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‘M4 to Wales – and prosper!’¹

A History of a Motorway

Roads do not often get much analysis from historians or even the people that drive on them. As Joe Moran has noted, they are ‘just part of the invisible landscape of the everyday’, there to be driven on, taken for granted or maybe complained about.² Yet roads are not just means of getting from A to B but places in themselves and they are important to individuals, to communities and to economies. This is particularly true of motorways and the M4 has been central to the development and life of post-war Wales. It enables the economy of south Wales to function and has shaped that economy’s geographic development. It has become engrained in the physical and mental landscape and the time before it, a time of tailbacks and long journeys, a time not actually that long ago, has been forgotten. Indeed, a south Wales without the M4 is now unimaginable.

Through a study of the Welsh stretch of the M4, this article illustrates some of the different ways the history of a road can be explored. In many ways, the history of this part of the M4 is the history of modern Wales: a reliance on the state, tensions over nationalism and regional rivalries, the marginalization of working-class communities and the emphasis on integration with the UK. Of course, not all these themes are unique to Wales but then Welsh history should be as much about what makes Wales similar to the rest of the UK as what it makes it different.³ Indeed, the M4 illustrates both Wales’ Britishness (through its origins in

¹ Advertisement for Development Corporation for Wales, *The Times*, 13 January 1972.

² Joe Moran, *On Roads: A Hidden History* (London, 2010), 2.

³ On the historiography of modern Wales see Martin Johnes, ‘For class and nation: dominant trends in the historiography of twentieth-century Wales’, *History Compass*, 8, 11 (2010), 1257-74. On Wales and Britishness see Martin Johnes, ‘Wales, history and Britishness’, *Welsh History Review*, 25, 4 (2011), 596-61.

decisions and funding from London and through its use of UK-wide regulations and conventions for driving and construction) and Welsh difference (through its bilingual signage and the symbolic sense of entering a different country given by the Severn Bridge). Whether the emphasis is on Welsh difference, similarity or both, the history of the M4 is as much a cultural history as an economic and political one. While social scientists have long explored the cultural dimensions of roads and driving, historians are only slowly coming to this.⁴ This article thus demonstrates that the politics and dynamics of building and using roads offer insights into the communities and networks that exist around them. Roads shape perceptions of distance both along the route and on regional and national levels. They make individual communities both feel part of or isolated from wider networks. This is intentional and roads are also products of political processes and power struggles. The article begins with an overview of how and why the Welsh stretch of the M4 was built. It then moves on to explore how the motorway's building was shaped by the nature of power in south Wales, before concluding with a consideration of the road's impact.

I

South Wales' historic primary road network, developed before the advent of the motorcar, was aligned from the north to the southern coast, rather than from the west to the border with England to the east. This was not a problem when the Welsh economy was dominated by coal and metal, goods which were moved by rail and sea rather than road. But, by the middle

⁴ For a review of the social science literature see Peter Merriman, 'Automobility and the geographies of the car', *Geography Compass* 3, 2 (2009), 586-99. For calls for transport history to pay more attention to the cultural turn and 'meanings' see Colin Divall and George Revill, 'Cultures of transport: representation, practice and technology', *Journal of Transport History*, 26, 1 (2005), 99-112. For an engineering perspective on the history of the M4 see Brain Hawker and Howard Stevens, *The Motorway Achievement: Building the Network in Wales* (Chichester, 2010).

of the twentieth century, the economy was diversifying and light industry was more dependent on motor transport. The problem was that not only was the Welsh network orientated in the wrong direction but its roads were in a lamentable state too.⁵ The key route into England was the A48, which ran from Gloucester to Carmarthen and passed through Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. There were sharp turns, steep hills and varying road widths to slow down traffic. On the stretch between Gloucester and Chepstow, there were 10 steep hills, 3 narrow bridges, 4 low bridges, 2 sharp bends, 5 danger spots and 1 badly designed junction. In 1960, average speeds through Cardiff, Newport and Port Talbot were below 20 mph. At Newport, this could fall as low as 7 mph in peak hours.⁶ The A48's traffic was never as bad as might be imagined because not all drivers gravitated to this main route when it was no better than other roads and in many ways rather worse. But this was still the road network upon which Wales' economic integration with the UK depended and, as motor traffic and Wales' position as a branch economy grew, it was a network that was creaking. Between 1954 and 1960 traffic on the three main approach roads into south Wales doubled.⁷

Such problems were hardly unique and the entire UK road system was in desperate need of modernization. The government first discussed motorways in detail in 1942 and the plan included a route from London to Swansea and a bridge across the Severn. This was deemed crucial to the emerging reconstruction plans that sought to redistribute manufacturing by forcing developments away from the south-east and Midlands to areas that had suffered during the inter-war depression from their reliance on heavy industry. Because manufacturing

⁵ C. T. Brunner, *Traffic Problems with Particular Relation to South Wales* (London, 1949).

B. Price Davies, 'Road facilities in Wales', in E. Maslin Kearsley (ed.), *Wales and Monmouthshire: An Illustrated Review of the Industries and Tourist Attractions of the Principality* (1947), 79.

⁶ Industrial Association of Wales and Monmouthshire, *Assessment of the Future Highway Needs of South Wales and Monmouthshire*, Final Report (1961), paras. 8.02, 10.04, 10.18

⁷ Industrial Association, *Assessment of the Future Highway Needs*, paras. 10.18, 11.10.

depended on motor transport, that plan could only work properly if Britain's regions were adequately linked by road. In 1946, the government announced its plans for a motorway network. Like other major new capital projects, plans to complete this within a decade fell victim to the financial crises of the late 1940s and the scheme was cancelled.⁸ Across the UK, pressure for the scheme to be revived intensified in the early 1950s. One Welsh commentator noted in 1951, for example, that 'lasting prosperity would not be maintained' unless road developments kept up with factory constructions.⁹ Such pressure, along with rising car ownership, the example being set in Europe and the USA and the improving economic conditions, led the government to not only revisit the national network but also announce new plans.¹⁰ Thus a Port Talbot bypass of motorway standard was announced in 1953.

Port Talbot was a congestion blackspot and a logical choice for Wales' first motorway. The A48 snaked through the town on a route that dated back to the days of horse and carts and had to cross a railway which meant it was shut for three hours a day causing tailbacks of several miles. The result was that for a 5½ mile stretch on the A48 the average car speed was 18 mph.¹¹ Traffic were also worsening, not just as car ownership rose but because the town was the site of a major new steelworks that opened in 1951. A new estate built to house steelworkers exacerbated problems because its only access point was via the A48.

⁸ David Starkie, *The Motorway Age: Road and Traffic Policies in Post-War Britain* (Oxford, 1982), 3.

⁹ C. T. Brunner, in D. J. Davies (ed), *Wales and Monmouthshire: An Illustrated Review* (Cheltenham, 1951), 159. Also see *Guardian*, 19 January 1954.

¹⁰ Charlesworth, *History of British Motorways*, 34.

¹¹ Industrial Association, *Assessment of the Future Highway Needs*, para. 10.24. *Guardian*, 19 January 1954. *The Times*, 7 May 1959.

Building a major new road was not quick and it was not until July 1966 that the 4.5 mile A48(M) opened, cutting the journey time between Swansea and Cardiff by twenty minutes. For those who were not having to contemplate living beside the motorway, it was difficult not to be impressed by how it ran over the town on 45-foot-high gleaming white concrete pillars. The *Western Mail* produced a six-page supplement to mark its opening and called it a ‘£5m miracle’ that would end ‘stop-go misery’; it claimed that the road would become ‘one of the sights of Wales’. Some people felt it should have had a pedestrian walkway to take advantage of the panoramic views of the town. The Town Clerk proclaimed on its opening, ‘if you stand still you die, and Port Talbot intends to live.’¹² The road was thus a symbol of progress, a modern marvel that saved time and demonstrated the practical benefits to ordinary people of the age’s technological developments and the rhetoric of modernization that dominated Welsh political discourse.

Yet progress also brought anger for those who were not sharing in it and there was a fear in 1950s and 60s urban Wales of being marginalized within the wider modernization of the UK. The fears were primarily economic and centred on how the declining heavy industrial base would be replaced (something new roads were seen as central to) but it also had a cultural edge too, whether that meant access to consumer goods or a bypass. Indeed, the constant rhetoric of affluence and modernization created a strong sense of resentment amongst those who felt they were not sharing in it and in traditional industrial Welsh communities this was particularly acute.¹³ During the Port Talbot motorway’s first week, a newspaper article on Welsh bypasses encapsulated the growing frustration elsewhere: ‘Not until your throat is parched, your head reeling, your premises shaking in time to pulsating

¹² *Western Mail* (hereafter *WM*), 22 July 1966. Cf *South Wales Evening Post*, 22 July 1966.

¹³ For the limited sense of affluence and discussions of economic modernization of Wales see Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939* (Manchester, 2012), chs. 3 and 9.

diesels, and you could not speak for shouting irritably, are you entitled to relief'.¹⁴ That frustration was evident in Newport. Its bypass had been scheduled in 1946 and but it was postponed on economic grounds in 1952 and was not revisited until 1960, by which time growing fears about unemployment were adding to the concerns over the economic impact of Wales' creaking transport system.¹⁵ That year, a Cardiff MP wrote to the Minister of Transport complaining of the delays with the road and maintaining that it was not an exaggeration to say 'the whole economy of South Wales hangs on this one thread'.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it was not until May 1967 that Newport's motorway bypass opened.

Elsewhere concerns intensified over congestion as private cars became more common and road haulage developed to serve the expanding industrial base. A 1960 survey found that heavy good vehicles made up 20 to 35 percent of traffic on the key south Wales trunk roads.¹⁷ At one level, this was a mark of a developing economy but it also slowed up all the other traffic. There were piecemeal developments on the A48 - such as the building of dual carriageway bypasses for Neath and Briton Ferry – and more than £78m was spent on Welsh roads between March 1949 and 1959.¹⁸ But, beyond Port Talbot and the stretch between the Severn and Newport, motorway development in Wales remained on the drawing board in the early 1960s. A line for a motorway was put in Glamorgan's development plan in 1957 and approved in 1963 with no objections. This raised hopes and the press claimed that 'After years in a run-down wilderness of torturous, traffic-choked roads, Wales is on the threshold of a revolution in road transport as important as was the car's impact on the horse-and-buggy

¹⁴ *WM*, 27 July 1966.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 19 February 1959.

¹⁶ TNA: D. Box to M. Marples, 10 June 1960. MT 39/984.

¹⁷ Industrial Association, *Assessment of the Future Highway Needs*, para. 4.08.

¹⁸ J. Hamish Richards, 'Transport', in Brinley Thomas (ed.), *The Welsh Economy: Studies in Expansion* (Cardiff, 1962), 145.

era'. Its expectation was that within a decade motorists would take a 200 mile afternoon spin in their stride.¹⁹ Yet such an idyll still remained some way off and *The Guardian* was right to claim in 1965 that 'wherever the motorways fall short there is pessimism. The back of beyond today is anywhere beyond the reach of the motorway network.'²⁰ By 1965, there were still only 16½ miles of dual-carriageway in Wales.²¹

It was the river Severn that confined south Wales to the 'back of beyond'. The only road across it was at Gloucester and even that was normally reached via a one-way bridge over the Wye at Chepstow. There was a tide-dependent ferry and an expensive car shuttle service on the rail line but most motorists heading to or from London or Bristol were simply forced into a long indirect route.²² A Severn bridge much further south than Gloucester had been a high priority in the 1940s plans but during the 1950s the Conservatives decided to build the Forth Bridge first because its political needs in Scotland were greater, whereas most of south Wales was regarded as immovably Labour. Building both bridges too close to each other was expensive and would create the danger of a monopoly amongst those few contractors able to meet the challenges of even tendering for such complex projects.²³ Attempts within Cabinet to plead a special case for Wales got nowhere and further illustrated the lack of weight Welsh interests carried within a Conservative cabinet. In 1957, the Minister for Welsh Affairs was arguing against a delay on the grounds that opinion in Wales was very suspicious of the government because of rising unemployment and the furore over the flooding of the Welsh-speaking Tryweryn valley to create a reservoir for Liverpool. With

¹⁹ *WM*, 2 May 1963.

²⁰ *Guardian*, 18 February 1965.

²¹ *HC Deb*, 11 March 1965, vol 708 c600.

²² *Financial Times*, 8 September 1966.

²³ Richards, 'Transport', 146. TNA: Notes from Cabinet meeting, 12 December 1957, CAB 195/17; Cabinet minutes, 12 December 1957, CAB 128/31

the Forth Bridge and Tyne Tunnel going ahead, a delay on the Welsh bridge would ‘inflamm[e]’ the belief ‘that the Government refuses to give Wales a fair crack of the whip’. The minister held his Welsh brief alongside being Minister for Housing and Local Government and he also warned that the feeling would be that the Scots got the Forth Bridge because they had a full Secretary of State.²⁴ These arguments were persuasive but not persuasive enough. They may have spoken to the government’s fear that pressure for greater Welsh political representation could grow but no amount of devolution was going to build a road that was only half in Wales. Nonetheless, the M50, which linked south Wales and the Midlands but only cost £6m compared with the Severn Bridge and associated motorways’ £40m price tag, allowed the government to still do something for Wales.²⁵ The Ross Spur, as it was known, was thus commissioned, despite not having been in the 1946 national plan. It remains one of the quietest motorways in the UK.²⁶

After pressure from the Industrial Association of Wales and Monmouthshire, the Ministry of Transport finally gave the go ahead for a Severn crossing in 1961 and the bridge opened five years later, cutting the route from Cardiff to London by 18 miles. It was the seventh largest bridge in the world and immediately hailed as an engineering masterpiece. The project, together with its immediate link roads, cost £15.5m but tolls were meant to recoup the cost in 40 years. The 2s 6d toll was not popular but the transport minister claimed the 55 miles saved between Bristol and Cardiff would save motorists an average of 8s 6d in petrol. Its opening generated huge crowds and genuine excitement. On its first Sunday, there

²⁴ TNA: Henry Brooke, Memorandum on the Severn Bridge, 15 November 1957, CAB/129/90; Notes from Cabinet meeting, 12 December 1957, CAB 195/17. On political and cultural tensions in this period see Johnes, *Wales since 1939*.

²⁵ Starkie, *The Motorway Age*, 5. *HC Deb*, 25 January 1944 vol 396 c544. TNA: The Severn Bridge and the Roads Programme. Memo by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 22 November 1957, CAB 129/90.

²⁶ Hawker and Stevens, *Motorway Achievement*, 12-3. *Economist*, 27 August 1988.

was chaos and five-mile tailbacks; the police had to ask motorists to avoid the bridge unless they had to cross. Collisions became ‘commonplace’ with drivers looking around at the bridge rather than the road ahead of them.²⁷ In August 1967, a survey estimated that 12 percent of traffic across the Severn was people specifically setting out to see the bridge.²⁸ The services at Aust, which had its own postcards, became a particularly popular destination and even the venue for Sunday school trips from the rural west. The bridge became a powerful icon of the modernization of Wales and its economy. One man remembered it was ‘tremendous to drive over ... like something out of the movies, like the San Francisco bridge.’²⁹ Two years after the bridge had opened, a survey suggested that 90 percent of people in Chepstow and Newport and 71 percent in Bristol and Ebbw Vale had crossed it.³⁰

The Severn Bridge was part of a motorway network that stopped at Tredegar Park near Newport. Extending the M4 beyond that was becoming more important as the government looked for alternatives to a coal industry whose downsizing was gathering pace and only likely to continue. There was also a growing urgency to the need to act caused by the election of Plaid Cymru’s first MP in 1966. This was a political development of near epic proportions; suddenly the frustrations over how Welsh economic and cultural needs seemed to be marginalized by the status quo had translated into nationalist votes. The Labour government, who had the most to lose through any gains for Plaid Cymru, saw economic arguments as the key to maintaining its grip on Welsh politics. In 1967, its review of the Welsh economy reported, ‘Good roads are one of the keys to the future prosperity of

²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 23 July, 8-9, 12 September 1966. *Financial Times*, 15 September 1966.

²⁸ E. J. Cleary & R. E. Thomas, *The Economic Consequences of the Severn Bridge and its Associated Motorways* (Bath, 1973), 25.

²⁹ *A Promised Land*, HTV, 29 April 2004.

³⁰ Cleary & Thomas, *Economic Consequences*, 34.

Wales.³¹ The previous year Glamorgan County Council representatives had met the Secretary of State for Wales and asked for a motorway across south Wales. He agreed, was willing to pay for it and in 1967 announced the M4 would be extended across Wales by 1976, the first commitment to this. The cabinet post of Secretary of State for Wales had itself been created in 1964 in response to the political impotence some felt Wales had, an impotence that the delays over the construction of the Severn Bridge in many ways typified.³² However, the new Minister lacked power and resources and this meant that turning promises into reality was not straightforward. The need to make a case to London for money led to it consulting local authorities for evidence that good roads did actually lead to investment. Johnson and Johnson told Monmouthshire County Council that the M4 had been key to their decision to locate in Wales and claimed that only industrialists truly appreciated the social and economic significance of motorways.³³ Nonetheless, the Welsh Office's argument for the westward expansion of the M4 pointed out the difficulty of making a clear empirical case. The road would not solve any short-term unemployment problem and the results would only become apparent in the long term. This meant there was a gap in the case that could 'only be bridged by an act of faith rather than a welter of statistics'. Yet it still maintained an expanded M4 would be 'bringing hope through work to existing communities needing economic stimulation to transform their existing environments and giving scope for the imaginative development of new forms of living for work and leisure in a spacious environment more appropriate to our rising horizons of expectations'.³⁴ These were grand words but in 1969

³¹ *Wales: The Way Ahead*, Cmnd. 3334 (Cardiff, 1967), para. 42.

³² Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, ch. 8.

³³ Various correspondence in TNA: BD4/23.

³⁴ TNA: Glyn Jones, 'The Case for the Westward Expansion of the M4' (1968), BD 4/23.

there were complaints in Parliament that there seemed to be no organization or planning to the completing of the Welsh stretch of the M4.³⁵

Part of the problem was that while administrative devolution may have prioritized the M4 in Wales it was a step backwards in another sense. The Welsh Office seemed to have little clout at the Cabinet's bargaining table, while the Ministry of Transport, now no longer responsible for Wales, was even leaving the nation off its progress maps and publicity.³⁶ The slow release of funds, arguments over routes and subsequent public inquiries were also hampering progress. Across the UK, the motorway programme faced problems in the 1970s as public inquiries became more complex and more controversial and the general economic downturn curtailed government expenditure. Moreover, rising oil costs and a slowly-developing awareness of how fossil fuels were finite led to questions over whether so many new motorways were really needed.³⁷ By 1974, the incoming Secretary of State for Wales could later note that the motorway's expansion had 'crunched to a halt'.³⁸ A year later, a newspaper was claiming that, although the M4 had been a staple of Welsh political rhetoric for twenty years, the road between Cardiff and Swansea was still one of the worst between two major towns anywhere in Europe.³⁹ Yet progress was being made and the Welsh Office's constant battles with the Treasury were beginning to deliver the funds to begin construction west of Newport. By 1977, the *Western Mail* could say it had been 'the most momentous year for road building in South Wales since the Romans left'.⁴⁰ In eight months 30 miles of Welsh motorway had opened. At the opening of one section, George Thomas,

³⁵ *HL Deb*, 7 May 1969, vol 301, c1236

³⁶ TNA: Note by A. S. Coombs, 8 November 1968, BD 4/23. See, for example, *Roads in England, 1971-2: Report by the Secretary of State for Environment* (London, 1972).

³⁷ Charlesworth, *History of British Motorways*, chs. 6 & 8.

³⁸ Lord Morris of Aberavon, *Fifty Years in Politics and the Law* (Cardiff, 2011), 145.

³⁹ *The Times*, 2 July 1975.

⁴⁰ *WM*, 22 December 1977.

Speaker of the House, said the M4 would be his generation's 'contribution to those who will follow us.'⁴¹ By 1980, the M4 reached from London to Pont Abraham, with just one gap west of Baglan, eventually filled in 1994.

II

When the Port Talbot bypass route was planned in 1949 rumours flooded through the town and some people found out their house was going to be demolished from neighbours. Even after seeing the plans, people could be unclear on how it affected them and had to write to the Ministry of Transport for answers. Letters received by that department demonstrate how deferential people were, their willingness to accept significant change in the early post-war years and the depth of the housing shortage. Compensation was not an issue raised often. Some just wanted to know the timescale to demolition to see if it was worth spending money on decorating or repairing their homes. One man even sent a stamped addressed envelope to the Ministry to find out if his house was going to be knocked down. The Ministry did not always know the answer since it was working from plans which did not show house numbers and it was forced to ask some inquirers to draw a map showing where in a street their house was.⁴² Although two chapels and more than 150 houses were likely to be demolished, the 1949 public inquiry was cursory by later standards. In a narrow town situated between the sea and mountainside, there was not very much choice over where the road could be put. There were just 30 objections, including one from the council who felt that the town would be cut in two and that too many homes were going to come down. Yet few people pressed the matter at the inquiry after receiving answers on whether their home would be demolished or not.⁴³

⁴¹ *WM*, 23 December 1977.

⁴² For the planning, letters and inquiry see TNA: BD 31/117.

⁴³ See *South Wales Evening Post*, 20 September 1949; *Port Talbot Guardian*, 23 September 1949.

The Ministry of Transport commissioned a detailed design in 1953 but problems with the route meant it was not until 1957 that the Port Talbot bypass was finally given the go ahead.⁴⁴ This delay from the 1949 inquiry created new problems in itself, because motorway standards had moved on since the original plan, meaning hard shoulders had to be added and junctions redesigned. This meant more changes to the list of properties needed and it was April 1959 before compulsory purchase order plans began. A decade of uncertainty meant residents were particularly frustrated by an ongoing lack of information over what exactly was going to be bought up and when. With ten years having passed since the original inquiry, some tenants now only found out that their homes were scheduled for demolition from the newspaper. Afraid and uncertain letters of protest were written to the Ministry of Transport: some suggested alternative routes, while others worried about losing their garage or shed or just wanted to know what was happening. Despite the emerging popular sense of faceless and uncaring government bureaucracy, the Ministry did deal sensitively with the objections, even visiting people at their homes to explain the situation and trying to find one individual surplus land where a new garage could be built. It was also willing to compensate the local authority for costs incurred by re-housing unprotected tenants and owner occupiers on low incomes, two groups that the council was under no legal obligation to help but was doing so because of the wider shortage of housing in a town enjoying a boom thanks to its steelworks. These shortages did mean however that when people were relocated they often got little notice, something which exacerbated their anxiety. For one family this was all the worse because their neighbours on both sides had found alternative accommodation, leaving their empty houses to become infested with rats.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Financial Times*, 29 November 1957.

⁴⁵ This paragraph is based on TNA: BD 31/191, 192 & 295.

In the end, three chapels and more than 200 houses had to be demolished. Yet people had accepted the whole situation with remarkable fortitude and calmness. There was no scandal or organized campaign of opposition. As one pensioner who was losing his home of forty years noted, it was ‘tragic’ but the road was needed.⁴⁶ Modernization was the dominant rhetoric of the 1950s and the working classes were not going to speak up against projects that were going to create jobs and develop the economy. Even the construction itself employed 450 men at its peak.⁴⁷ The population of south Wales was used to suffering environmental harm in the name of progress. It also remembered the 1930s and had no desire to harm economic prospects. Moreover, compulsory house purchases were far from unknown. The contemporary slum clearance project meant that between 1954 and 1969, 92,352 people in Wales were moved as a result of the demolition or closure of their former homes.⁴⁸

This does not mean people were happy about having to move or the general situation. For those who had to live on the doorstep of the construction, the experience could be nightmarish thanks to the vibrations, noise, dust, mud and even shoddy remedial work on their property, all on top of more than a decade of uncertainty of how their house would be affected.⁴⁹ One resident remembered:

For three years we lived in perpetual dust and dirt from the building of the M4 that was being built just yards from our homes ... Heavy lorries with loads of various materials and waste from the construction of the M4 passed within two yards of our front doors ... [There was] a constant stream of noise, dust and vibration [as] cement trucks emptied their loads within four yard of the fronts of our homes ... The road

⁴⁶ TNA: BD 56/23.

⁴⁷ *WM*, 22 July 1966.

⁴⁸ *Digest of Welsh Statistics*, 16 (1970), 29.

⁴⁹ See for example the complaints in TNA: BD 31/191.

surface gave way under the constant heavy traffic sinking in places to a depth of two feet the road soon became so uneven that the underside of our cars would ground on the uneven surface⁵⁰.

The press, however, spoke of an atmosphere of relief in the town as work progressed. The town clerk claimed that ‘the town will welcome unreservedly the opening of the new motorway’.⁵¹

By the early 1970s, the building of urban motorways was coming to an end as the government acknowledged the increasing opposition to them.⁵² That opposition extended to nearly everyone whose lives would be adversely affected by a new motorway. To ameliorate this, the 1973 Land Compensation Act allowed compensation and noise insulation to be paid for properties affected by road developments and for authorities to undertake landscaping to mitigate environmental impacts. Added to this was a policy that began in 1973 of holding public consultations before a decision on the route of roads was taken. The first section taking the M4 to Cardiff and beyond was announced in September 1971. There were just 15 objections and no public inquiry. In contrast, the remaining sections, all held later, drew 57, 86 and 176 objections.⁵³ The situation in Wales was more temperate than the very angry scenes at many English inquiries that included claims that the road programme was corrupt and undemocratic. But the complaints that greeted the expansion of the M4 illustrated how differently motorways had come to be seen since the 1950s. The press reported anger and

⁵⁰ *Aberafan before and After the M4 Motorway* <http://www.aberavon-historical-friends.co.uk/beforethe%20m4.htm> (accessed: 5 January 2012).

⁵¹ *WM*, 1 April 1964, 22 July 1966.

⁵² Moran, *On Roads*, ch. 7. Simon Gunn, ‘The Buchanan Report, environment and the problem of traffic in 1960s Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22, 4 (2011), 521-42.

⁵³ Charlesworth, *History of British Motorways*, 165.

shock at how near the route went to existing homes.⁵⁴ Near Cardiff, there were fears that the motorway might cause a local reservoir to burst. Farmers highlighted how their holdings would be divided into two without any provision for crossing the new road. John Morris, before he ended up the Secretary of State that gave the go ahead for this section, claimed that the M4 would bring ‘noise and misery’ to hundreds in North Connelly.⁵⁵ To those affected, the situation seemed deeply unfair and even illogical. For example, there was some anger over the demolition of Court Farm near Cardiff. The public inquiry decided that this seventeenth-century building was more of interest to specialists than the general public. Nonetheless, the farm was listed in 1976 while the plans were ongoing, leading to the situation where the owner could not change it but Welsh Office was applying for permission to demolish it.⁵⁶ Yet some of the suggestions from other residents were perhaps less reasonable and ranged from burying the whole road in a tunnel to claiming motorways were out of date because of rising oil prices.⁵⁷ One Lisvane resident told a public inquiry that an alternative route would cause less damage to less well-to-do Llandaff North than the existing proposal would to her leafy suburb. After being told that the other route would affect far fewer properties, she replied ‘they probably don’t enjoy their gardens as much as we do’.⁵⁸ For all the complaints, the historical records suggest that the inquiry and consultation process was thorough and fair. Objections were looked at carefully.⁵⁹ Moreover, changes were made where the argument for them was sound. Thornhill interchange, although wanted by the

⁵⁴ *WM*, 11, 18 April 1974.

⁵⁵ *WM*, 8 February 1974.

⁵⁶ See Lisvane Protection Society, *News Bulletin 1976*, Glamorgan Record Office, D407/11/8.

⁵⁷ *South Wales Echo*, 10 December 1974.

⁵⁸ Hawker and Stevens, *Motorway Achievement*, 94.

⁵⁹ *Report of inquiry into M4 and Connecting Roads Scheme, Castleton to Coryton, 2 June 1977*, Glamorgan Record Office, D407/11/8.

Welsh Office, was not built because the local roads were not adequate to support it and it would increase traffic in a residential area. This left Cardiff underserved in motorway junctions but it represented a clear victory for the interests of local residents.

Far more serious than what happened along Cardiff's northern edge was what the M4's 1970s extension did to the village of Groes near Port Talbot. All of its 21 houses were demolished, although its historic round chapel was moved to another site. In stark contrast to the campaign against the flooding of the Welsh-speaking village Capel Celyn in the late 1950s, this small working-class community got little more than sympathy from outsiders. Its destruction was even signed off by its local MP, John Morris who became Secretary of State for Wales in 1974. He blamed his predecessor and said it was too late to change the route he inherited. A *Western Mail* editorial concluded 'The disturbance of existing communities is often a sad but unavoidable consequence of motorway building.'⁶⁰ Regardless of who was in power, wider economic needs took precedence over the future of any specific community.

Some of the fears of opponents of the M4 were realized. A man living by the motorway in Pontyclun complained that his sleep was disturbed by lorries. Another in Newport was afraid of a car plunging into his garden from the crash-barrierless motorway on an embankment at its bottom. Others just worried about the impact on house prices or the large road sign they could now see from their house.⁶¹ Yet the net noise, vibration and pollution effect could be neutral for areas, when compared to the slow congested pre-motorway roads before. At Port Talbot, the motorway passed within inches of some buildings, including a school where it overhung 19 foot above the playground. An inquiry, however, had decided that this would cause less noise than the existing busy road near the

⁶⁰ *WM*, 8 February, 25, 30 March 1974.

⁶¹ See the letters in TNA: BD 62/11, BD 31/4 and BD112/1/1.

school.⁶² In its earliest days, some residents living very close to the motorway said they were pleasantly surprised that there was no excessive noise. At Taibach Working Men's Club there were no complaints about vibrations, even though the road went straight over its billiards room.⁶³ Later tests showed that in areas where noise pollution from roads was severe, 10 percent of residents said there was no nuisance and 10 percent said it was minimal.⁶⁴ Such results owed much to how acclimatized people could become to traffic noise by their homes.⁶⁵ By the end of the 1970s, some householders were even cutting down trees planted to give them protection from the motorway in order to expand their gardens onto boundary land they did not own.⁶⁶

Of course, not everyone was so enamoured, especially in Port Talbot. One side of Llewellyn Street was demolished leaving the terrace opposite to look out on the underside of an elevated motorway. One resident complained of debris falling onto the street, cracked windows, a plague of dust and a view of motorway pillars. Because the road was built before 1973 they did not receive any compensation for having 'this horrendous life' inflicted upon them. He concluded that the M4 'ripped the heart out of the town'.⁶⁷ Others in the street also spoke of a sense of community being broken by the intrusion of the road and the demolition of houses. One noted how not only had one side of his street been pulled down but so too

⁶² TNA: MT 139/105.

⁶³ *South Wales Evening Post*, 23 July 1966.

⁶⁴ *Twenty Years of British Motorways: Proceedings of the Conference Held in London, 27-28 February 1980* (London, 1989), 90-1.

⁶⁵ Department of the Environment, *Report of the Urban Motorways Project Team to the Urban Motorways Committee* (London, 1973), 34.

⁶⁶ TNA: BD 112/1.

⁶⁷ *Aberafan before and After the M4 Motorway* <http://www.aberavon-historical-friends.co.uk/beforethe%20m4.htm> (accessed: 5 January 2012).

had his school and chapel.⁶⁸ In as early as 1971, the British Road Federation was using Port Talbot to illustrate how urban motorways could be done badly, with rows of huge pillars that were unsympathetic to their surroundings and large ‘unsightly and depressing’ concrete embankments. It noted how views of motorways could be a constant distraction and reminder of the noise and pollution.⁶⁹ Similarly, a 1973 report noted how elevated roads gave a sense of ‘psychological severance’.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, in 1970, 38 of the 55 remaining houses in Llewellyn Street still had at least one occupier who had been there a decade earlier.⁷¹ Thus, despite the entirely different environment of the street, the majority of residents did not move away. People get used to roads; their noise quickly becomes an unnoticed part of the background for all but those closest to them. Moran is right that roads ‘are not a concrete napalm that renders all human life around them unbearable.’⁷² In the Port Talbot area, the motorway was perhaps not the most serious of people’s environmental worries when there was a huge steelworks on their doorstep, while at nearby Baglan there was a petrochemical plant that gave out ‘dense clouds of foul oily-black smoke’⁷³

The visual intrusion of motorways was inescapable but there were ways of making it more acceptable. Designers and engineers had always been concerned about the impact of the motorways on landscapes, even if they did not always agree on what was suitable.⁷⁴ Landscape architects in the 1950s had tried, with a degree of success, to influence motorway construction through planting trees and shrubs alongside the roads. The idea was to screen

⁶⁸ *Passion in Port Talbot*, BBC television, June 2011

⁶⁹ British Road Federation, *Motorways in the Urban Environment* (London, 1971), 46, 47.

⁷⁰ Department of the Environment, *Report of the Urban Motorways Project Team*, 19.

⁷¹ Aberavon Register of Electors, 1960 and 1970.

⁷² Moran, *On Roads*, 239.

⁷³ *WM*, 7 February 1974.

⁷⁴ Peter Merriman, *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-historical Geography of England’s M1 Motorway* (Oxford, 2007), ch. 4.

the unsightly but to also give a sense of flow, to stop the driver becoming bored but without distracting him or her.⁷⁵ The Royal Fine Art Commission was consulted on the design of bridges and even requested that the bridge railings on the Calidcot to Caerwent road be painted a dark blue-grey or green-gray colour.⁷⁶ Yet, in some towns, a different colour paint was not going to help a motorway blend in. No matter how used people got to a road, no matter how accepting many of them were about it being built in the first place, motorways did bring huge changes to people's lives that were not always for the better.

III

New motorways always brought vague talk of 'enormous' social and economic benefits but precisely what these were was always open to debate. The two main rationales for motorways were the economic impacts and the relief of congestion elsewhere. The latter was not straightforward. Motorways changed the flow of traffic within towns, harming life for some, improving it for others.⁷⁷ When the Port Talbot bypass opened the impact on traffic in the town was noticeable within a few hours. Yet the local authority was noting that if the motorway reduced traffic in the town by the estimated 40 percent, the benefit could be lost within four years if traffic continued to grow by nearly ten percent a year.⁷⁸ Everywhere, urban traffic speeds increased in the 1960s and 70s thanks to better road layouts, planning and controls.⁷⁹ That, together with people's preference for using the motorway over town

⁷⁵ Peter Merriman, "A new look at the English landscape': landscape architecture, movement and the aesthetics of motorways in early postwar Britain', *Cultural Geographies*, 13, 1 (2006), 78-105.

⁷⁶ TNA: BP 2/275.

⁷⁷ *WM*, 22 December 1977.

⁷⁸ *South Wales Evening Post*, 23 July 1966. *WM*, 22 July 1966.

⁷⁹ Starkie, *The Motorway Age*, ch. 6.

roads, meant that some of the fears being expressed did not quite emerge and Port Talbot never returned to the congestion that characterized the town before the M4.

Nonetheless, both the Port Talbot and Newport motorway bypasses soon became congestion problems in themselves, as two lanes turned out to be insufficient to cope with demand and even dangerous. Part of the problem was local traffic using the bypasses for short journeys, something which motorways were not intended for but which was encouraged by the relatively large number of junctions used in early designs.⁸⁰ The Newport bypass thus had to be widened in 1980-1, just thirteen years after it opened. The Severn Bridge faced similar problems. The annual flow over it increased from 5.83m in its first year to 10.58m in 1976, an increase twice the national rise in traffic levels. Such levels of use meant more repairs than had been anticipated and 1977 saw maintenance work reduce the flow to one lane each way, causing significant further delays. The bridge began to develop a reputation as a bottleneck, especially in the summer when the numbers crossing could be more than seventy percent higher than in January. It shifted from being seen as something that was opening Wales up for economic development to a barrier against new opportunities.⁸¹

The economic benefits of motorways were also not straightforward. This was partly because people did not behave in ways that might be expected. Port Talbot may have hoped for more shoppers by reducing its congestion but its bypass also made it easier for people to get to bigger shopping centres elsewhere.⁸² A survey estimated in 1973 that the average numbers of crossings of the Severn Bridge for people living within thirty miles of it was around three a year, which, it noted, ‘scarcely constitutes a dramatic change in the pattern of life’. No drastic variations in shopping patterns emerged, although people’s leisure’s choices

⁸⁰ *WM*, 7 February 1974. *South Wales Echo*, 3 May 1977.

⁸¹ *Financial Times*, 8 December 1977.

⁸² *WM*, 27 July 1966. *Financial Times*, 13 September 1966. *South Wales Argus*, 6 September 1966.

were affected and the Brecon Beacons National Park, for example, reported that the bridge substantially increased its visitor numbers, while Bristol's zoo, shops and theatres reported significant new numbers of Welsh visitors on Saturdays.⁸³ Yet drivers were not always switching to new motorways. Some avoided the Severn Bridge altogether to avoid its tolls, although this lessened with escalating petrol prices in 1970s. Even in 1963, traffic on the Ross spur had not reached expectations with some lorry drivers not wanting to sacrifice their usual regular stops on their usual route from the Midlands to south Wales for a 'long belt down the motorway'.⁸⁴

Even for industry the economic impact of the Severn Bridge was not as straightforward as it might first seem. Less freight was moved by rail and companies who already traded across the estuary increased their business but for the majority of firms on both sides of the bridge trade with their immediate region and other parts of the UK was more important, limiting the impact. However, for distribution companies the impact was more dramatic and companies now had more choice over where they sourced their supplies from. These new distribution patterns led to 40 redundancies in the south-west and 166 in south Wales. There was an assumption that the bridge had made Wales more attractive as a place for investment, not least because managers could move around more easily.⁸⁵ But the impact of this may have been to increase Wales' reliance on branch plants, something which was a structural weakness because in times of contraction these factories closed first. Moreover, it was difficult to disaggregate the impact of the bridge from the impact of the development grants available in Wales. It also seemed likely that the bridge had benefitted Bristol as much

⁸³ Cleary & Thomas, *Economic Consequences*, 34, 39, 103. Welsh Office, *M4/A55 Study: The Effects of Major Road Investment Schemes in Wales* (Cardiff, 1981). *The Times*, 10 October 1966.

⁸⁴ *WM*, 2 May 1963.

⁸⁵ Cleary & Thomas, *Economic Consequences*, 62, 98, 100. 98

as south Wales. Some organizations moved their regional headquarters from Wales to Bristol following the bridge's opening and economists argued that Bristol benefitted as site for investment because motorway links brought the mountains of Wales within easy distance.⁸⁶ Before the bridge opened, there had been fears that the economic impact would be negative rather than positive since it might open up Wales to competition from the west country.⁸⁷ This drew on the assumption that there was finite amount of trade and developments in one place would be to the detriment of neighbours. Roads thus became entwined with civic rivalries. The press began to talk of battles between towns, as advertising campaigns were staged to tempt visitors and shoppers across the bridge and resentment and suspicions grew of developments, plans and state assistance on both sides of the border.⁸⁸ Overall, economists were uncertain of the bridge's precise benefits to the economy given fluctuating costs, wider economic conditions and traffic levels but early 1970s estimates were anything from £99.8m to £273m.⁸⁹

Such figures were always open to interpretation because they relied on valuing time saved and estimating savings on vehicle maintenance from better roads. Although both government and industrialists argued that road links were key to industrial development, the hard evidence that the motorway network was decisive in where industry located was less certain and contemporary investigations now argued for more limited benefits.⁹⁰ A study in 1978-9 found that local authorities, unions and the NCB all welcomed the M4's impact on travel times. In Gwent, 84 percent of small manufacturing firms said the M4 had increased

⁸⁶ Martin Boddy, John Lovering and Keith Bassett, *Sunbelt City? A Study of Economic Growth in Britain's M4 Growth Corridor* (Oxford, 1986), 125, 164.

⁸⁷ *Guardian*, 18 February 1965.

⁸⁸ For example, *WM*, 15 July 1966. Boddy et al, *Sunbelt City?*, 174, 163.

⁸⁹ Cleary & Thomas, *Economic Consequences*, 104-5

⁹⁰ Starkie, *Motorway Age*, 7, 143. Charlesworth, *History of British Motorways*, ch. 12.

business, but under half of large manufacturing companies reported that it had had any impact on their volume of business. Although there was a consensus that road links mattered for economic development, the motorway could not be a magic solution on its own and was part of a wider pattern of influences such as government support and the availability of labour and sites that decided on industrial development.⁹¹ Nonetheless, when the impacts on construction, manufacturing and tourism were put together, economists were still talking of the bridge and associated motorways creating more than 14,000 jobs in their first five years.⁹² Yet, the benefits from the M4 for south Wales were geographically concentrated. There were fears in the valleys that the road to its south was too far away to help its own economic needs.⁹³ That in itself was an echo of contemporary fears that motorway developments in the Midlands and south-east England were harming more peripheral economic regions such as south Wales.⁹⁴

The Economist noted in 1978 that Cardiff was only 150 miles from London and 100 miles from Birmingham,

which is not far at all. Only a dozen years ago it seemed immeasurably distant. The building of motorways to Britain's political and commercial capital, and to its industrial centre as well, has broken that false isolation forever. South Wales has gained its rightful place in the British and for that matter the European, context. It is not at the centre of things – not unless you happen to live there, that is – but it not too far out either.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Welsh Office, *M4/A55 Study*, 11.

⁹² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Impact of Transport Infrastructure Investment on Regional Development* (Paris, 2002), 80-8.

⁹³ *WM*, 8 February 1974.

⁹⁴ Merriman, *Driving Spaces*, 189.

⁹⁵ *Economist*, 18 November 1978.

The case for the M4's economic benefits were based on the fact that it integrated the Welsh economy further into the wider UK, something which had been a goal of Welsh economic policy throughout the post-war period.⁹⁶ *The Guardian* was quite right in noting that nothing 'would do more in the short-term to promote the unity of the nation than the swift completion of the first thousands miles of motorway and the detailed planning of the second thousand.'⁹⁷ But not everyone wanted a unified Britain. It could also be argued that successive governments' concentration on bringing industry to Wales was at the expense of developing a self-sustaining Welsh economy. Some nationalists certainly regarded the Severn bridge as another force for the further Anglicization of Wales because it increased Wales' reliance on English trade and reduced the physical barrier between the two nations. In one of its periodic attempts to gain publicity, the maverick Free Wales Army even threatened to blow the bridge up.⁹⁸

Nationalist concerns were not groundless. The landscape, architecture, and flora/fauna of motorways were no different in Wales than England. Roads and driving, with their signage, rules and conventions, were a strong common experience across Britain, and part of the everyday practices that help sustain an assumed sense of national identity.⁹⁹ Yet that sense of integration that motorways helped sustain was still within the confines of symbolic difference. Crossing a major bridge gave a sense of occasion to entering and leaving Wales. Moreover, once over the border, the Welsh road signs, bilingual but conforming to UK designs, showed Wales to be British but at the same time other. The M4 had been built

⁹⁶ *HC Deb*, 24 April 1975, vol 890 c1886.

⁹⁷ *Guardian*, 18 February 1965. Cf. *South Wales Argus*, 8 September 1966.

⁹⁸ National Library of Wales: Letter from Patriotic Front, 31 August 1966, Harri Webb Papers H7/1. *WM*, 23 July 1966. *New Statesman*, 5 August 1966.

⁹⁹ Tim Edensor, 'Automobility and national identity: representation, geography and driving practice', *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, 4–5 (2004), 101–20, 113.

against a backdrop of debates about the use of the Welsh language on road signs. This had long been a goal of language campaigners and a controversial issue that the Welsh Office had been reluctant to get too involved in. Bilingual road signs were more symbolic than anything but they were seen by campaigners as an important marker of status for the language at a time when the number of speakers was in decline and persistent claims that Welsh was old-fashioned and unsuitable for the modern world. The 1967 Welsh Language Act, which theoretically gave Welsh and English equal status in public life, meant there was a case for the use of Welsh on signs, something which was gradually implemented, but throughout the 1970s there were arguments over which language should come first. On the grounds of cost and road safety some opposed any use of Welsh at all. Research did suggest that putting Welsh first slowed drivers down even if they spoke the language, so the Secretary of State for Wales decided that English should be first.¹⁰⁰ That was not popular and the Conservative government elected in 1979 allowed local authorities to decide which language came first. This meant that as the M4 left West Glamorgan and entered Dyfed, Carmarthen and Caerfyrddin switched orders, a symbolic statement that in the west linguistic cultures were different (although not everyone realized that such names were translations).¹⁰¹

Whichever language came first, bilingual signs were a visible symbol to visitors and locals that Wales had its own culture and identity. Despite the arguments of some social scientists that motorway drivers are detached from the places they pass, motorways do

¹⁰⁰ *Economist*, 25 June 1977. Johnes, *Wales since 1939*, ch. 8. Peter Merriman and Rhys Jones, 'Symbols of justice': the Welsh Language Society's campaign for bilingual road signs in Wales, 1967-1980', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 35, 2 (2009), 350-75.

¹⁰¹ The author of one guidebook to sites on the M4 confessed to thinking that the Abertawe and Swansea on M4 signs were different places. Mike Jackson, *M4 Sights Guide* (Worcester, 2005), 5.

contribute to a sense of place.¹⁰² This may not be very specific because motorways are a blur of places passed by at speed by drivers' focussing on the traffic around them. Instead, the meaning of motorways often lies in their length and entirety rather than any specific spot. To travel down the M4 was to see south Wales; everything from castles to country houses and steelworks to government office blocks were clearly visible, even to a driver concentrating on the road. In 1964, one travel writer said of the Ross spur motorway that led to Wales: 'These new motorways, though in themselves bare and purely functional, certainly take one into the hinterland of the countryside, much as canals and rivers do, avoiding villages and towns. They have therefore a peculiar charm for one sees, as it were, the 'back' of the country, from quite a different angle.'¹⁰³ On a wider level, the simple existence of the road changed people's mental geographies of distances, even contributing to a sense that Wales itself was not so remote.¹⁰⁴ Yet there was no monolithic experience of the M4. Familiarity with the road, weather, traffic conditions and the presence of passengers all vary the experience.¹⁰⁵ Commutes are integrated into the routines of people's lives, a time to think, listen to music or talk.¹⁰⁶ Landmarks could have specific meanings for individuals, a marker of how far it is to home or the place that a child always jokes about.¹⁰⁷ Yet these were relatively minor differences and still exist within the confines of the road itself and the traffic controls and

¹⁰² On the isolation of drivers see John Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies* (London, 2000), 63. For a discussion see Merriman, 'Automobility and the geographies of the car', 589. Also see Edensor, 'Automobility and national identity' and Peter Merriman, 'Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-places, and the geographies of England's M1 motorway', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21, 4-5 (2004), 145-67.

¹⁰³ BB, *Summer Road to Wales* (London, 1964), 10.

¹⁰⁴ Memories of listeners sent to *Jamie & Louise*, BBC Radio Wales, 9 August 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Merriman, 'Automobility and the geographies of the car', 590.

¹⁰⁶ Tim Edensor, 'M6 – junction 19–16: refamiliarizing the mundane roadscape', *Space and Culture* 6, 2 (2003), 151-68.

¹⁰⁷ Merriman, 'Driving places', 161.

customs that govern how a motorway is travelled. The M4 thus still became embedded in many people's perception of the region they lived in or visited, a common experience and place that helped them understand what south Wales was.

The motorway's integration into the mental landscape of south Wales was of course gradual because the road itself was built in sections. This also lessened the cultural shock for users that occurred when long sections of motorway were suddenly opened in England. In their earliest days, there was something of euphoria about motorways, in their modernity, their potential for speed and in the exoticness of driving on them.¹⁰⁸ In Wales, in contrast, until the late 1970s the motorway was just a series of short lengths, often with congestion at each end. People may have been able to bypass Newport and Port Talbot by the end of the 1960s but they were soon back on the old A48. Part of the Port Talbot bypass was even limited to 50 mph because of its sharp bends. There were not even any service stations in Wales until 1983. The shorter length did not mean that motorway driving was not an experience that people had to get used to. In 1963, the manager of Strensham services on the M5 told a Welsh newspaper that trade was not what was expected: 'People need to be educated about these new roads. They still are afraid of the speeds you can travel at.'¹⁰⁹ Motorways did bring new widespread anxieties about how drivers would behave.¹¹⁰ Yet most people did drive safely and sensibly. Following the opening of one new section in 1978, police reported that drivers were behaving well beyond some hogging of the middle lane and getting frustrated at lorries.¹¹¹ That year, the police reported less than one speeding offence per police shift when monitoring a temporary 50 mph limit during widening work on the

¹⁰⁸ Moran, *On Roads*, 27-8.

¹⁰⁹ *WM*, 2 May 1963.

¹¹⁰ *South Wales Evening Post*, 22 July 1966. For such fears in England see Merriman, *Driving Spaces*, ch. 5.

¹¹¹ *South Wales Echo*, 24 January 1978.

Tredegar Park to Coldra section.¹¹² Between 1977 and 1985, just 18 of the 872 fatalities and 872 of the 41,305 injuries on south Wales roads were on the M4.¹¹³ This was despite the M4 hosting 12 percent of all traffic in Wales by 1984.¹¹⁴

IV

Those involved in the construction of the M4 were proud of their achievements.¹¹⁵ They were not alone. A 1978 inquiry into service stations found many staff who were proud of offering a public service. It noted, for example, that a breakdown unit cleared the Severn Bridge on average three times a day ‘with such resource and courage as any Commando leader would be proud of’.¹¹⁶ Yet for most people the M4 was a less considered addition to their lives, even if they drove along it every day. Few reflected on quite how much the road had changed south Wales. Indeed, by 1980 motorway specialists seemed a little annoyed that the achievements and benefits of the network were not acclaimed.¹¹⁷ Most of the population of south Wales must have used the M4 at some point. Indeed, it made it possible to live in one place but work some distance away (although the liberty the road brought was, of course, still limited by external traffic and road conditions).¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, driving on the M4 still became part of the physical and mental contours of life in south Wales, even if people rarely

¹¹² TNA: BD 112/1/2.

¹¹³ South Wales Constabulary, *Chief Constable Reports* (Cardiff Central Library).

¹¹⁴ Calculated from data in John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics, 1974-96* (Cardiff, 1998), 109.

¹¹⁵ *In The Second Crossing*, supplement in *WM*, 5 June 1996.

¹¹⁶ Peter J. Prior (chairman), *Report of the Inquiry into Motorway Service Areas* (London, 1978), 21.

¹¹⁷ *Twenty Years of British Motorways: Proceedings of the Conference*.

¹¹⁸ A point noted by social scientists who study transport. See Merriman, ‘Automobility and the geographies of the car’. Jörg Beckmann, ‘Automobility: a social problem and theoretical concept’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 19 (2001), 593-607.

reflected on that. If there were collective stories about motorways they were not so much about driving on the motorway but about what its coming did to communities, whether that was the physical, aesthetic and sensory intrusion of an urban stretch or how being located near an exit transformed quiet rural villages or suburbs into commuter belts.

Acknowledging such impacts has shifted transport history from its traditional whiggish emphasis on a series of developments, each better than the last.¹¹⁹ The harmful rather than liberating effect of transport might most obviously be true for those who lived in the way of or near new roads but motorways also have environmental consequences that affected everyone. An early awareness of this came in 1966 when one writer worried about the impact of noise from the new Severn Bridge on the estuary's fish and wildfowl.¹²⁰ But until the late 1970s such environmental concerns were marginal voices and even now the pollution and physical intrusion of the road across the south Wales landscape is normally considered secondary to the social and economic benefits of easier travel; it could be decades before we appreciate the true environmental cost of the dependency on cars that emerged in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Yet motorways also mark how transient some issues are. The acute congestion that the M4 relieved in some towns only existed at certain times of the day and for the relatively short period between the rapid growth of the motorcars in the 1950s and whenever in the next two decades the relevant stretch of motorway opened. Thus understanding why the motorway mattered is a question of historical specificities rather than more profound long-term trends.

Nonetheless, the M4 still offers a window into mid twentieth-century Wales. It illustrates the impacts of administrative devolution, something which prioritized the needs of Wales but without always bringing the means to act upon this. It demonstrates how economic

¹¹⁹ John Armstrong, 'Transport history, 1945-1995: the rise of a topic to maturity', *Journal of Transport History*, 19, 2 (1998), 103-21, 114.

¹²⁰ J. C. V. Pryce, *The Severn Bridge* (St Briavels, 1966), 24.

policy remained wedded to integrating Wales into the UK economy rather than on emphasising the development of a sustainable and freestanding economic base. The limited opposition to this policy direction was however based on cultural rather than economic grounds, a key reason why the nationalist movement failed to make significant headway. The motorway also shows how remarkably tolerant people in the 1950 and 60s were of the demands modernization could place upon their lives. This was probably a good thing since there was little they could actually do to stop the motorway revolution but the government did at least take their concerns seriously and relatively compassionately. In England, this tolerance faded at the end of the 1960s but vocal opposition in Wales remained relatively mute. The impact of the M4 may not have been as straightforward as initially anticipated but its importance was assumed and it was accepted as integral to the modernization of a region still coping with the legacy of nineteenth-century industrialization. But perhaps the biggest historical insight the motorway offers is simply how aspects of life became so much simpler and easier over the course of the mid twentieth century. Simply getting from one place to another was now quicker, smoother and less frustrating. And for that reason alone, the M4 is one of the most important developments in the recent history of Wales.