 1-999 (excepting certain 'cherished' numbers which are now held back for resale by the central licensing authority at astronomically high prices), followed by three letters. As with the previous system, the first letter starts with 'A' for each authority and progresses serially with the second two letters still denoting the local vehicle licensing authority. In recent years, however, this system has broken down and the last two letters are often assigned serially as well.

The year-letter prefixes are:

A 1983-84
B 1984-85
C 1985-86
D 1986-87
E 1987-88
F 1988-89
G 1989-90
H 1990-91
J 1991-92
K 1992-93
L 1993-94
M 1994-95
N 1995-96
P 1996-97
R 1997-98

The current year prefix (introduced August 1, 1997) is 'R' and manufacturers want the Government to switch to the 'S' registration letter next March and 'T' in September 1998 to help smooth out their sales pattern, as nearly a quarter

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of Britain's forecast 2.1m car sales for 1997 will be purchased in August when the 'R' registration came into force.

Even if nothing else is done, by 2004 the current prefix year-letters will run out, which will force some kind of change. Other rumours regarding replacement include rapidly using up of the remaining prefixes in three-month increments and then adopting a pan-European system or changing to a completely new configuration comprising four letters, two numbers and another letter.

Miscellaneous

The vintage pre-1960 number plates were usually pressed steel with traditional silver letters and numerals on a satin black background. The front number plate is rectangular, about 5 in. high by 21.5 in. wide and the rear is either the same or 9.5 in. high by 12.75 in. wide with the registration number on two lines. On cars of the 1920s, and '30's you will sometimes find the registration number painted white on a black background as on my 1931 Austin seven Tourer. With the introduction of the first year-letter (1963), number plates were standardized with raised white letters and numerals riveted onto black plates of the same size as earlier. Jaguar adopted the 'squarer' style for the rear and this is why the number plate area of Jaguars of the 1950's and '60s is the shape that it is. As Britain became more safety conscious, the number plates were gradually changed to the current standard of black on yellow reflective (rear) and black on white reflective (front). The font is a uniform size sans serif of various types.

Unlike the USA, the British local licensing authority does not supply the actual number plates, just the log book and registration number. The plates are purchased separately from number plate manufacturers who are now producing some more colourful (and illegal) designs.

Since British number plates are permanent, you may be wondering how the British pay their annual car registration fee. This is done yearly or semi-yearly at the local Post Office where they receive a tax disc that must be displayed in the windscreens. You have probably

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seen a round reddish-brownish-orange paper disk about three inches in diameter usually in a soft plastic stick-on holder in the lower left corner of the windshield. While the fee was £1 in 1904 (about \$5.00 at the exchange rate of that time), it had risen to £17-10-0 (Pounds-Shillings-Pence) in 1966 (about \$42.00 at the then-current \$2.40/£) when we bought our 3.8 'S'.

At that time you could pay yearly or four-monthly, so Jaguar paid £6-8-0 for 4 months. The fee has now risen to £145.00 per year (at the current Sterling decimal rate this is \$237.80) or £79.75 (\$130.87) for six months.

An annual vehicle inspection, called the 'MOT', is also required but that certificate is not displayed and is carried in the glove box. While those fees, and about \$4.00 for a gallon of petrol, make motoring in Britain expensive, they at least recognize the value and uniqueness of old cars as those over 25 years old do not require either registration fees or inspections!

British Vanity Plates

As mentioned, the British system, unlike the USA, is that the number plate stays with the car throughout its life. While a trade began in unique number plates many years ago, it often required the destruction of the 'donor vehicle' or purchase of a complete car to get a vanity registration. There are a number of companies advertising British vanity plates in Motor Sport and on the WWW. Clearly, Britain is a nation of car enthusiasts and they want personalized plates of all kinds. As in the US some people are very proud of their name. In 1991, J1 MMY (a 1991 plate originally issued in London West) sold for £35,000, whilst BAS 1L (a 1972 Inverness registration) went for £42,650. Which shows that, to some people, their name is almost priceless. But more unique is Clive Smith, owner of the Pine Ridhe Golf Club in Camberley, Surrey. Already the owner of 2 TEE, 9 TEE, 17 TEE and 18 TEE, he paid £52,000 for the number plate 1 TEE. Soon he'll have enough for a whole round of golf! For your information 'EE' plates are from Grimsby.

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Now collector plates are also big business for the DVLA (Drivers & Vehicle Licensing Authority) who hold back interesting combinations each year for special sale. The DVLA has sold over 500,000 vanity plates since 1989, when the scheme started and made almost £250 million for the Treasury, to the benefit of British taxpayers. Among the interesting registrations the DVLA has sold are B1 MBO (£18,000), B10 PSY (£4,500), APH 1D (£1,600), BAD 1E (£12,000), BRA 1N (£16,000), CUT 1E (£3,200), E1 FEL and PAR 1S (£23,000), FRU 1T (£12,000), F1 SHY (£14,500), GOT 1M (£2,200), G1 ANT (£15,000), K1 LTS (£6,600), ORR 1D (£1,100), P1 GGY (£11,000), SON 1C (£7,500), TOX 1C (£5,200) and WED 1N (£11,000).

Postscript

With an estimated 1/2 million new cars being put on British roads in August, there was bound to be problems. In 1996, when 480,000 new 'P' registered vehicles hit the roads, the automobile clubs received more than 100 calls for help the first hour in London alone. This year the AA (the British AAA) said, "The problem is that so many cars are going off the forecourt (dealer's lot) in the first few days that dealers do not have time to familiarize customers with the details of how they work." The most common problem is drivers who could not understand their new car's electrical gadgetry. More than a dozen locked themselves out of their cars or could not start the engine because they had not turned off the immobiliser (a British anti-theft device).

This year, one of first 'R'-registered cars was written off (totaled) within four hours of leaving the showroom. The incident occurred at 3.40 am (remember, they start taking delivery at one second after midnight!).

Also, in Wetherby, North Yorks, a 64-year-old driver pranged (dented or had a collision) his £37,000 R-registered Mercedes 320 just seconds after leaving the showroom at 9 am. He pulled out of a junction (intersection) and crashed into a Jaguar.