



Es with his MBE (left) and (below) in the city where he now lives, Dubai



# Es express

INTERVIEW BY **PAUL HUTTON**

**Londoners have a lot to thank Esmon George MBE for, given that he was instrumental in the setting up of Transport for London’s traffic control centre which has helped the traffic move around more efficiently for more than a decade. He’s now facing the same task in the deserts of Dubai. Paul Hutton caught up with him to find out more...**

**Q** So Es, first of all, you’ve met The Queen to be awarded an MBE, so before we move on, what did you do to deserve the honour?

It was a number of things. In my final RAF posting I was a Management Planner to the Chief of Logistics; the Management Plan I produced for his areas was used throughout the Headquarters. I had also been a volunteer worker for the Royal

International Air Tattoo for a number of years, was on the school PTA and ran a kids football team. It was this collection of things that led to my nomination by my RAF bosses; unlike a civilian, you don’t see the full citation, but the short bit said for “outstanding commitment and performance in your primary duties which has added considerably to the efficient running of the Headquarters, and your selfless contribution to the local community”.

**Q** What attracted an East London boy to join the RAF?

I read *Warlord* comic as a kid, loved Killer Kane and the other aircraft-related stories, joined the Air Training Corps as a result and decided that I wanted to be a pilot when I was about 15.

**Q** What did you do?

I wasn’t a pilot! I joined as an Assistant Air Traffic Controller, later commissioning

*“ It was either a 13-hour bone-shaking and noisy ride in an RAF Hercules transport, or a two-week sea trip in a converted North Sea ferry ”*



A photograph taken towards the end of Es' first posting, at RAF Binbrook, 1986

into the Supply Branch. So, in my RAF career I did operations and logistics, doing everything from working in a control tower, moving special weapons and running a military airport.

**Q** Reading books about the Falklands War, the navigators on Vulcan bombers were using a sextant and the stars to navigate over the South Atlantic, but by the time of the first Gulf War, we had satellite-guided missiles. Was your time in the RAF one of great technological change?

Absolutely. But not just in kit, but in mind set too. My first posting was to RAF Binbrook; the Lightning base, with a 60's vintage fast but short-ranged and lightly-

armed fighter. When I left, the ultra-modern 4th generation multi-role Typhoon was on the verge of entering service. No one had desktop PCs when I joined and I remember in 1992 having an application for a PC in my remote office rejected; now everyone and everything is networked.

**Q** Did your time in the forces give you a taste for travel?

Yes, but not at first. OK, I left home at 19 to join up but was a little wary of travelling overseas. That changed as I got older and now travel is water off a duck's back to me and something I enjoy. Certainly, my time in the RAF has contributed to my ability to being comfortable in most settings and environments.

**Q** We became mates when we talked about the Falkland Islands after I'd got back from a trip there. Was that the most remote place you went, and where was your favourite?

I think the Falklands had to be the most remote, especially as RAF Mount Pleasant wasn't open when I got there; it was either a 13-hour bone-shaking and noisy ride in an RAF Hercules transport, or a two-week sea trip in a converted North Sea ferry. I got the latter, but fortunately, I was on the second-ever 747 out of RAF Mount Pleasant on the way home.

My favourite was RAF Brüggen in Germany; end of the cold war and into a new way of doing operations. Worked hard and played harder!

**Q** When you came out of the RAF, you joined TfL, how did that happen?

Ok, well, initially I worked for the Community Fund, running a system team. I'd only been doing that for a few months when I got contacted about a role with TfL; they wanted someone to set up the "new" London Traffic Control Centre.

Three key words had been used for the CV search which pulled my CV out; "traffic" (I started in air traffic), "operations" (one of my RAF jobs had operations in the title) and "management" (I was a management planner). My CV had a bit more than that, led to a chat and an interview and by that time I realised that it was a dream job; the rest is history.

**Q** TfL was fairly new when you arrived and you were shoehorned into a control room near Victoria, from memory. What were the early days like? Were you part of a plan or was it a case, to use a flying term, of winging it a bit?

We were in new territory that was for sure and they were exciting times! It didn't always feel like it, but the then LTCC was part of a plan to "Keep London Moving" and ensure that TfL was as efficient a Traffic Manager as it could be. TfL had done something big and innovative with Congestion Charging but that by itself was never going to reduce gridlock and add consistency to journey times.

That's where we came in, taking over the hands-on real-time traffic signals management from the Police and doing something about putting out meaningful traffic information. Before this though, was training; we devised our own training programme on three fronts; real-time traffic management using signals, incident management and traffic information ▶



TfL planned the Olympic Route Network to keep officials and competitors moving during the Games

provision. We used existing systems like the Urban Traffic Control System (UTC) and the London Traffic Information System (LTIS) but I think we used them differently and more proactively. I think we also had to be a little creative in how we forged new relationships, inside and out of the organisation, but I was fortunate that I had an awesome team with many and varied capabilities.

From a personal perspective, I think we went very quickly from a standing start in October 2003 to a decent operational capability by February 2004, though the controls were gripped a bit tightly at times!

**Q** Then along came the move to the Palestra and being part of the bid for the Olympics. How much did the planning for 2012 affect the way LSTCC grew?

I remember thinking, when we were presented with the initial challenge for the Olympic Bid, that it was great to be part of it and that it would not fail because of us!

At that time (early-2004) we were still very new and not fully established. Luckily, my counterpart in the UTC Team felt the same way and between us I think we did a lot to ensure that we met the challenges given to us by the Bid Team (namely, prove Olympic Route Network (ORN) journey times) and also meet existing TfL objectives.

One of the highlights for me was asking Lord Coe, during a visit, what he thought the journey time would be from the centre of London the Olympic Park; he said around 40 minutes to an hour. He was speechless when I said we'd done it in 22 minutes, and even more speechless when we showed him the dashboard video. We did it by managing the signal timings for sure, but did so

*“ Lord Coe... was speechless when I said we'd done it in 22 minutes ”*

without any impact on traffic overall and by doing the same during the bid visit, I think this went a long way towards proving that the ORN could work, even without the added Games-time measures.

We didn't, however, let the Olympics planning change the way things grew; we were very much focused on the day-to-day and planning for the future and I remember at the time saying that the post-Games era would be much harder than what we'd experienced prior and the Games themselves.

Having said that, I took a key decision in early-2012 not to implement the replacement for LTIS with the Traffic Information Management System (TIMS) until after the Games; it wasn't going to be ready until June 2012 at the earliest and I didn't want us to be in the position of having a new system and shaking that down with a differently-shaped and operated network... with all the world watching.

We built on many good things from the Games, particularly with inter-agency working, and we also had to work within a new command and control structure. I was also proved right with TIMS; we had the time and space to ensure a stable end to development and service introduction. It gave us the ability to be more accurate with the traffic information we provided,

made data much more consistent and quantifiable and improved our incident management capability. Some of the active traffic management measures we used at Games-time also continued and whilst some of these had technical-sounding names, what we did overall was build on the understanding of traffic demands to balance out traffic congestion in an adaptive and consistent way.

And yes, when we moved the opportunity was taken to change to become the London Streets Traffic Control Centre, as part of 'Streets' branding; a bit of a shame really as we'd done a lot to market the LSTCC...

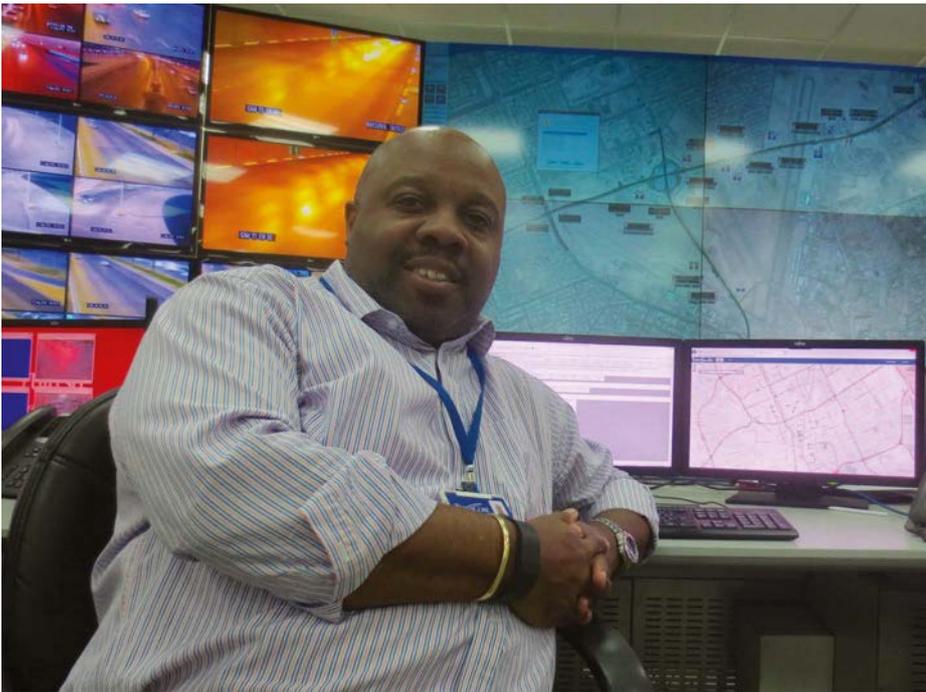
**Q** Outsiders sometimes get the idea TfL still has a silo mentality where different parts, buses, tube, streets etc don't necessarily work particularly efficiently. Is that an unfair observation?

Not entirely. The bottom line is that the legacy elements, London Buses and London Underground did work in silos and for some it was hard to change that mentality. We did a lot to help change that, especially with the move to Palestra, which by default led to a change in thinking and operations, bringing London Buses (CentreComm) and London Streets (LSTCC) closer together and to a lesser extent, the Police traffic and transport control room (Metrocomm); instant benefits were face to face communication and consistent reporting, leading to a reduction in incident duration due to the improved responses and information to road users that encouraged their use of other routes.

We were also willing to try something new and different. The Traffic Radio station your then-company, Paul, supplied on our behalf was an example of this, in that we agreed to allow the radio station you ran to set up a desk in an area of our element of the control room.

This provided updates on a regular basis and as the presenters could speak to traffic co-ordinators directly and also view the issues on CCTV, I think this service was real value-added. It was a shame we weren't able to keep it going. On the subject of CCTV though, we also led on camera sharing protocols with most of the London Boroughs and Highways England, which improved everyone's network visibility without installed additional and/or duplicated cameras in close proximity to each other. This was helped by digitalisation of our CCTV network and working to a common standard; no silo there for sure.

The opening up of data to third party app developers had the effect of forcing us all to ensure that our data was high quality



The initial Traffic Management Center in Riyadh



A farewell gift from the TransCore team in Riyadh

so there's a lot of amazing things going on and being considered. Compared to some cities though, I've seen a lot worse.

**Q** We love multi-modal solutions in the UK, but how do you encourage people to wait outside for public transport when it's 55 Celcius outside?

Well, there are some air-conditioned bus shelters although I'll have to let you know how it all works after my first summer here!

**Q** Dubai has quite a lot of western culture, although you never forget you're in the Middle East. What opportunities do British companies have for work there?

As I said, there is a lot going on. I couldn't speak with any authority to be honest, but I think the opportunities are many and varied although it's an exceptionally competitive market.

**Q** Is this a long term move or will we see you back in London soon?

I see me being out here for a few years yet. Certainly, Expo2020 looks like it will be an exciting challenge. I do though plan, as well as family visits, being back every year to continue my volunteering for the RAF Charitable Trust's Royal International Air Tattoo, which I've been doing since 1989 and having only missed three shows. I run one of the teams there and am responsible for ensuring that the air and ground crews that arrive are met and welcomed to the Show and get to and from where they want to be whilst they are on the airfield.

**Q** And is it a coincidence that your beloved Spurs are doing rather better these days now you're not around?

Possibly! I came home for a break last May and went to the Southampton game, which we lost and never really recovered from. It has though been great watching from afar, even though not being able to get to any games at the Lane this last season there has been painful. ■

*“ I think the 1.1m million followers, compared to the other traffic news providers, is testimony to the overall and lasting success ”*

and didn't just work for "old Stan on the 4th Floor". Equally, this bought home, certainly as far as the LSTCC was concerned, the closeness of individual's work to road users.

A good example of this is Twitter. We were admittedly wary and sceptical of the value and how it would work at first, though within a short space of time we were clearly having an impact and were the leading traffic and news Twitter Service in London, if not the UK.

How? The service comes from the heart of the control room and is delivered by information operators who run the Twitter desk in rotation as part of their overall duties, which makes them knowledgeable and expert; I think the 1.1m million followers, compared to the other traffic news providers, is testimony to the overall and lasting success and equally, has help to raise overall standards and a change in thinking.

**Q** I remember a day when I got an email out of the blue saying you were off to the sand pit, or Saudi Arabia as it happened, how did that happen and what experience did you use there?

The Olympics was a high point for me and I was ready for a new challenge after that. I was made a decent offer to set up a Traffic

Management Center in Riyadh, their first, and decided to take a punt. Riyadh was different for sure though and I used a little bit of all my RAF and TfL experience in the role, from writing procedures, actually working TMC desks and personnel management.

**Q** We did an interview with you in Smart Highways about the differences. One difference for you was not being there for long before you moved to another desert city, Dubai. Happy with the move?

Very. I'm in a completely different role, consulting on a massive command and control centre project, and I'm enjoying being in a very forward-thinking city.

**Q** So you've worked with thousand gear-old roads in London and then a city which has changed beyond recognition since I first went there ten years ago. But Dubai, despite being new seems to have some travel problems even though the city surely had to be planned with transport in mind. Or was it? The rate of growth in the Emirates has been phenomal and to put things in perspective, there wasn't a hospital in the whole of the UAE until the mid-60s. It is recognised that transportation is key and can be improved,