

## An Anorak's Guide to early Q Plates<sup>1</sup>

("Anorak" /'ænəræk/ is a British slang term which refers to a person who has a very strong interest, perhaps obsessive, in niche subjects.)

Those with an interest in cars of the 1920s and 1930s are also often interested in fitting number plates from the same (or an earlier) era as their car.

Australia had a number of very distinctive early designs, none more so than Queensland (Qld), with what have become known as "Q Plates". These have a black Q on a white background, followed by one or more numerals on a black background.



*Single and 2 digit plates as reissued in 1985*



*3 and 4 digit plates as reissued in 1985*

Many Australian jurisdictions, Qld included, have now reissued these early plates. Qld began with the "Great Plate Auction" in 1985, where a hairdresser (who else?) reputedly paid \$100,000 for Q1.

Many of us have procured these plates and fitted them to our cars. Queensland enthusiasts are fortunate as "personalised" Q plates can be fitted to historic cars registered under the Special Interest Vehicle Scheme (aka SIVS or Historic rego) in lieu of the SIVS plates. This is not permitted in some other States such as Victoria and NSW, where the historic rego (or permit) plates must be displayed.

### Preliminary

Before 1914, Qld was divided into 15 police districts, and the police in each area handled car registrations. Each district was allocated a letter. To illustrate, Brisbane was A, Toowoomba was C, and Hughenden was P.

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<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges assistance and information from Roger Payne (Number Plate Collectors' Club of Australia), Old State Archives, Old State Library, the PPQ website and Richard McDonough's excellent work "Queensland's Motoring Dawn"

The police allocated a number for each vehicle in their district, known as a numeric plate. This meant it was possible for 15 cars across the State to have exactly the same number.

The folly of this was realised as motorists ventured further from home and so in 1914, the district letter had to precede the number. A plate issued in the Hughenden district, prefix P, follows.



1921

On 27 May 1921, motor vehicle registrations became centralised, with the Commissioner of Police in Brisbane being instructed to “*assign a separate identifying number to every vehicle so registered*”<sup>2</sup>. The Regulations prescribed the dimensions and spacing of the numbers (on the “*metal disc or plate*”), to be white on a black background.

Dimensions: “*All such figures shall be three and a half inches high; every part of every figure shall be five-eighths of an inch broad; the total width of the space taken by every figure except in the case of the figure “1” shall be two and a half inches...*”

Spacing: “*...the space between adjoining figures shall be half an inch.*”

The Regulations went on to state: “*Such disc or plate shall be provided by the owner of the vehicle, but on being attached to the vehicle shall be and remain the absolute property of the Commissioner of Police*”. An example of such a numeral-only plate appears below.

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<sup>2</sup> *Motor Vehicle Regulations 1921* Reg 3, made under the *Main Roads Act 1920* (Q)



This situation only prevailed for 6 months or so as on 15 December 1921, registrations became the province of the newly-formed Main Roads Board, with the Regulations<sup>3</sup> mandating a “Q” prefix for motor car numberplates. The same metal “disc or plate” was stipulated, as applied from May 1921.

Despite there being only 16 days left in 1921 for the allocation of Q numbers, 8182 numbers were allocated by 31 December 2021. It appears that the numeral-only numbers already issued were reallocated with a Q prefix. Q8182 was the last number allocated in 1921. This means that all the single, double, and triple digit numbers were issued in 1921.



*A 4 digit Q plate as used in 1921*

Significantly, the colour scheme, numeral dimensions, and spacing remained the same, with the Q as well as the numerals being white on a black background.

1922 saw a further 5,740 numbers allocated, from Q8183 to Q13922. Therefore, all 4 digit numbers were issued in 1921 and 1922.

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<sup>3</sup> *Motor Vehicle Regulations 1921* (which repealed and replaced the earlier *Motor Vehicle Regulations 1921*).

1923<sup>4</sup> saw a further 7,512 numbers issued, from Q13923 to Q21434.



*A 1923 Q plate*

1924

On 13 March 1924, new Regulations<sup>5</sup> issued, which required the letter Q and numbers to be “*painted in a permanent white colour...on a black (back)ground on a metal disc or plate...*”. The dimensions and spacings remained the same. However, any existing plates with the Q, and numbers made of aluminium or other metal, were still legal.



*A rare, weathered 1924 survivor*

A further 11,290 numbers were allocated, from Q21435 to Q32724.

1925

On 26 February 1925 new Regulations<sup>6</sup> issued, bringing major changes to the plate format. These commenced on 1 April 1925. This marked the beginning of Q Plates as we know them. While the dimensions of the letter and numerals remained unchanged, the following changes occurred:

(a) The letter “Q” changed from white on black, to being “*painted ... in a permanent black colour on a white (back)ground...*”

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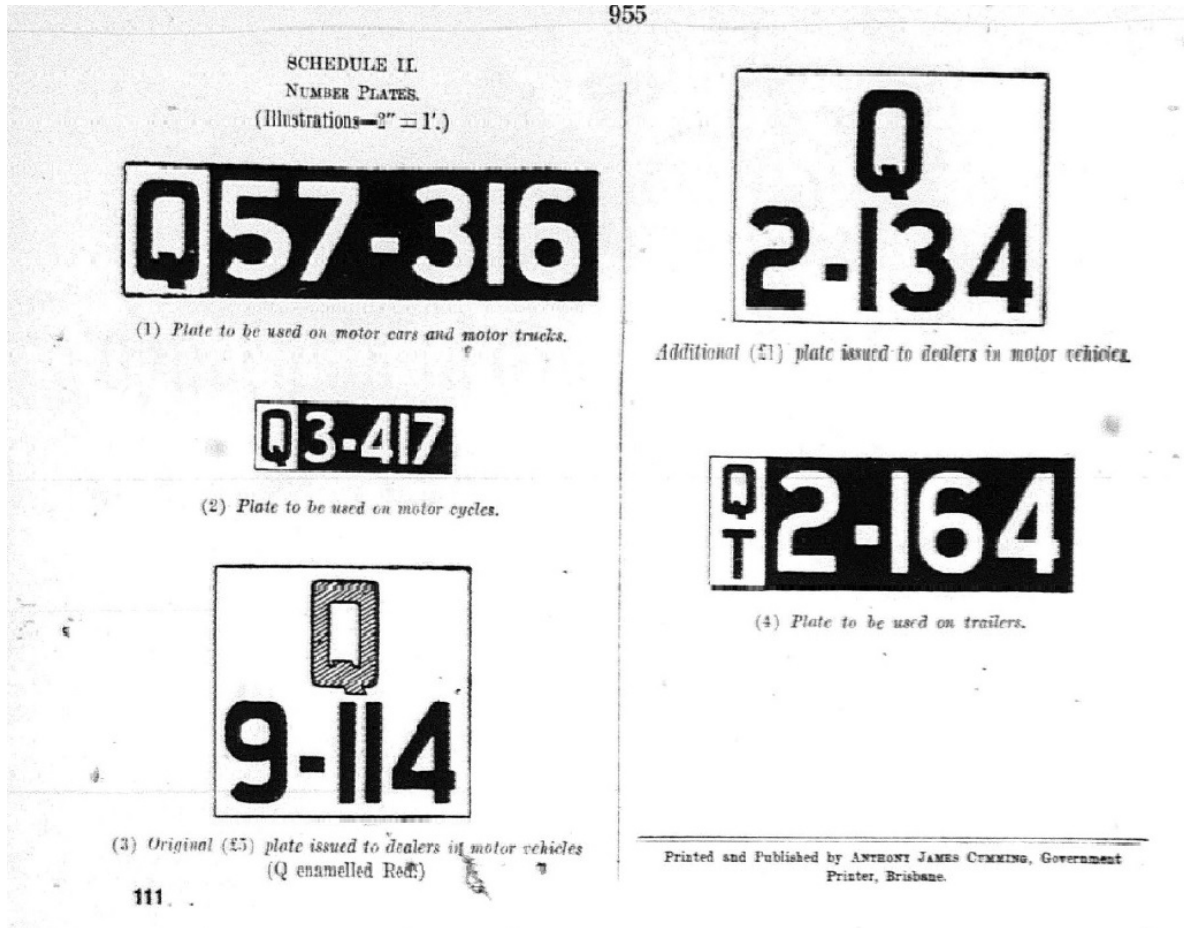
<sup>4</sup> A list of all registered cars in Qld in 1923 can be downloaded here <http://hdl.handle.net/10462/pdf/2155>. From this list it is possible to determine the name and address of the original owner, and the vehicle to which they were affixed.

<sup>5</sup> *Motor Vehicle Regulations, 1924* which repealed and replaced the 1921 Regs.

<sup>6</sup> *Motor Vehicle Regulations, 1925*, which repealed and replaced the 1924 Regs.

(b) Instead of the numbers being equally spaced, from now on “...between the third and fourth numbers from the right (in the case of numbers over 1000) there shall be placed a horizontal dash one inch (1”) long in a central position. The space between this dash, and the figure on either side thereof shall be one-half inch (1/2”).”

For the first time, the Regulations also included a Schedule depicting what regulation plates should look like.



As PPQ note<sup>7</sup>, “From April 1, 1925, most Q plates were repainted so that the ‘Q’ was black, and the numerals white.” It is also obvious from surviving photographs that the dash was also added. Hence, we know that Q31157 would have issued in 1924, and the plate would have had a white Q and 5 digits on a black background with no dash between the “31” and “157”. However PPQ have published a picture of this plate after repainting (below), with the Q now black-on-white, and the dash added..

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ppq.com.au/ /media/campaigns/history-of-plates/60-years-posters.pdf?la=en>, accessed 5 December 2021.



*1924 plate repainted after 1 April 1925 to conform to the new regulations.*

15,186 registration numbers were issued in 1925, from Q32725 (no dash) to Q47-920.

1927

Before 1927, the plate requirements were contained in *Motor Vehicle Regulations* under the *Main Roads Act* which were dedicated solely to motor vehicles. However on 5 May 1927, these, and a number of other sole-topic regulations (eg those dealing with Traction Engines) were all repealed and incorporated into an omnibus set of Regulations called the *Main Roads Regulations, 1927*.

Here is where a trivial pursuit master whose special topic is Qld Number Plates will be able to shine, provided he gets the right question. That question is: how can you tell if a 5 digit Q number was issued before or after 5 May 1927? The answer of course, is that the space between the dash and the figures either side has been reduced from “*one half of an inch (1/2”)*” to “*a quarter of an inch (1/4”)*”.

In all other respects the plate requirements remained the same.

18,774 registration numbers were issued in 1927, from Q67-736 to Q86-509.

PPQ have published a picture of a plate Q45-673 as an example of what Q plates looked like in 1925-1926. It appears to show the 1/4” spacing either side of the dash, the number having issued in 1925 – clearly repainted after 5 May 1927. (It would have originally had the “Q” and the numerals all being white on black, with no dash).



There were no further design changes until 1933.

1928 – 18,206 numbers were issued, from Q86-510 to Q104-715.



*A 5 digit 1928 plate, with what appears to be ½" spacing either side of the dash..*

1929 – 20,080 numbers issued, from Q104-716 to Q124-795.

1930 – 14,741 numbers issued, from Q124-796 to Q139-536

1931 – 12,936 numbers issued, from Q139-537 to Q151-572

1932 – 12,006 numbers issued, from Q151-573 to Q163-578

1933

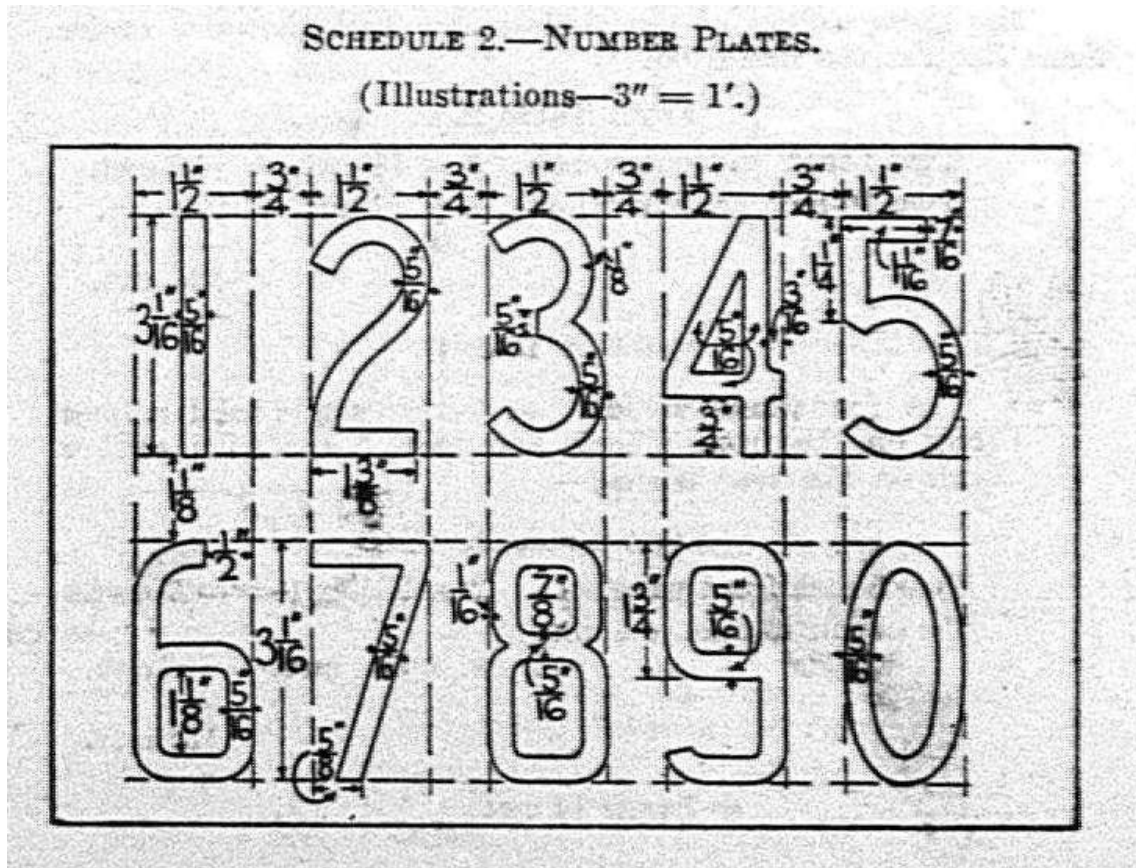
1933 saw major changes to the design of Q Plates, commencing with Q166-332<sup>8</sup>. The shape of each figure was prescribed, as well as the following dimensions:

- (a) Height reduced from 3½" to 3 1/16"
- (b) Thickness/width reduced from 5/8" to 5/16"
- (c) Width of space on plate to be occupied by each number reduced from 2½" to 1½"
- (d) Space between numbers increased from ½" to 3/4"

The dash remained between the third and fourth figures from the right, and the Q remained as black on white, with the figures, white on black. The shape was prescribed in Schedule 2.

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<sup>8</sup> *Main Roads Regulations, 1933* which revoked the *Main Roads Regulations, 1927* ; and advertisement for manufacture of plates, stipulating the changeover number.



A Q plate from 1938, made to the 1933 “thin figure” specifications, appears below.



For the period from 1921 to 1933 inclusive, the obligation remained with the owner of the vehicle to provide the number plate.

I have not examined the Regulations from 1933 to 1955, when the issue of Q Plates ceased. These were of course all 6 digit Q plates, and it appears that at some times the dash was omitted, and at other times it returned. Some have a gap where the dash would otherwise have been.

#### Summary

The original registration number plates for single, double, triple, 4 and some 5 digit plates all had the “Q”, and the figures, in white on a black background. Therefore, none of the reissued plates are accurate copies of the originals. However, it is arguable that the post-1/4/1925 version, with the bold black Q on a white background is more attractive and distinctive than the original configuration, and so to that extent, no harm is done.



Those that were repainted to match the 1925 requirements would have had the Q black on a white background, and a dash (for plates above number Q1000) between the third and fourth figures from the right.

So while the re-issued single, double and triple digit plates could be said to resemble the original plates after repainting to conform with the new 1925 regulations, the re-issued 4 digit plates match neither how they were before repainting, nor how they would have appeared after, as repainted 4 digit plates would have had the black Q on a white background, AND a dash between the third and fourth figures from the right. The “new” 4 digit Q plates do not have the dash – see Q9100 above..

The same applies to 5 digit plates, and the examples given above show 5 digit plates for numbers issued before 1 April 1925 repainted afterwards, displaying the black “Q” on a white background, and a dash between the third and fourth figures from the right. And all 5 digit plates issued after 1 April 1925 until the commencement of 6 digit numbers in 1928 would also have been in the later format. Again, the reissued plates do not match, as they omit the dash.



*Original 1925 Q Plate and reissued Q Plate.*

While current issue PPQ Q 4, 5 and 6 digit plates have neither the dash nor a space between the third and fourth figures from the right, it seems PPQ once did reissue 6 digit Q plates with the dash – see below.



In closing, a picture of an unfortunate motorist, proudly displaying his 1935 Q Plate, caught between 2 Brisbane trams. Whether or not he had a dash in his plate would appear to be the least of his worries.

