

## Dictionary of National Biography

### Chief Constable Mowbray Lee Sant

**Sant, Mowbray Lees** (1863–1943), police officer, was born in London on 18 December 1863, the second but only surviving son (there were five daughters) of James Sant (1820–1916), portrait and genre painter, and his wife, Eliza, *née* Thomson (1833–1907). Educated at Charterhouse, he was commissioned in the 5th battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers in 1885, and married in 1889 Annie Marguerite Alicia (1866–1953), third daughter of Chesborough Macdonald of Queensland, Australia, with whom he had twin daughters. He was promoted captain in 1892 and was adjutant of the 3rd battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers until his retirement in 1898, when he joined the reserve, and gained some police experience through working in the office of the chief constable of Northumberland.

In September 1899 Sant became chief constable of Surrey, having been selected from fifty-one applicants. He was only the second head of the force of about 230 men, his predecessor Captain Henry Cadogan Hastings having held the position since the establishment of the county constabulary in 1851. At the time of Sant's appointment the Surrey local authorities were receiving complaints about the 'undue speed' and recklessness ('scorching') with which motor cars were being driven through the towns and villages of a still predominantly rural county. Traversed by major routes out of London to the south coast, Surrey was particularly exposed to incursions of the capital's wealthy 'automobilists', exploiting the capacities of their expensive new machines. Sant's response to this novel policing problem earned him a reputation as 'motoring's arch-persecutor' (Barty-King, 42). In October 1899 his consultations with chief constables and police superintendents in neighbouring counties and boroughs produced a practically unanimous response in favour of additional regulation. In June 1900 he issued an order to his superintendents to tackle the problem of reckless drivers, recommending that pairs of constables monitor sections of roads where speeding would be dangerous, and to stop offenders. He urged that motor vehicles should be made identifiable by a number attached to every car (a requirement that was made law in 1903), since the worst offenders often evaded prosecution by failing to stop, or giving false names and addresses to his officers.

In 1901 Sant was quoted as saying that he would stop speeding motorists 'at any cost' (*Daily Mail*, 11 July 1901), and elsewhere stated the intention of his force to 'check' those motor drivers 'who are making the highways of the county unsafe for the general body of the public' (Surrey county council reports, 1902, 725). Between 1904 and 1905 prosecutions in Surrey for reckless or dangerous driving, or breaking speed limits, substantially exceeded those in any other county in the United Kingdom. In November 1905 he told the royal commission on motor cars that owners of cars should be made responsible for the

transgressions of their chauffeurs, and that photographs should be attached to driving licences. He defended the existing 20 m.p.h. speed limit, even though he acknowledged that on certain stretches of road 50 m.p.h. might be safe. His own experiences of inconsiderate motorists in the Guildford area—whom he reckoned at a quarter of the drivers on a typical Sunday—were that they failed to slow down when passing, or allow room for other road-users (he was reduced to shaking his fist at a driver who nearly forced him and a cycling companion into a ditch), and tooted persistently at anything that hindered their claim to monopolize the middle of the road. The road dust thrown up by motor vehicles obliged cottagers to keep their front windows shut, and prevented children playing outside; he also feared class antagonism, having witnessed the resentment of a group of working men pedestrians at being enveloped in a ‘pea-soup fog’ by a passing motorist. Critics attacked his ‘crusade against motorists’ (*Surrey Times*, 8 July 1905), and national newspapers condemned his ‘motorphobia’, but the chief constable was generally supported by the Surrey press (Durrant, 30–31).

Sant gained convictions by use of speed controls (or ‘traps’, as they were stigmatized) along measured quarter-mile stretches of road, with a constable at one end signalling the passing of a car, while another at the other end recorded the time on a stopwatch. Since magistrates were reluctant to convict other than on evidence from long stretches of relatively open road, this dictated the position of the speed traps, which were then criticized by motoring organizations for penalizing drivers in places where speeding presented no immediate danger. Some alleged that the heavy fines raised were a form of taxation. In correspondence with Stenson Cooke, secretary of the Automobile Association (AA), Sant justified the traps as instilling ‘into the minds of drivers of motor-cars the feeling that at any moment they exceed the limit of speed allowed by law they may be detected and called upon to answer for it’ (*The Times*, 5 March 1908). The practice of AA patrolmen warning their members about the location of speed controls led to a succession of roadside skirmishes between the Surrey police and the scouts. Sant regarded the AA tactics as a deliberate interference with the duties of the police. After some legal setbacks he gained his point in October 1909 when the appeal court upheld (*Betts v. Stevens*) the conviction for obstruction of an AA patrolman who had signalled to drivers of motor cars bearing the association's badge that they were approaching a police control at the top of Rodborough Hill, on the Portsmouth road near Godalming.

After 1910 Sant's conflict with the automobile subsided, partly because tarred roads reduced the problem of dust. He became concerned, instead, at the demands made by motor traffic on police resources. As early as 1909 he suggested the recruitment of a special staff to regulate and control cars, so that the police could concentrate on their prime duties of keeping the peace, and the prevention and detection of crime. Complaining in the 1920s that over a third of his officers might be on traffic duty at any one time, he advocated a force of road wardens under the Ministry of Transport, and won over a conference of chief constables in 1928. He acknowledged that motoring offences brought the normally law-abiding public into conflict with the police, and made them less likely to help the police in their crime detection work.

This consideration may explain why his earlier battles with motorists were not mentioned in his retirement tributes or obituary; the constabulary's historian in the mid-twentieth century set them out in detail, but depicted Sant's outlook as 'Victorian' (Durrant, 52)

Sant himself regarded the First World War, when large numbers of troops were billeted in Surrey and Canadians awaiting demobilization rioted at Witley in 1919, as the most challenging period of his service. Initially slow to tackle the low pay of his men, he caused resentment by his advice to them not to use the weekly rest day introduced in 1914 improperly. After the war he encouraged sport within the force, establishing competitions for cricket and marksmanship. A stickler for smartness and drill, he nevertheless trusted his subordinates, bringing in Scotland Yard during a murder case only once, in 1906, to no effect, after which he relied on his own superintendents to investigate serious crimes. He was awarded the king's police medal in 1925, and retired in December 1930. Required as chief constable to live within two miles of the constabulary headquarters at Guildford, Sant settled at Shalford, where he died at his home, the Red House, on 14 June 1943. He was buried in Shalford cemetery.

M. C. Curthoys

### Sources

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### Wealth at death

£5460 2s. 10d.: probate, 26 Nov 1943, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

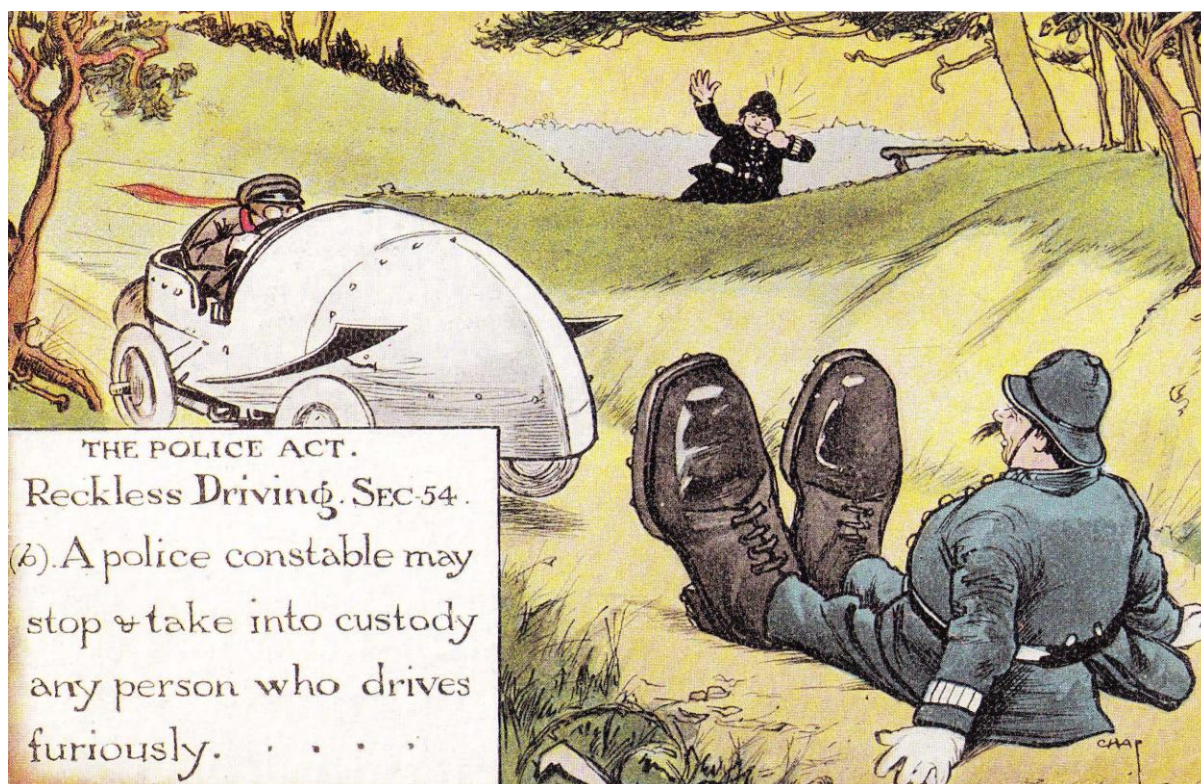
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## The Beginning of the Modern Age<sup>1</sup>



The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the development of the motor car and a running battle between the Chief Constable and motoring organisations about speeding drivers and cyclists along with the need for some form of index plate.<sup>2</sup>

**1900 8 June: Captain Sant** the Chief Constable (of Surrey) issued General Order 451 “Having given cyclists and motor car drivers due notice, I am now anxious to take such steps as may be practicable to put an end to the nuisance and danger caused by reckless riders and drivers and show them that the warnings were not idle ones. --- I leave it in your hands to take what action you may consider necessary, but I would suggest if possible you place two constables (two together one in uniform and out of sight and one in plain clothes) at intervals so that if any motors are driven too fast or cyclists ride at a dangerous pace one set of

<sup>1</sup> From RF Bartlett Surrey-Constabulary.com

<sup>2</sup> Picture from John Molyneux

constables could signal to the other to stop the offender ---.”<sup>3</sup> These men should only be placed on points on the road such as villages, hills etc., where rapid travelling would be dangerous, and where there are many inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

**1902 15 October: The Scotsman: The Regulation of Automobiles:** At the Surrey Quarter Sessions Kingston-on-Thames yesterday the Earl of Onslow proposed the following resolution: “That in the opinion of this Court it is in the interests of the public that the police should in their efforts to secure the observance of the regulations as to light locomotives on the highways, devote their attentions to preventing danger to passengers and traffic from the fast driving of motor cars in villages and populous places and around sharp corners rather than securing any fixed maximum of speed regardless of traffic and other conditions.” Lord Onslow in criticising the actions of the Surrey police said they often acted in an underhand way to obtain convictions against motorists. On a show of hands the resolution was lost by a large majority.

**1903 Motor Car Act** introduced the mandatory Vehicle registration of all motor cars with the county council or county borough council in which the driver was to reside (RTA 1934 raised to 30). The act followed the [Locomotives on Highways Act 1896](#) which had increased the speed limit for motorcars to 14 mph from previous 4 mph speed limit in rural area and 2 mph in towns. There were some who wished to see the speed limit removed altogether. The influential [Automobile Club](#) (soon to become the Royal Automobile Club or RAC) was split on the subject; the chair of the working group on the Bill was [Lord Montagu](#) (MP) who took a moderate line supporting speed limits, but was opposed on this by the chairman of the organisation Roger Wallace who were 'strongly against any speed limit' and described Montagu as a 'traitor'. The secretary of the club publicly proposed a 'compromise' of 25 mph without authorisation. Parliamentary debates were described as 'bitter'.<sup>5</sup>

**1905 June:** Edward Priestly Letter to the editor taken from **The Surrey Herald:** “Sir, Let me make an appeal to the inhabitants of Egham and Englefield Green with regard to their toleration of the most selfish and wicked tyranny that has ever been inflicted on the people of this country by the rich. I mean of course “**the motor curse**”. Surely, the owners of motorcars have committed enough murders.... Everywhere I find indignation, but the people have become slaves of a formula “the motor car has come to stay”. Twenty miles an hour is a monstrous pace to legalise on our roads, and the people should see to it, that no motorcar capable of going at a greater speed than ten miles per hour is allowed to run. To fix any legal limit without rendering a greater pace impossible is quite futile, for the motor car has revealed an amount of heartless scoundrelism in the country of which we had no previous notion.” I am sir etc. George M Minchin

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<sup>3</sup> Off Beat February 1978

<sup>4</sup> Durrant Page 33

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia

**1905** At the beginning of the 20th century motorists were keen to test out their new and increasingly powerful motorcars. A new police chief had been appointed in Surrey, and the **AA** was formed by motoring enthusiasts to **protect the interests** of their fellow **road users** from what they saw as **persecution** of motorists. Chief Constable Captain H M Sant, was overly enthusiastic in enforcing the **first speed limit for roads** that had been introduced in 1905, and set about establishing regular **police speed traps** along straight stretches of road to catch speeding motorists. The AA encamped a safe distance ahead of the traps to **warn motorists** in Godalming, Wisley and Cobham, and much of Captain Sant's effort was duly thwarted. As the diary of the Bow-Wows Motor Cycle Club reported in 1914 "Motorists proceeded quietly to Godalming where a halt was called to see everyone safely through the trap which was observed to be working with its usual weekend vigour."

**1907 November 28 The Scotsman:** Motorist fined for **attempting to bribe** a policeman: At Surrey Assizes yesterday William Nelson Barmborough of Prince's Hotel, Jermyn Street, London, an American, was fined £60 for having attempted to bribe Constable Miles Surrey Constabulary after the constable had stopped the defendant's motor for excessive speed.

**1908 June 29: the Times:** Lord Russell was summoned at the Guildford County Petty Sessions for having driven a motor car at Thursley at a **greater speed than 20 mph**. Sergeant Stevens stated the defendant's speed was thirty six miles per hour and he ran over a dog. The driver had previous speeding convictions and was fined £10.

**1908 July 29: The Times:** Summoned for **perjury**: PC Thomas Edwards and PC James Butler of the **Surrey Constabulary** were charged with perjury following a case of speeding. The case was defended by the force as this was a part of a campaign by the influential and the motoring organisations against speed enforcement. Both charges were dismissed.

**1910:** Guildford Watch Committee was receiving complaints about **speeding motor vehicles**.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> They Guarded Guildford by Richard Ford Surrey 1969 internal publication Surrey Constabulary