**Signing Off**

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In 1904, under the authority of The Motor Car Act, of 1903, the British Local Government Board was charged with the design and implementation of state-legislated road signs, warning motorists of hazards such as corners and road junctions. The significance of this is that, for the first time, it shifted the responsibility for such signage from private interest groups to the state itself. The implications of this were far-reaching in terms of the politics of road use and particularly to cyclists.

This paper stems from a larger research project that is to be published in a special issue of *Technology & Culture* in 2015. It focuses on the period from the 1880s to the 1930s and in particular on the provisions of the Motor Car Act, after the implementation of which the Cyclists’ Touring Club withdrew from the erection of road signage, auto club signage proliferated and the government was forced to take an expanding role in road regulation and infrastructure.

The modern road-sign is largely the invention of the British cycling lobby of the early 1880s in the form of ‘danger boards’ erected by the three national organisations, the Cyclists’ Touring Club (CTC), National Cyclists’ Union (NCU) and the Scottish Cyclists’ Union (SCU). Fig. 1 illustrates the version by the NCU; the others share a common message, but differ in detail. What makes them different from previous road-signs is that they warn of a hazard, rather than being concerned with direction and distance. Moreover, they were standardised for use nationally. They respond to what Sydney and Beatrice Webb called ‘through traffic’, in which the traveller did not know the road and, being mounted on a personal, fast vehicle, was likely to travelling too quickly to respond to hazards as they appeared.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In the context of the high bicycle, there were few hazards that merited such a permanent warning sign. Problems to do with the road surface were ever changing, sharp corners and most road junctions could be seen, but the nature of a descent was often concealed until it was too late. In the 1880s, danger boards warned of one thing only, downhill slopes on which a cyclist was likely to lose control of the machine.

The origins of the boards are summarised in Lightwood’s 1928 history of the CTC. A proposal had first been submitted to the newly-formed Bicycle Touring Club and the Bicyclist’s Union in 1878.[[2]](#endnote-2) After some experiments and politicking, both organisations (by then called the Cyclists’ Touring Club and National Cyclists’ Union, to include tricyclists) agreed to share the cost of manufacturing an initial batch, the SCU following in their wake with their own rather flamboyant version. (Fig. 2) In addition, others were erected by local cycling clubs. For the next ten years the boards proliferated, with the CTC taking on the greatest share in their erection and maintenance. By the early 20th century, the CTC was responsible for some 4,500 boards, while many others erected by the NCU, SCU and smaller clubs remained in place.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Contrary to first appearances, the boards did not only address cyclists, nor were they merely about hills. Their long-term importance was and is political. In Fig. 3 we can see a CTC board in place on a road in the 1880s; the board is not the subject of the picture, yet it acts as a focal point.[[4]](#endnote-4) Erecting prominent notices by the public highway was a territorial act of publicity. They advertised the presence of cyclists, even on a road devoid of them as here, thus stating the cyclists’ right to the road. They acted as a marker of responsibility and, in the 1880s, were also part of the Roads Improvement campaign. It is the political nature of the signs that is the subject of this paper. It encapsulates an aspect of the longer article in *Technology and Culture* mentioned earlier.

Wilkinson, writing in 1913, underlined the significance of the danger boards in *The Highways and Byways of England* :

The club [the CTC] became known to the general public by the danger-boards which it placed on hills. It had been preceded in this useful work by the Bicycle Union..... The “C.T.C.” boards, indeed, probably attracted attention more by their number than by their novelty, though they were the first seen in many parts of the country. However this may be, the club missed no opportunity of stirring up the highway authorities and doubtless paved the way for many reforms.[[5]](#endnote-5)

It is not the place of this paper to go into the road politics of the 1880s, but road improvement to the level that cyclists desired in England and Wales - it had been achieved in Scotland some ten years earlier - was largely achieved in 1888 in the *Local Government Act*.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is highly questionable if the pressures put upon government by the quasi-independent Roads Improvement Association (sponsored entirely by cyclists and constituted little more than a year earlier), or the cyclists’ clubs themselves, had much to do with this, but this did not stop them claiming that it did.[[7]](#endnote-7) Wilkinson’s much later comment confirms that their claim hit home and emphasizes the value of road signage as a territorial marker and political tool.

While the signs continued to have political clout, their intended use began to be compromised by changing technology. In particular, the safety bicycle rendered the majority of the ‘dangerous’ hills of the high bicycle era far less dangerous.[[8]](#endnote-8) With the development of coaster and rim brakes in the 1890s, the currency of the 1880s pattern danger board was over. This did not stop the cyclists’ organisations from erecting signs for other hazards. The CTC introduced general ‘TO CYCLISTS - RIDE WITH CAUTION’ signs in 1897, but resisted the idea of signs for specific hazards.[[9]](#endnote-9) (Fig. 4)

At this time, cycling in the U.K. was beginning to share road space with motoring. In the U.K. motoring became realistic after the passing of the so-called ‘emancipation act’, in fact the *Locomotives on Highways Act* of 1896. Rather the same model of assertion as the cyclists had used began to be adopted by motorists. This should be no surprise since many pioneering motorists were also cyclists.[[10]](#endnote-10) Clubs were founded and, within a few years, began to erect road signs, based on the cyclists’ precedent. Undoubtedly, the most advanced of these was the series introduced in 1902 by the Automobile Club. The club had been represented at international congresses in Europe, which had established a basic protocol for common signage based on the use of the pictogram, rather than text.[[11]](#endnote-11) Four signs had been devised, road intersection, bends, level crossing and uneven roads. The AC had developed this idea into the ten signs illustrated in Fig. 5.[[12]](#endnote-12) Had this scheme been developed, the number of AC signs would probably quickly have outnumbered those of the cyclists’ clubs, but instead the AC shelved the scheme.

The reason for the AC’s withdrawal from road signage was the *Motor Car Act* of 1903. The Act set out to perform a difficult balance. It attempted to address public concern about motor cars by regulating them, but in such a way to allow motorists greater freedom on the road. Part of the Act included provisions for signage. This was not insignificant. No other state authorities had taken responsibility for the provision of road signs at this early date, indeed the European motor and touring clubs actively rejected the idea that they should. The Act remitted authority for the signs to the Local Government Board, which came up with four ‘Motor Car Notices’ for implementation in 1904. As can be seen in Fig. 6, their design was very different from anything previously proposed as they relied on shape, rather than text or image.[[13]](#endnote-13) Though largely forgotten in most histories, two are now recognised the world over, the red warning triangle and the prohibition disc. The fact that they are now so universally understood demonstrates that these signs were more than ‘motor car notices’; like the cyclists’ danger boards their public placing exposed them to the public at large, but unlike the danger boards they did not specify their user, indeed they used no text whatsoever. Thus, both their design and meaning could transfer way beyond the confines of motoring.

However, from the road users’ point of view, the importance of the motor car notices was that, although they were paid for by taxpayers and erected by local authorities as a result of national legislation, they only applied to a tiny minority of road users. Their design and erection can be seen as an indication that from this point on, roads were to be furnished for the use of motorists at public expense and, by default, to the disadvantage of every other road user. As the century progressed, this in fact happened. In the U.K., it was fully established in the imposition of the terms of the Road Traffic Act of 1930, almost exactly a generation later.

Where were cyclists in this process? After all, in 1903 anyone looking at the British roads would see them punctuated by cyclists’ danger and caution signs and little else, and by far the majority of personal mechanical vehicles on the road were cycles. To answer this question we have to look at the legal position of the two forms of transport on the road.

In the article written for *Technology & Culture*, I consider at length why it is that cycling is generally deemed of low importance in major road histories, such as those by the Webbs, writing as early as 1913, and William Plowden in 1970.[[14]](#endnote-14) The conclusion here is one of political position. In the U.K., cycling was largely outside of the control of the law. The logic of all nineteenth century road legislation was based on the context of foot traffic moving at walking pace, be it human or equine. Cycling seriously challenged this status quo, yet the cycling lobby was remarkably adept at keeping cycling out of legislation. In particular it was very successful in preventing cycles being seen as ‘locomotives’ within the terms of the 1865 Locomotives Act, that limited these to walking pace and being attended by more than just the driver.[[15]](#endnote-15) It is interesting that most cycling histories are generally congratulatory in their assessment of this avoidance of stringent control; but, should they be?

After the ‘success’ of the 1888 Local Government Act in terms of road provision and maintenance, coupled with cycles being defined as ‘carriages’ in the same year (still in 2014 legally defined as such), and thus beyond significant statutory control, the political voice of cycling diminished rapidly. It had good reason to since both legislation and the roads seemed to be effective in handling hugely increasing numbers of cyclists. Through the 1890s, the Roads Improvement Association, for instance, seems to have been no more than a talking-shop, rather than an active lobbying group.

Compare this to the motorists. Motor cars came under the terms of the 1865 Locomotives Act and therefore their representative clubs had to overturn established legislation that was supported by the whole community. This placed the motorists in a very different position from the cyclists - every step the motor lobby took to establish motoring had to be negotiated with the government. Therefore the motorists’ organisations tended to work with government to provide motoring-friendly legislation. This was very different from the cyclists’ position of defending themselves from controlling legislation and, when things were good, withdrawing from the arena. Unlike the CTC, the AC was deeply involved in advising on the provisions of the Motor Car Act and allowed government to take control, quite possibly knowing how much this would be to their advantage in political terms. It is worth noting that the motoring lobby in mainland Europe was often very much more in the British cyclists’ position of having very limited legislation apply to their vehicles, explaining why the European motor lobby were keen not to have signage provided by government, with all the restrictions that might bring.[[16]](#endnote-16) This made the motor car far more like the cycle in legal terms, thus tending to ally the two during the pre-1914 period, while in the UK the situation was quite the opposite.

The situation might have been very different had the council of the CTC decided to ally themselves with the AC to provide a lobby group for all personal mechanical vehicles on the road and thus allow cycling to be drawn into legislation as a partner to motoring. The fact that they did quite the opposite, ending in the divisive high court ruling of 1906, sealed the fate of the cycling lobby.[[17]](#endnote-17) The CTC found itself in a stalemate. Cycling was outside of legislation (which is what it desired), but as a result had no place in its writing, which was, from 1903, geared entirely to the motorists. The dichotomy of this position was probably best illustrated in the CTC’s attempts to avoid a ‘red light act’ in the late 1920s.[[18]](#endnote-18) The intellectual position belonged to the nineteenth century and seemed ridiculous in a context of roads equipped for motoring. How much better had they been equipped for both?

Returning to 1904 and the implementation of the motor-car notices, we should note that the government did not prescribe them. Typical of the other elements of the Act, they operated on a quid-pro-quo basis with the motoring lobby. Two of the signs did what no club signs did - prohibit altogether, or apply speed limits (a generous 10 mph, previously it was often 4 mph) which sold them to local authorities who would otherwise baulk at the cost of erecting them. But the warning triangle, the most successful (Fig. 7) did no more than take the responsibility for what would have been seen to be a matter for private clubs and place it in the hands of the taxpayers. The implication of the sign was that the state’s perception of road hazards was not those posed to the vast majority of road users, but rather those perceived by motorists.

Moreover the act was not prescriptive, allowing clubs to continue erecting their own signs; whole new genres of these were developed, most notably by the Automobile Association after it amalgamated with the Automobile Union in 1907. (Fig. 8) Thus, from a position of power in 1902, where CTC and other cyclists’ signs dominated the roads, by 1913 they were but a memory to writers such as Wilkinson.

Indeed, the CTC was active in this process. Rapidly diminishing membership numbers resulted in funds for signage being withdrawn after 1905.[[19]](#endnote-19) A justification was that the new Motor Car Notices were equally applicable to cyclists, even though cyclists had no part in their design or placing. The clear implication of the diminishing numbers of cyclists’ signs relative to the rapidly increasing provision for motorists was that the signs, and therefore cycling itself, had no place on the roads. This was an almost laughable irony, as cycling in Britain had never been more popular than it was at this period.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Let us conclude this paper in 1930 with the provisions of the Road Traffic Act of that year. It was drawn up entirely round the use of motor vehicles, to the extent of withdrawing all local and national speed limits. Yet, importantly, the Act’s use of the term ‘traffic’, rather than ‘locomotive’ or ‘motor car’, assumes road traffic to be synonymous with motor vehicles. It was supported by the quasi-legislative *Highway Code* a Ministry of Transport handbook for all road users first published in 1931*.* The introduction of this publication states that ‘It is hoped that the code of conduct now issued in accordance with the direction contained in the Act may come to be universally respected and obeyed...every user of the road should study it as a whole, and not merely read the particular sections that have an interest to him.’ However, like the Road Traffic Act itself, there was no doubt that it had been written with the primacy of motoring at its heart and that all other road users would give priority to motors.[[21]](#endnote-21) In the Act, road signage was brought completely under the control of government and ‘signs of another character’ were to be removed.[[22]](#endnote-22) Like the Act itself, the new series of ‘traffic signs’, introduced in 1933-4, was entirely designed round motoring; other road users were to respond to them as if they were motorists. (Fig 9) Cycling, by now one of the principle forms of short distance utility transport, was conspicuous by its absence in the new signs, it had indeed signed itself off the road.

1. **Endnotes**

   Webb, Sydney and Beatrice. *English Local Government – The Story of the King’s Highway.* London: Longmans Green, 1913. (Reprinted by ULAN), p.240. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The idea of danger boards appears to have been expressed in a letter to the then-Bicycle Touring Club in Sept. 1878 from the BTC Newport (Isle of Wright) Consul, James George, which suggested erecting warning notices on hills which were dangerous for cyclists to descend. This idea had also been put to the Bicycle Union by the writer but they had not taken up the idea. The *Monthly Circular* picked up this issue for the first time with a list of dangerous hills in the March 1879 issue. This was followed by the Bicycle Union taking up the issue of putting up ‘a uniform sign-post’ after local clubs started to put up warning notices on an ad hoc basis. In late-1883, shortly after the Bicycle Touring Club had renamed itself the Cyclists’ Touring Club, it joined what had been the Bicycle Union, itself renamed the National Cyclists’ Union to share the cost of erecting Danger Boards, purchasing a stock for £50, similar to the BU signs, but inscribed to both clubs. See: Lightwood, James T. *The Cyclists' Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years'*. London: CTC, 1928, pp.191-194. See also *The Boneshaker* #56 (1969) pp.141-143 and #79 (1975), pp.249-251. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In 1902, the figures were 2,331 DANGER and 1,989 CAUTION signs and this was rising. Lightwood, James T., *The Cyclists' Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years'*. London: CTC, 1928, p.195. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Photograph courtesy of Lorne Sheilds. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wilkinson, T. W., *The Highways and Byways of England*, London: Iliffe, n.d. (1913), pp.269-270. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The Act specified that the county and borough council Highway Districts be reorganised, with defined budgets coming from taxpayers. County Councils were given the remit to provide well- maintained main roads within their borders and District Councils secondary roads. In spite of these revisions there remained no national road body and a confusing complexity of local authority responsibilities below that of the County Councils. Webb, Sydney and Beatrice. *English Local Government – The Story of the King’s Highway*, London: Longmans Green, 1913. (Reprinted by ULAN n.d.), p.223, pp.243-246. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The political and somewhat hypocritical nature of the RIA is summarised in Lightwood, James T., *The Cyclists' Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years'*. London: CTC, 1928, p.225 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The rear-driven safety could be braked hard on the front wheel without high risk of the rider being pitched over the bars. A plethora of brakes and free-wheel clutches were developed in the later 1890s, rendering almost all the ‘dangerous’ hills of the early-1880s rideable. See Clayton, Nick. “The Origin of the Bowden Cable,” in *Cycle History 21,* Birmingham, 2012, pp.13-18.  [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The CTC had considered a more general CAUTION board in 1884, but did not proceed with the idea. Text-based boards for five specific hazards - RAPID DESCENT, DANGEROUS TURNING, LEVEL CROSSING, WATER SPLASH, and GATE were considered in about 1900, but were rejected. In 1902, two relatively light, pressed steel signs were introduced -DANGER and CAUTION. See Lightwood, James T. *The Cyclists' Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years'*, London: CTC, 1928, pp.193-195. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Sir David Salomons was President of the Tunbridge Wells Cycling Club before setting up the Self-Propelled Traffic Association and Harry Lawson was deeply involved in cycle design and manufacture before he founded the Motor Car Club. Both these organisations were instrumental in promoting the Act. See Reid, Carlton, *Roads Were Not Built for Cars,* Newcastle: Front Page Creations, 2014, pp 241-243. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Mom, Gijs, “Building an Infrastructure for the Automobile System; PIARC and Road Safety (1908-1938)”, draft paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Motoring Annual and Motorist’s Year Book*, London: Motoring Illustrated, 1904, p.286. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. From Inglis, H.R.G., *The Contour Road Book of Scotland,* Edinburgh: Gall & Inglis, 1913, Foreword. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Both write the bicycle off in the space of a single page. Webb, Sydney and Beatrice. *English Local Government – The Story of the King’s Highway.* London: Longmans Green, 1913. (Reprinted by ULAN, n.d.) p.240; Plowden, William. *The Motor Car and Politics, 1896-1970*. London: Bodley Head, 1970, pp.24-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *The Locomotives Act, 1865* (28 & 29 VICT. CAP. 83. – s3) set limits on ‘locomotives’ at 4 miles per hour (2 mph in villages, towns and cities), preceded by a flag bearer. Modified under *The Highways and Locomotive (Amendment) Act, 1878* (41 & 42 VICT. CAP. 77. Part II) that, in England, a person ‘shall precede by at least twenty yards the locomotive on foot’. Glen, Alexander. *The Highways Acts 1862-1878, The Locomotive Acts 1861-1878 and the General Provisions of the Turnpike Continuance Acts 1863-1878.* London: Knight & Co, 5th Edn 1879, pp.237-239. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Mom, Gijs, “Building an Infrastructure for the Automobile System; PIARC and Road Safety (1908-1938)”, draft paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. From about 1902, the CTC was divided as to whether or not to increase its remit to include motoring: the argument went so far as being taken to the High Court in London. For details of the debate and the hearings see Lightwood, James T. *The Cyclists' Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years'*. London: CTC, 1928*,* pp.84-92, pp.232-235, and Oakley, William. *Winged Wheel.* Godalming: CTC, 1977, pp.19-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The ‘Red Light Act’ would have compelled cyclists to carry tail lamps. Instead, a compromise was reached that allowed the use of a white flash and reflector instead of a lamp. The CTC position was that all tail-markers were unreasonable as it was the responsibility of the motorist to see a cyclist, or any other road user, no matter how darkly dressed; motorists should therefore drive slowly, in the field of their headlamps, to anticipate such road users. *Why Cyclists Object To Compulsory Rear Lights*. London: CTC, 1927. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Lightwood, James T. *The Cyclists' Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years'*. London: CTC, 1928, pp.197-8, and p.274. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Raleigh's output rising to a high of approximately 55,022 per year in 1913-14, from 7,813 in 1896-97 in an almost constant increase; for full figures see Rosen, Paul. *Framing Production*. Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2002, p.52. The retail price of a new ‘popular’ model had fallen to about £6 from about £12. First class mounts to £12-£15 from £20-£30. For a fuller discussion of British cycling in this period see Oddy, N, “The Flaneur on Wheels?”, pp.97-112 in Horton, David, Paul Rosen and Peter Cox (Eds). *Cycling and Society*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ministry of Transport, *The Highway Code: Issued by the Minister of Transport with the authority of Parliament in pursuance of Section 45 of the Road Traffic Act, 1930* (HMSO, London, 1931), p1. Six pages are given over to motor vehicles, four to specified other users, two to all users. The single page (14) given to pedestrians is entirely concerned with instruction as to how to cross the road and not to ‘stand about in the road…to avoid danger and assist in the easy flow of traffic’. Unlike other government publications, *The Highway Code* was appended by advertising indicative of the close relationship between government and motoring interests, the front and rear inside cover being given over to membership of the AA and RAC, the rear cover the Motor Union Insurance Co and three pages to *The Autocar* and *The Motor Cycle*, Castrol motor oil, and BP petrol, respectively. To an extent this was developed from *Safety First on the Road* (National “Safety First” Association, London, 1929) a booklet ‘issued with the approval of the Ministry of Transport to Registration Authorities free of charge for distribution with every driver’s licence.’ It was entirely sponsored by the motoring organisations and, not surprisingly, barely mentions any other road users than motorists. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *The Road Traffic Act, 1930* at 20 & 21 GEO. 5. CH. 43. (1st Aug) S48, ‘Erection of notice boards’, S48(2) *The Traffic Signs (Size, Colour and Type) Provisional Regulations 1933*, *dated December 22*.Department of Transport, *The History of Traffic Signs*, pp.8-9. For all regulations see Woodward, Gilbert E. *Woodward’s Road Traffic Acts and Orders 1930-1934*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode,1934. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)