



SIXTY years ago, at precisely 10am on November 2, 1959, the Minister for Transport, Ernest Marples, gave instructions from an over-bridge near Luton for barriers to be removed at 13 access points on the first stage of the M1 motorway, using a police car's radio telephone (no mobile phones, of course, in those days). Rockets were fired in celebration and waiting motorists were waved onto the broad new super highway, with its defining characteristic of access restricted to prescribed types of vehicles.

The celebrations were apt. This was the dawn of the motorway age, a time of national self confidence and a belief in technical progress. Britain in the New Elizabethan Age had pioneered the jet airliner and atomic power for civil use; it was only fitting that it, too, should have the new road technology of limited-access highways.

‘Newly emancipated motorists were free to drive at whatever speed they liked’

The first phase of the London-Yorkshire motorway (as the M1 was then commonly known) was not, in fact, the first piece of British motorway. That distinction had fallen nearly a year earlier to a short, eight-mile bypass looping around Preston, Lancashire (later to become part of the M6), but the M1 was the first real bit—all 72 miles of it.

In spite of a wet summer during the muck-shifting phase, the motorway was built on time (there were no environmental campaigns in those days). The cost was £24 million, which might buy a few hundred yards of (the much-delayed) HS2 today.

Life in the fast lane

The thought of spending time on a motorway is one we dread, but when the M1 opened 60 years ago, motorists flocked to try it out, reflects David Starkie

The day of opening was a Friday and, that weekend, drivers poured onto the road, keen to experience its novelty. The newly emancipated motorist of the 1950s, freed from petrol rationing (scrapped by the Labour government before the 1951 election), was free to drive at whatever speed they liked—astonishing as it now seems.

Not until the end of 1965 was a speed limit introduced, but this mattered little at the time. The early motorway user was cautious, with average car speeds hovering just above 60mph. There was another good reason for this: family cars at that time, nearly all British built, were incapable of cutting loose. Morris Minors, Ford Consuls, Hillman Minxes and the iconic, but rather basic Mini, launched in August that year, were the order of the day. As a test review for *Autocar* remarked, driven into wind, the Minx would take an unrealistically long time to reach 70mph.

Bigger, sportier models, such as the Jaguars used by the M1 police patrols, could cut a dash. Indeed, the legal speed

record on the M1 of 185mph, set in the early hours of a June morning in 1964, is held by an AC Cobra test car preparing for the Le Mans 24-hour race. Generally speaking, however, automotive technology had still to catch up and adapt. Tyre blow-outs were common (old-technology, cross-ply tyres were the norm), as were overheated engines, but the biggest problem was running out of fuel. With older engine designs, as speed rose so did petrol consumption—rapidly—catching the motorist unawares.

It's difficult to imagine life without the M1 and its accompanying national motorway network. Society was transformed as journey times shrank for both work and play, but the broader economic impact is less certain. In 1959, Britain was still an industrial power-house; when the final piece of the M25 opened 27 years later and new motorway construction was drawing to a close, the nation had been transformed into a consumer-led, service-based economy. Instead of British goods flowing along the M1 and other motorways to the seaports, as planners originally envisaged, the dominant flow was reversed—particularly after Britain's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973. Thereafter, Brussels prescribed the M1 as European route E13.

Today, much of the M1 has been updated into a controversial smart motorway, with a variable speed limit and use of the hard shoulder. This is argued to be a more cost-effective way of adding capacity, although safety concerns have been raised. But have we already glimpsed the future? In April last year, the sole occupant of a car on the M1 was caught illegally sitting in the passenger seat, as the car drove itself. Technology to make the car fully autonomous has still to be perfected, but if and when it is, the driving experience—and the M1 itself—will be a far cry from that autumn day, 60 years ago. 🐉