

A361 - A road of some character

The A361 is a road with a short but chequered past. Under 25 years ago, Barnstaple and the M5 motorway - 40 miles apart as the windswept crow flies - were, automotively speaking, as disparate as chalk and cheese. Separating them were roads never worth contemplating in a hurry: a Hobson's choice of winding routes through rural Devon embracing Witheridge and South Molton, or the town and country contrasts of CREDITON and the scenic Taw valley. As traffic and delays grew, and Bideford, Barnstaple and beyond fretted, the new A361 became antidote and saviour. Sweeping across Exmoor's southern fringes, its wide ribbon of distinctly open-plan tarmac linked north west Devon to latter-day civilisation, securing prosperity and development in a previously remote corner of the peninsula.

Pausing in a lay-by high above Tiverton brings time to reflect on the brief but chequered history of the road known colloquially - though hardly affectionately - as the 'North Devon Link.' Up here, horizons are shimmeringly distant, skylscapes powerful, the views expansive. An occasional Buzzard hangs on the ever-present wind, eyeing the ever-present, fast moving traffic, vainly searching Devon's widest open spaces for a vantage point on which to rest. Swooping up hill and down dale, in a schizophrenic mixture of peaks and troughs, this is a road of endless deceptive contrasts - an instant qualification for its place within Devon's Country Mile.

This innovative project has brought the County's highway engineering and road safety staff together with Police, Safety Camera Partnership, Fire and Ambulance services in a concerted bid to analyse, understand and improve rural road safety. Jeremy Phillips, the county's road safety operations manager, knows the road's unique problems well: "Its a lot about speed, overtaking, following distances, the mixture of vehicles - many of them HGV's - and the wide open spaces," he says. "There are 55 laybys on this road - more per mile than anywhere else in the County - but with so little to attract attention, theres no reason to rest. Police and mobile safety camera units report plenty of drivers exceeding the mandatory 60mph limit... but most have driven a long way before using the North Devon Link... they're just pressing on to journey's end - as quickly as possible"

Incidents on this road tend to be major and high profile - one good reason the County Council has systematically filed vast amounts of accident data, stretching back many years. This is now being complemented by a detailed flow of real-time vehicle, speed and separation distance information, automatically derived from recently installed sensors and software. Its a unique information databank, turning Devon's A361 into Britain's best-documented and most-analysed road - one more reason for its leading role in the Country Mile Project.

At County Hall, Road Safety Data Analysis and Intelligence Officer Matt Edmunds views screens of newly accessible information, emanating from a growing collection of lonely roadside sensors. "I already know how much traffic travels along the road every hour, day or night, and its average speed,"

he says, "...including vehicle types: motorcycles, cars, multi-axled HGV's and so on." Vehicle-by-vehicle information is recorded on some stretches - even including the weather at the time. He also knows the highest speeds being reached, where - and when: "Monday is the fastest day: between 5 and 7 in the morning I'm seeing some surprising speeds," he continues, "...and evenings after 7 they're going quite quickly too." Speed is already acknowledged as crucial in North Devon Link road incidents, but Edmunds is aware of another key factor: "I can now see following distances," he says, "Motorcycles are worst: there are lots above 80 miles an hour, some above a hundred - and most are following much too closely. Its scary."

Sharing such data amongst Country Mile project partners opened a new chapter in enforcement methods, particularly for excess speed and inappropriate following distances. All parties agree that driver communication, education and possible road infrastructure improvements remain important, but new, data-led intelligence allows deeper insight into long-appreciated trends: many accidents involve 'out-of-county' drivers for instance, 40% are close following "shunts," a third take place in darkness, another third in the wet. The weather, indeed, is a driver-challenging wild card on the A361, where conditions change fast: quite suddenly, sunshine fades, visibility drops, mist lingers, rain falls, wind blows, ice forms.

This is a rare piece of road, eternally populated by a sobering mix of local and long distance, big and small, faster and slower traffic. Speed and wide open spaces are laid bare by the data, emerging as dangerous bedfellows, aided and abetted by fractious weather, unfamiliar territory, wide grey tarmac and distant horizons, endless white paint and few junctions or signs. The North Devon Link road is deception personified, and though the Country Mile partner agencies each operate from a different perspective, there's unanimous concern for improved safety - on a road whose ill-starred reputation long since entered local folklore.

Sharing real-world expertise and comprehensive new data has invigorated ongoing safety work, bringing closer understanding of real problems - and new opportunities to address them. "Though theres plenty more to look at, speed is a key problem on this road," says Jeremy Philips. "We're constantly looking at how to remind drivers to check their speed - to stay within their vehicle's own particular speed limit, and speed limits generally - and apply common sense in using speed wisely to reflect changing conditions. Traffic queues build like changes in the weather on the A361: a speed culture of 'choose, set and forget' has absolutely no place on this road..."

Underpinning Devon's Country Mile project is a genuine desire to comprehend whats happening and why, to understand public perceptions through research and consultation, and develop new solutions - with closely monitored results. Road users everywhere will benefit: Devon is one of four county authorities involved in this Government-financed rural road safety scheme, and the knowledge-bank generated will ultimately be shared across Britain as unceasing efforts to reduce road casualties continue.