The A1, Britain's longest road. Stretching almost 400 miles from the city of London to the heart of the Scottish capital, connecting two nations and passing through 18 counties. It's an unrivalled highway used by hundreds of thousands of vehicles every day.

I want to speak about this topic because I think that roads, and also transport in general, are very important for the economy of every country. So I chose A1 because it is probably the most varied and fascinating route on the Motorway Database: there are, if you're sufficiently interested, whole books and websites solely about the A1's history and place in British culture. In terms of highway engineering that variety translates into inconsistency, running the whole way from the single-carriageway rural highway along the Scottish coast to the choked dual carriageway of the Newcastle Western Bypass and the eerily quiet eight-lane motorway that slices incongruously across the Cambridgeshire countryside.

It was designated by the Ministry of Transport in 1921, and for much of its route it followed various branches of the historic Great North Road, the main deviation being between Boroughbridge and Darlington. The course of the A1 has changed where towns or villages have been bypassed, and where new alignments have taken a slightly different route. Several sections of the route have been upgraded to motorway standard and designated A1(M). Between the M25 (near London) and the A696 (near Newcastle upon Tyne) the road has been designated as part of the unsigned Euroroute E15 from Inverness to Algeciras.

As far back as the 1960s there was strong criticism of the Ministry of Transport's road programme because of the inconsistency with which it chose to make road schemes motorways or normal dual carriageways. Nowhere was this more evident than on the A1, which today is littered with occasional bursts of motorway. In Yorkshire there has been steady progress over the last decade to fill in the gaps and create a continuous and modern motorway route, and works now in progress are pushing the blue line north towards Tyneside. But a few miles south and there have been incredibly budget-conscious works to replace six roundabouts with flyovers at the absolute minimum cost. Inconsistent as ever, in policy as well as appearance.

A proposal to upgrade the whole of the A1 to motorway status was investigated by the government in 1989 but was dropped in 1995, along with many other schemes, in response to road protests against other road schemes (including the Newbury Bypass and the M3 extension through Twyford Down).

The A1 runs from New Change in the City of London at St. Paul's Cathedral to the centre of Edinburgh. The road skirts the remains of Sherwood Forest, and passes Catterick Garrison. It shares its London terminus with the A40, in the City area of Central London. It runs out of London via St. Martin's Le Grand and Aldersgate Street, through Islington (where Goswell Road and Upper Street form part of its route), up Holloway Road, through Highgate, Barnet, Potters Bar, Hatfield, Welwyn, Stevenage, Baldock, Biggleswade, Sandy and St Neots.

The inns on the road, many of which still survive, were staging posts on the coach routes, providing accommodation, stabling for the horses and replacement mounts. Few of the surviving coaching inns can be seen while driving on the A1, because the modern route now bypasses the towns with the inns.

Scotch Corner, in North Yorkshire, marks the point where before the M6 was built the traffic for Glasgow and the west of Scotland diverged from that for Edinburgh. As well as a hotel there have been a variety of sites for the transport café, now subsumed as a motorway services.

Most of the English section of the A1 is a series of alternating sections of primary route, dual carriageway and motorway. From Newcastle upon Tyne to Edinburgh it is a trunk road with alternating sections of dual and single carriageway. The non-motorway sections do not have junction numbers.

Plans to dual the single carriageway section of road north of Newcastle upon Tyne were shelved in 2006 as they were not considered a regional priority by central government. The intention was to dual the road between Morpeth and Felton and between Adderstone and Belford.

To sum up, there is no single identity to the A1, no one thing that you can say that describes the whole of it, except the glib observation that it's incredibly varied and it always has been. And it's all the more wonderful and fascinating for it.