

THE MAVERICK

“TURN OUT THE TRAFFIC LIGHTS”

They hold us up, can make streets more dangerous and cost tens of millions a year. So, argues **Ellie Rose**, why not remove most of these pointless signals?

When the world's first set of traffic lights exploded in a policeman's face in January 1869, just a month after they'd been installed outside the Houses of Parliament, we should have taken it as an ill omen.

Everyone finds red signals irritating—but, worse, I'd argue that traffic lights cause delays, reduce driver attention and increase aggression as we rush to beat them. So isn't it time we got rid of most of them?

There are an estimated 25,000 sets in the UK. Each one costs about £150,000 to install, has a lifespan of 18 to 20 years, and takes £5,000 a year to run. That's a hefty £125m a year in maintenance alone.

But this is almost certainly the tip of the iceberg; traffic congestion may cost the economy up to £20bn a year in lost time. Although it's difficult to put a precise figure on it, hold-ups caused by lights—from pedestrian crossings on red when no one's crossing, to busy main roads slowed to a crawl by numerous side-road sets—will be a significant contributing factor.

Nor do traffic lights seem very effective at stopping accidents. In London, for instance, there are an average of 1.71 injuries per year at each signal junction, compared with 0.87 at each of the capital's roundabouts. ▶

Thinking differently!



Bringing cars to a halt:
the Traffic Light Tree
created by sculptor
Pierre Vivant, near
Canary Wharf, London

◀ Yet between 2000 and 2008, the number of traffic lights on our roads increased by 30 per cent. In a recession, when money's tight and energy prices high, is that really the best option?

I grew up in Guernsey, where roads are narrow and traffic dense (the island has one of the highest numbers of cars

per head of population in the world). But traffic lights are rare; people just filter across junctions. Drivers approach with caution, and, even at relatively busy intersections, traffic moves.

Light-free living works in the Dutch town of Drachten (population 50,000),

too. In 1999, planners tore up 12 of 15 traffic-light sets—if drivers weren't so used to relying on them, they reasoned, they'd be more careful. "All those signs are saying to cars is, 'We've organised behaviour so that, as long as you behave this way, nothing can happen to you,'" said Hans Monderman, the engineer who pioneered the scheme.

I've seen that mentality in action. As lights turn amber, cars race to get through before red appears, a cause of many accidents. A year ago, I witnessed a black cab in the West End of London accelerating from stationary when the light went green and driving, very deliberately, into my tiny female friend (albeit slowly—she got a skinned knee)

as we made our way across a crowded pedestrian crossing.

Monderman argued that this kind of dangerous behaviour is due, in part, to a system that gives drivers a sense of entitlement, and the Drachten scheme was about equality rather than priority. Interestingly, accident rates in the town

dropped from 36 in the four years before the experiment to two in the two years after.

Similar trials have taken place in Britain, too. Martin Cassini, founder of the Equality Streets traffic campaign, instigated a lights-off project in Portishead, Somerset, in 2009. This was made

permanent after journey times on some routes reportedly fell by more than 50 per cent, with no measured reduction in pedestrian safety—despite increasing numbers of cars using the route (more than 2,000 vehicles per hour).

Cassini predicts we could save the economy billions by ripping out nearly every traffic light in Britain. "We talk about painful cuts," he says, "but here's something where cuts would actually make an improvement." Yet council officials, he says, have been wary of change, with some agreeing to trials then backing out at the last minute.

Transport for London (TfL) do claim to be stripping out unnecessary lights as part of Mayor Boris Johnson's

"We talk about painful cuts, but here's something where cuts would actually make an improvement"

"Smoothing Traffic Flow" agenda. In 2010, they reported that they were reviewing 145 sites across the capital to see if signals could be safely removed. Since then, they've turned out lights at 20 of these locations. But when you consider that there are 6,000 sets of lights in London—and that TfL put in 20 new sets in the same period—it doesn't seem quite the pioneering measure it could be.

TfL's chief operating officer for surface transport, Garrett Emmerson, says it will continue to take out lights where possible, but cites the need to look not just at individual junctions but at traffic flow through the entire network.

I agree that the danger of removing lights in one junction may be that you cause a build-up of traffic at the next—but not in the way he means.

Except on a few multi-lane crossroads, traffic lights rarely help traffic flow, whether at a single location or throughout a town. If you remove them in one spot, you may improve things a bit—but

if you remove them all, there will be a cumulative effect, with the new junctions working together to keep traffic moving and encourage more care on the roads. Meanwhile, priority paths with textured surfaces would allow those with disabilities to walk safely—with zebra crossings where absolutely necessary.

The latest development in the traffic-light saga is playing out in the town of Poynton, between Stockport and Stoke-on-Trent. It's chopped in two by a fiendishly busy junction, through which more than 26,000 cars pass per day. It was difficult for pedestrians to cross as cars thundered through and queued alternately. So, championed by Cassini, four sets of traffic lights have been removed, to be replaced with two roundabouts and a filtering system.

The junction is unveiled next month, and traffic engineers and policymakers will be watching closely. I hope it'll be a step on the way to a more democratic system, valuing attention, traffic flow and safety over blind obedience. ■

Are traffic lights stemming the flow of progress?

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CASTING A LONG, LINGERING LOOK

Our largest goldfish, Livingston, had swim-bladder problems. We were advised to starve all our fish for 48 hours, and this was how they looked after 24 hours when we turned on the light in the morning. Were they trying to tell us something?

Submitted by John Fisher, Swindon

