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'KEEP TO THE WEST, PLEASE'

said the Traffic Warden in 1722

by

Paul Dew

The ancient London Bridge with numerous arches and a double run of houses along almost the entire length is quite a well know image. Slightly less well known, is the law about driving carts and wagons on the left of the bridge, which is said to be the origin of the national 'Keep Left' rule. Almost completely forgotten is the detail of that law and how it was enforced. For that, we need to turn to a ruling made in 1722 by the City of London Common Council who were led by Lord Mayor Sir Gerard Conyers. The wording requires *carts, coaches and other carriages entering the City to keep to the west side, and those leaving to keep to the east side of the bridge*. In practice, this meant *keep to the left*, but the original wording is clearly by compass point, presumably because the very concept of keeping to the left was unprecedented.

Furthermore, to enforce the rule, *three sufficient and able persons* were appointed. These men could be the earliest traffic wardens and were to be present at each end of the bridge every day to prevent *the said inconveniences* (obstruction), and deter anyone from allowing carts to stand across the roadway to load or unload. Carters due to pay a toll had to have the coins ready for the official collector, or faced the prospect of being charged with obstruction. The highest toll then was fourpence (say two 'new' pence) for a wagon with shod wheels, as these were thought to cause the most damage to the road surface.

In 1811, 800 wagons, 2,000 carts and 1,300 coaches crossed the bridge every day, so the toll income was considerable. Added to the rent from the shops and houses along the bridge, an enormous amount of money has built up, and the City's Bridge House Estates Fund is now able to donate about £10 million to charity each year. Not bad from fourpence a wagon with shod wheels!