

Shopping 'mega-jams' have brought cities to a halt for decades

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If you found yourself this year sitting in traffic waiting to get into your local town centre in order to buy Christmas presents while pining for a simpler time, frustrated drivers may be surprised to learn that gridlocked city streets are really nothing new, according to a University of Leicester researcher.

In December 1958, for example, central London was gridlocked by [traffic](#) caused by last minute Christmas shopping. The issue was so severe that questions were asked in parliament and the Conservative government of the day ordered the Ministry of Transport to take over the management of traffic in the capital.

"One consequence of the mega-jam was the introduction of traffic wardens and fixed penalties for illegal parking – legal practices still in use to this day," said Professor Simon Gunn from the University of Leicester's Centre for Urban History.

"Another was the setting up of a high-level study group to investigate the growing problem of traffic in towns, resulting in the publication in 1963 of the Buchanan Report, whose proposals for pedestrian zones and urban motorways shaped the cities we inhabit today, including Leicester."

The Leicester Traffic Plan of 1964 that followed claimed to be the first to 'say no to the motor car'. Its most controversial proposal was to build a monorail from Oadby to Beaumont Leys, passing through Charles Street in the centre of town – an idea rejected by the government on grounds of

cost.

The history of traffic is the subject of an innovative new research project, headed by Professor Gunn and Susan Townsend of the History Department at the University of Nottingham.

Their project, *Motor Cities: Automobility and the Urban Environment in Britain and Japan, 1955-1973*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, has already produced a number of journal articles on the problem of traffic and the impact of mass car ownership in 1960s Britain.

Now he and Susan are writing a book on the idea of the 'motor city' in Birmingham and Nagoya – home to Toyota - due to be published in 2016.

Motor Cities will tell the story of how the car came to dominate cities across the globe. In showing how the car system came to be questioned by the time of the 1973 oil shock, it will also help us to understand how 'motordom' might be undone in the future.

He added: "Gridlock still occurs at Christmas, of course, as drivers head en masse to the shops to buy last minute stocks of food and presents. Yet despite the growing numbers of cars on Britain's roads the problem has been eased somewhat by pedestrianisation and the rise of out-of-town shopping centres - and in London by the congestion charge which means that a much greater proportion of the population has come to use public transport.

"We are unlikely ever to rid cities of cars but we may at last be learning how to make them our servants, not our masters."

Provided by University of Leicester

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