GIVE THEM AN INCH

A positioning paper for the Design for Movement Symposium

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I was not going to speak at this symposium, but my colleagues insisted I presented a historical positioning paper…where to begin? The obvious time seems to be in the 1860s with the Locomotives Acts. There are a number, all much maligned. Those familiar with motoring history probably know of them summed up in a single term the ‘Red Flag Act’ and will no doubt also ‘know’ that the Red Flag Act held progress back on UK roads for a generation. SLIDE Has anyone here ever heard a good word said of the Red Flag Act? I doubt it. Why is it so maligned? Because it physically restricted the speed of road locomotives to that of walking pace simply, and effectively, by demanding that someone precede the locomotive on foot. In a world where the speed of road traffic was set by humans and animals walking, it seems to me a remarkably democratic requirement. While the act defined speed limits, these were entirely nominal, no vehicles carried speedometers and it is difficult to assess speed to a single mile per hour. However, with someone walking in front the speed problem was solved, locomotives presented no real threat to other road users.

In the negative press that surrounds the so-called Red Flag Act we see the whole problematic of the subject of this symposium encapsulated. The act was designed to favour the default road user, but the default road user did not move fast, about 3mph, all novel forms of vehicle were capable of greater speed…and that was the issue…speed.

We can add two other factors into the mix, wealth and gender. Novel forms of vehicle do not come cheap. Locomotives were expensive things, but as they would be understood in the 1860s, they were associated with commercial utility. Traction engines and road rollers, there was real demand for either to travel at speeds greater than normal traffic. The real problematic was the concept of *private* transport for individuals. The first serious newcomer was not a ‘locomotive’ at all, but a human powered vehicle, the pedamotive bicycle. Although simple, it demanded high specifications to work effectively and to purchase one required disposable income that limited the market to the ‘comfortable’ middle class and above. The nature of the machines made them nearly impossible to ride in long skirts and their mechanical nature coupled with their rapid association with sport and competition made cycling a toxic compound of male privileges that it has never sloughed off.

Once on the roads, cyclists were quick to start moving towards owning them. Their status as wealthy, educated (manly young) men gave them considerable clout at legislative level. They set a number of important precedents. The first was ‘road improvement’. Although argued for the common good, road improvement was really only to make roads easier for cyclists to traverse at speed and therefore at the expense of those who were moving slower than them and who therefore became obstacles. The second was visual ownership of infrastructure SLIDE sign. It was the cyclists of the 1870s and 80s who invented the modern road sign, warning of hazards only relevant to cyclists, but permanently positioned on the road as if cyclists were its default user. A key part of all this was to transfer the responsibility of accident from the cyclist to the road itself.

However, THE key feature of the bicycle was its totally pointless nature. It had little application in an industrialised society where the infrastructure had developed without it. There was no *need* for bicycles. As a result, for a generation at least, they were playthings for those wealthy enough to own them. Worse, bicycles were designed round one thing, and one thing alone, speed. The high bicycle was a speed machine. Impractical in many ways as a form of utilitarian transport, it was however very exciting to ride by those who could. Effectively the cyclists’ sign was indicative of a take-over of the public space by a wealthy elite with nothing else on their agenda than having a good time. While cyclists tried to present themselves as respectable road users, SLIDE off for a spin, SLIDE 1899 their very nature as being young men out for fun on machines built for speed and little else made this hard SLIDE Burch. Cycling was further hugely problematised by its relationship to sport and competition, so closely were these linked to the design development of the machine and the interests of many of its users that it is now almost impossible to disentangle them SLIDE KoR. If I were given a pound for every time people assume that, because I ride century-old bicycles and research cycling history, I should be interested in competitive cycle riding, I’d be able to buy a lot more old bicycles. Surprisingly, no one asks me about motor racing when I get out of my 20 year old Berlingo. Intriguingly, for those of us in this institution, yesterday’s press is full of a seeming link between a cut of Creative Scotland’s budget by £6,000,000 and an overspend of £8,000,000 on Scottish Government support for the ‘Glasgow Festival of Cycling’, a folk-friendly cover for the UCI Cycling world Championships that, supposedly, was meant to encourage active travel. Competitive cycling should have nothing to do with active travel, competition belongs on a race track, not on the public road. For those who are seriously interested in active *travel* rather than just ‘activity’, the entire concept of an event like the Glasgow Festival of Cycling sends all the wrong messages of what cycling as a form of travel ought to be. The degree to which a government overspend of £8,000,000 on a single, one-off, competitive cycling event is justifiable over £6,000,000 spent on the arts in Scotland, with many small and not so small organisations’ futures being jeopardized as a result, is something delegates here might want to debate.

The bicycle was not governed by the terms of the Locomotives Acts, though, given their speed, many thought they should be, but the motor car was. Whatever the Locomotive Acts did to hold back the development of powered vehicles for quarter of a century could be differently presented by the numbers of deaths and injuries it prevented by so doing, and would have done had it remained in place. One has to credit the motor lobby, it was very good at presenting a positive as a negative. Like the bicycle the motor car had no practical purpose save for the enjoyment of the very few wealthy enough to own one. While a bicycle in the 1890s cost between £12 and £30, way out of the reach of most, a motor car was more in the £300-500 bracket, the stuff of the super-rich. As with the bicycle, transport infrastructure had developed perfectly satisfactorily without motor cars and there was no *need* for them whatsoever. The lobby that demanded that the locomotive act be reviewed to allow motor cars to be driven without physical speed control in the form of a person preceding the vehicle on foot was immensely powerful and began serious politicking in 1894-5 succeeding in their goal with the Locomotives on Highways Act of 1896. As many in the lobby were close to government it is no surprise that success came quickly, particularly given that the motor car was largely an unknown quantity to the public at large, those who knew anything of them generally assumed that they would do little more than replace a few carriages, the eccentric toys of the rich. The 1896 act stipulated a 12 MPH national speed limit, but then, no motor car carried a speedometer. Effectively, by removing that person in front of the vehicle, the genie was out of the bottle, motorists would drive to the speed of their vehicles, not to that of all other road users.

Many early motorists had been active as cyclists; so, were already used to ‘owning’ the road, notably people like William Rees Jeffreys who became the official voice for motoring in Government circles in the Edwardian period and after. Jeffreys was behind many of the terms of the 1903 Motor Car Act, that increased the national speed limit to 20 MPH, in a quid-pro-quo against introducing registration plates and driving licences. A largely forgotten element of this act was the introduction of motor car notices, the first ever state-specified modern road signs. SLIDE Pilain Seen by many as controlling, in fact they were the first physical statement that the state was willing to equip the road for motor cars at the expense of all other road users. From 1904 the public road was signed only for motorists and pressure was exerted to clear the roads of ‘other road users’ to facilitate their free passage and, from 1930 any ‘sign of another character’, not designed to motoring specification. I need not give much further history as those are the roads we have today.

SLIDE Ratepayers

The issue, as I see it in the present, is a direct inheritance from the historical origins I outline here. Mechanised road transport has been formed round giving the privileged a right of way over all other road users. It does not matter that now bicycles are within the financial reach of almost all in economically advanced societies and motoring is largely (if wrongly) taken for granted as a universal form of travel, people grow up with the attitude that both are about travelling quickly and all other road users ceding right of way. Can we change it? Not while there is a ‘cycling superhighway’ mentality amongst those lobbying for active travel, that merely replicates the mistakes of ‘free passage’ encouraging a style of cycling that replicates that of those (many) motorists who believe that the streets should be free of foot traffic, that because they move quickly they should be given ‘right of way’.

In decades past, I found cycling a pleasure because one shared the road with motor vehicles and their drivers, at least (in the main) the ground rules were clear. Now, cut-in by snarling MAMILS as some sort of obstruction that should be eliminated, I realise that cycling culture is rapidly returning to ‘King of the Road’ mentality and I find that frightening. If we want a truly democratic transport system we need to get back to the principles of the Locomotive Acts.