

✓ All road users

Department for  
**Transport**



# Know Your **TRAFFIC SIGNS**

Official Edition



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**Transport**

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Official Edition

London: TSO

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## Introduction

### Why know your traffic signs?

Traffic signs play a vital role in directing, informing and controlling road users' behaviour in an effort to make the roads as safe as possible for everyone. This makes a knowledge of traffic signs essential. Not just for new drivers or riders needing to pass their theory test, but for all road users, including experienced professional drivers.

### Keeping up to date

We live in times of change. Society, technology and the economy all play their part in changing the way we travel. New road signs conveying new messages and in new formats are introduced from time to time, so drivers or riders who passed their driving test a few years ago need to keep up to date or run the risk of failing to understand or comply with recently introduced signs.

Do you understand the colour coding on signs such as this?



A few examples of events that called for new signs include:

- Britain's first motorway
- Pelican crossings
- Reintroduction of trams
- Advanced stop lines
- Vehicle-activated signs
- Active Traffic Management.

Having experience is all very well, but it's not enough if your knowledge is out of date.

### Responsibility for traffic signs

Responsibility for the road network in the UK is split among:

- the Highways Agency in England
- the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales
- the Scottish Executive in Scotland
- and local or regional highway authorities.

The central administrations above are responsible for the UK's strategic road network. Strategic roads are the highways that link cities, areas of population, ports and airports. Most motorways and some "A" roads are strategic roads.

Local or regional highway authorities are responsible for local roads, and this includes a few motorways, all other "A" roads and all other public roads. While responsibility for placing, erecting and maintaining traffic signs is split among these bodies, it is important that signs are consistent both in appearance and in the way they are used.

To ensure that the UK has a uniform traffic signing system, signs must conform to the designs prescribed in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (although some signs may have been specially authorised by the Secretary of State).

The Traffic Signs Manual, published by TSO, provides detailed guidance for those responsible for designing and installing traffic signs.

For more information about traffic signs guidance, see [www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/roads/tss](http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/roads/tss)

## A brief history of traffic signs

It was probably the Romans who first used "traffic signs" in Britain. They marked off road distances at one thousand paces (about one mile) with stones called "milliaries".

Most early signposts were erected by private individuals at their own expense. A law passed in 1648 required each parish to place guide posts at its crossroads, but it was not until after the General Turnpike Act 1773 that these "guide posts" or "fingerposts" became more common.



During the second half of the nineteenth century, bicycles became more popular. Steep hills and sharp bends were very dangerous for early cyclists, and "danger" and "caution" signs were erected at the top of steep hills. Signs showing skull and crossbones were erected at the

most dangerous places. Local authorities and cycling organisations installed an estimated 4000 warning signs.



The year 1896 heralded the era of the motor car, and some motoring associations took up the business of placing signs. The Motor Car Act 1903 made local authorities responsible for placing certain warning and prohibitory signs. The signs were for crossroads,

steep hills and dangerous bends. "A" and "B" numbering of roads was introduced in 1921, and these numbers were shown on fingerpost-style signs alongside the destination and distance. Town or village name signs and warning signs for schools, level crossings and double bends were introduced at the same time.



The main task of signposting our roads during the 1920s and 1930s still fell on the motoring organisations, but in 1931 a committee chaired by Sir Henry Maybury was asked to recommend improvements to the signing then in use, and by 1933 further new signs began to appear, including "No entry" and "Keep left" signs, warning signs for narrow roads and bridges, low bridges, roundabouts and hospitals. Other signs followed during the 1930s, including "Halt at major road ahead". These formed the basis of our traffic signing until the early 1960s.

It was not until after 1918 that white lines began to appear on British roads, and during the 1920s their use spread rapidly. In 1926 the first Ministry of Transport circular on the subject laid down general principles on the use of white lines. In the 1930s, white lines were used as



"stop" lines at road junctions controlled by either police or traffic lights. Reflecting road studs (often referred to as "cat's eyes") first came into use in 1934. By 1944, white lines were also being used to indicate traffic lanes and define the boundary of the main carriageway at entrances to side roads and lay-bys, and in conjunction with "halt" signs. In 1959, regulations came into effect to control overtaking by the use of double white lines.



It was realised that the old system of signing would not be adequate for motorways, and the Anderson Committee was set up in 1958 to consider new designs. It recommended much larger signs, with blue backgrounds. Then, in 1961, the Worboys Committee began to review the complete system of traffic signing. It concluded that the UK should adopt the main principles of the European

system, with the message expressed as a symbol within a red triangle (for warning signs) or a red circle (for prohibitions). Work began on the conversion of British signs in 1965, and this is still the basic system in use today.

Later developments include the use of yellow box markings at busy road junctions, special signs and road markings at pedestrian crossings, mini roundabouts and bus lanes. Regulations published in 1994



included new regulatory and warning signs and simplified the yellow line system of waiting restrictions that was originally introduced in the 1950s. Further Regulations were published in 2002.



More use is being made of new technology to provide better information to drivers on hazards, delays and diversions. The future will undoubtedly see more developments in traffic signing to keep pace with the changing traffic demands on our roads.

## The signing system

There are three basic types of traffic sign: signs that give orders, signs that warn and signs that give information. Each type has a different shape. A further guide to the function of a sign is its colour. All triangular signs are red.



**Circles**  
give orders



**Triangles**  
warn



**Rectangles**  
inform



**Blue** circles generally give a mandatory instruction, such as "turn left", or indicate a route available only to particular classes of traffic, e.g. buses and cycles only



**Red** rings or circles tell you what you must not do, e.g. you must not exceed 30mph, no vehicles over the height shown may proceed



**Blue** rectangles are used for information signs **except** on motorways where blue is used for direction signs



**Green** rectangles are used for direction signs on primary routes



**White** rectangles are used for direction signs on non-primary routes, or for plates used in combination with warning and regulatory signs



There are a few exceptions to the shape and colour rules, to give certain signs greater prominence. Examples are the "STOP" and "GIVE WAY" signs

The words "must" or "must not", when used in the descriptions that follow, refer to legal requirements that have to be obeyed.

## Warning signs

(other than those for low bridges, railway and tramway level crossings, bus and pedal cycle facilities, traffic calming and road works)



The priority through the junction is indicated by the broader line



Risk of lorries overturning on bend to the left (right if symbol reversed)



Sharp deviation of route to the left (right if chevrons reversed) (alternative designs)



Block paving incorporated into a roundabout to indicate sharp deviation of route



Plate used with warning signs where a reduction in speed is necessary

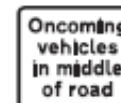


Road narrows on both sides



Road narrows on right (left if symbol reversed)

Plates used with "road narrows" signs



Traffic merges from the left

Traffic merges onto main carriageway

Roundabout

Bend to right (left if symbol reversed)

Single file traffic in each direction

Road wide enough for only one line of vehicles



End of dual carriageway



Two-way traffic



Two-way traffic on route crossing ahead



Near-side edge of carriageway or obstruction near that edge (alternative shapes). White markers are used on the off-side edge and amber ones on the off-side edge of a dual carriageway



**Ford**  
Worded warning. "Ford" may be varied to "Flood", "Gate", "Gates" or "No smoking"



**Try your brakes**  
Try brakes after crossing a ford or before descending a steep hill



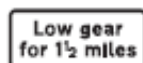
**10%**  
Steep hill downwards (10% is equivalent to 1:10)



**20%**  
Steep hill upwards (20% is equivalent to 1:5)



Sign used with "steep hill" or "try your brakes" signs



Plates used with "steep hill" signs



Opening or swing bridge



Quayside or river bank



End of bridge parapet, abutment wall, tunnel mouth etc.



Water course alongside road



**Soft verges for 2 miles**  
Soft verges for distance shown



Tunnel



Hump bridge



Uneven road



Slippery road



Side winds



**400 yds**  
Distance to hazard



**250 yds**  
Distance and direction to hazard



**For 2 miles**  
Distance over which hazard extends



Low-flying aircraft or sudden aircraft noise



**Gliders**  
Gliders likely



Low-flying helicopters or sudden helicopter noise



Risk of falling or fallen rocks



**Queues likely**  
Traffic queues likely ahead



Slow-moving military vehicles likely to be in or crossing the road



**Slow lorries for 2 miles**  
Slow-moving vehicles for distance shown



**Ice**  
Risk of ice. "Ice" may be varied to "Snowdrifts"



**FIRE STATION**  
**STOP when lights show**

Warning of signals (see page 120). "FIRE" may be varied to "AMBULANCE"



**Hidden dip**  
Other danger. The plate indicates the nature of the hazard



Zebra crossing



**No footway for 400 yds**  
Pedestrians in road for distance shown



Frail pedestrians likely to cross



**Disabled people**  
Disabled pedestrians. "Disabled" may be varied to "Blind"



School

Children going to or from school

Playground

Patrol

Disabled children

Alternative plates used with "school" sign



Lights warning of children likely to be crossing the road on their way to or from school (used with "school" sign)



Pedestrians crossing 200 yards

Pedestrians likely to be crossing a high-speed road where there is no formal crossing point



Horse-drawn vehicles likely to be in the road



Accompanied horses or ponies likely to be in or crossing the road



Wild horses or ponies



Wild animals



Wild fowl



Migratory toad crossing



Sheep



Farm traffic

Agricultural vehicles



Area infected by animal disease



Cattle grid

Horse drawn vehicles and animals



Cattle grid with indication of bypass for horse-drawn vehicles and animals



Cattle



When lights show 200 yds

Supervised cattle crossing ahead



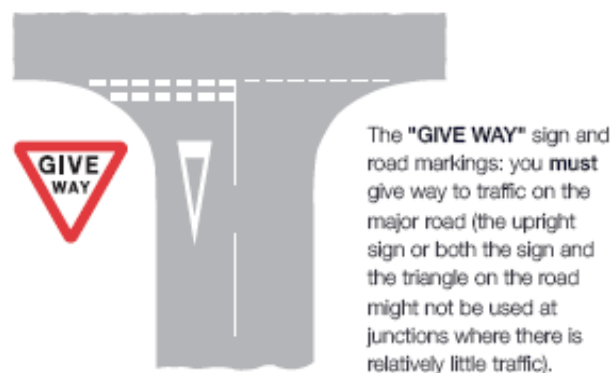
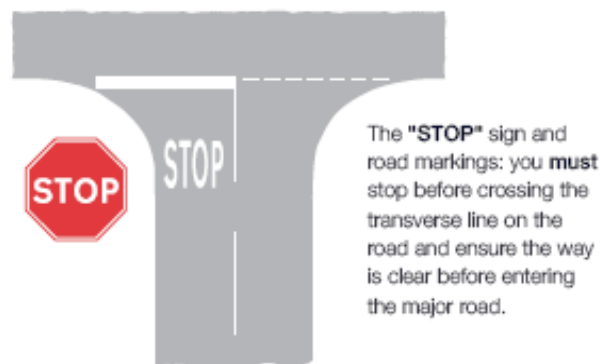
Supervised cattle crossing

## Regulatory signs

(other than those for low bridges, railway and tramway level crossings, bus and pedal cycle facilities and road works)

Most regulatory signs are circular. A **RED RING** or **RED CIRCLE** indicates a prohibition. A **BLUE CIRCLE** generally gives a positive (mandatory) instruction or indicates a route for use only by particular classes of vehicle (see sections on tram signs and bus and cycle signs).

Two notable exceptions are:



No entry for vehicular traffic, including pedal cycles (usually indicates the end of a one-way road where all traffic is travelling in the other direction)



No vehicles  
No vehicles except pedal cycles being pushed by hand



No vehicles  
10 am - 4 pm  
except for  
access



Play Street  
8 am to sunset  
except for  
access

Alternative plates used with the "no vehicles" sign, indicating times when vehicles are prohibited, except for access



No motor  
vehicles



No motor  
vehicles  
except solo  
motorcycles



No solo  
motorcycles



No towed  
caravans



No  
pedestrians



No ridden or  
accompanied  
horses



No horse-drawn  
vehicles



No  
articulated  
vehicles



No goods  
vehicles over  
maximum  
gross weight  
shown in  
tonnes



End of goods  
vehicles  
restriction



No vehicles or  
combinations  
of vehicles  
over maximum  
length shown



No  
explosives

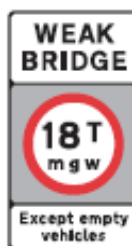
No vehicles  
carrying  
explosives



No vehicles over maximum width shown (width shown in metric and imperial units)

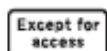


No vehicles over maximum width shown (width shown in imperial units)



No vehicles over the maximum gross weight shown in tonnes. The bottom plate is used where empty vehicles are exempt

#### Plates used to indicate exemptions from prohibition signs



Except for access to premises or land adjacent to the road, where there is no other route. Other exemptions may be shown



Except for loading and unloading by goods vehicles



No overtaking



Give way to oncoming vehicles

Where a road or bridge is very narrow, priority must be given to traffic from the other direction (there will usually be a "give way" line indicating where to wait)

#### Where changes of direction are prohibited, a red bar across the sign is used in addition to the red circle



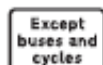
No U-turn



No right turn



No left turn



Exemption plate



Vehicles must not go beyond the sign where displayed by a school crossing patrol



Vehicles must not go beyond the sign where displayed by a police officer or traffic warden



Specified traffic must not use verge maintained in mown or ornamental condition



Proceed in direction indicated by the arrow



Turn left ahead (right if symbol is reversed)



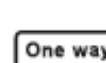
Vehicles may pass either side to reach the same destination



Keep left (right if symbol is reversed)



Plates supplementing "turn" signs



Mini-roundabout (give way to traffic from the immediate right)



One-way traffic



Nature of and distance to a prohibition, restriction or requirement



Weight restriction ahead (may show a different restriction)



Location of weight restriction ahead with indication of an alternative route (may show a different restriction)

## Speed limit signs

Remember that in areas of street lighting (other than on motorways) a 30mph limit applies **unless** another limit is specifically signed.



The maximum speed, in miles per hour, at which traffic may travel, if it is safe to do so



The national speed limit for the type of road and class of traffic applies

A larger sign indicates the start of a speed limit. Smaller repeater signs act as reminders. Repeater signs for a 30mph limit are used only on roads with no street lighting. Repeater signs for the national speed limit are used only on roads with street lighting (other than motorways)



Road marking used in conjunction with upright signs to indicate the speed limit



Entrance to a zone where a 20 mph speed limit is enforced by traffic calming measures (there may be no 20 mph repeater signs within the zone)



End of 20 mph zone and start of 30 mph speed limit



Start of a speed limit at the boundary of a town or village



Start of motorway regulations, including the national speed limit (unless a different speed limit is signed)



Point on a road with street lighting where an existing 30 mph limit originally ended but has subsequently been extended (temporary sign). This sign alerts drivers that a previous higher limit has been replaced by a 30 mph limit by the removal of speed limit signs



End of road works and any temporary speed limit through those works (may be supplemented by a sign indicating the permanent speed limit beyond the road works)



Area where speed cameras are in use



Length of road where two cameras are used to measure the average speed of a vehicle between two points



Reminder that enforcement cameras are in use (may be supplemented by a speed limit sign)



Speed camera nearby on a lit road with a 30 mph speed limit (i.e. where there are no speed limit repeater signs)



Speed camera nearby on an unlit road subject to the national speed limit (i.e. where there are no speed limit repeater signs)



Maximum speed advised, in miles per hour, at a bend (the plate may be used with other warning signs)



Minimum speed permitted, in miles per hour, unless it is impracticable or unsafe to comply



End of minimum speed requirement

## Low bridge signs



Each year there are hundreds of incidents in which bridges are struck by vehicles too high to pass under them. Both rail and road users have been killed in these incidents. Look out for signs in this section and **make sure that you are not a bridge basher.**

All bridges with a clearance of less than 16 feet 6 inches (about 5 metres) are normally signed. Both regulatory roundels and warning triangles can be used, depending on the type of bridge.



Bridges particularly at risk from strikes may have a variable message sign that is activated by high vehicles passing through an infra-red beam. When the sign is activated, four amber lamps flash, the top pair alternating with the bottom pair.

## Regulatory signs



No vehicles over the height shown may pass the sign (height shown in metric and imperial units)



No vehicles over the height shown may pass the sign (height shown in imperial units)

At non-arch bridges mandatory signs may be used; it is unlawful for an overheight vehicle to pass one of these. They are placed on the bridge and at the side of the road in front of the bridge.



Advance warning of a mandatory height restriction ahead; the sign may include an arrow, if the restriction is on a side road



Location of mandatory height restriction ahead, with indication of an alternative route

## Warning signs



A warning sign indicates, in imperial units, the maximum headroom under a bridge or other overhead obstruction. There may be an additional sign showing the height in metric units. These signs may be sited well in advance of a bridge, with the distance, either in yards or miles, shown on a plate; this may have an arrow to indicate that the bridge is on a side road at a junction ahead.



Chord markings used indicate the points between which different headrooms over different parts of an arch bridge are available.







