**A RED CARD FOR THE RED FLAG:**

**RESPONDING TO THE SO-CALLED ‘RED FLAG ACT’**

The cycling lobby of the 1870s and 80s was vociferous in its exaggeration of ‘problems’ that in fact were things that were to the benefit of the larger population, but not to cyclists. The motor lobby, largely formed of cyclists and ex-cyclists learned from this approach. While cyclists tend to see things from their own perspective, it should be the duty of a journal such as this to set things straight. So, it is with some depression that I read Bob Damper (*TB* 221 p39) referring to the ‘Red Flag Act’ in relation to the *Locomotives on Highways Act* of 1896, given the ‘Red Flag Act’ (Actually the *Locomotives on Highways Act* of 1865) had been superseded in 1878 by the *Highways and Locomotives (Amendment) Act*, in which the ‘red flag’ requirement was deleted in England and Wales. A locomotive still had to be preceded by a person at ‘least twenty yards ahead of the locomotive on foot’. This requirement was perfectly logical. By far the greatest amount of traffic on the road was foot traffic and there was an expectation that wheeled vehicles (drawn by animals) would naturally move at much the same speed as foot traffic. Locomotives were assumed to be steam-powered traction engines and road rollers, but there had been steam carriages and the legislation was designed to prevent these being developed and used in such a way to threaten existent road users. The tiny numbers of cyclists, and then motorists, mainly of the leisured middle and upper classes using their vehicles almost entirely for pleasure, did not agree with what seems to be, from today’s perspective, a remarkable piece of democratic legislation, and did all they could to overturn anything that was of benefit to foot traffic.

The cycling lobby was advantaged by the nature of their machines, it was difficult to define them as ‘locomotives’ although there was public pressure for this. Without their being defined as locomotives, cycles could be used freely and, as more cycles were built and sold, the lobby was increasingly supported by the economic benefit the cycle industry and infrastructure to support the activity brought. The lobby successfully kept cycles outside of legislation that would seriously restrict their use and, importantly, speed. It is speed that is the essential of all campaigning at this time. Cyclists wanted to travel far faster than foot traffic, foot traffic did not like this prospect, but without the bicycle being a deemed a ‘locomotive’, speed was impossible to successfully control. County authorities were permitted to act against ‘furious riding’ and the cycling press of the time is full of scare stories about unfair trails. In fact, with few exceptions, usually those where cyclists came into conflict with horse traffic, cyclists were clearly in the wrong, moving at a pace that threatened the normal traffic on the road with very limited braking capacity and sometimes none at all. All those accounts of cyclists losing control of their machines on downhill slopes, only to see foot and animal traffic blocking their path and desperately shouting to have the road cleared, should be looked at from the point of view of the other road users, not the cyclists, who deserved what they got if they fell from their machines. Nevertheless, they tend to be looked at from the point of view of the cyclists. Moreover, the facts that the bicycle was small, human powered and that cyclists often came off worse for falling, tended to conceal their inherently threatening nature.

The success of the cycling lobby was undoubted, but not surprising, because its social demographic was of such status that gave it clout, most of its members were middle or upper class. While cyclists had to overrule the (usually sensible) words of those who thought that vehicles moving at speeds could put foot traffic at serious risk, they had modernity and youth on their side as well as the advantage of social status and an increasing economic footprint.

With the motor car, it clearly was a ‘locomotive’ within the terms of the Act and exactly the sort of vehicle that the Act was designed to control. This it did very successfully, with very few taking up motoring while the vehicles remained under its control. At first sight the motor lobby had a far greater challenge in overturning legislation, rather than avoiding it. However, the motor lobby had huge advantages. Anyone who owned a motor car was, by default, extremely wealthy. Many of those pressing to have the act overturned were close to, or actually in government. Many had ten or twenty years of cycling experience to call upon and were ‘established’ in all senses, middle-aged, monied and in positions of authority. They played the same cards as the cyclists, arguing that they represented the vanguard of modernity, and that the potential economic benefits of the motor car far outpaced the concerns of those who wanted to keep the status-quo. The key thing was to overturn the requirement for physical speed control. Without the preceding person the motorist would be able to travel at whatever speed the vehicle would go. The negative potential of this was probably largely unrealised by the larger population. In 1896 few had ever seen a motor car and to many it seemed no more than an eccentric plaything that at most might replace a few carriages; cyclists had been allowed on the road without physical speed control and the status quo had not really been disrupted. It was no wonder that the *Locomotives on Highways Act* was passed against opposition that was already being stigmatised as out-of-date and fuddy-duddy.

However, the lobbyists of 1896 knew their regulations, they were arguing against having to have someone precede their vehicles on foot. The concept of the red flag in relation to motoring is largely retrospective. The idea of some poor person having to wave a red flag sixty yards in front of a motor car was used as an icon of stick-in-the-mud conservatism and *looked* ridiculous, therefore, in spite of it being inaccurately applied, ‘the Red Flag Act’ became a useful trope that became commonplace *after* 1896 as part of the process of ridiculing the past and built into popular history as a result. To see it cited in *The Boneshaker* is a sad inditement of how well rooted the trope is.

That in 1896 having someone precede a vehicle on foot was the only way that speed could be controlled in an effective manner for the free passage of all other road users without threat or injury, remains unmentioned in almost all histories of the rise of the motor vehicle. So successful was the motor lobby that I cannot remember ever hearing or reading a post 1896 argument in favour of the strictures of either the *Locomotives on Highways Act* or the *Highways and Locomotives (Amendment) Act*, which it is confused for. Instead it is invariably depicted as ludicrous and, indeed, sometimes illustrated with some miserable looking motorist being preceded by some tramp-like individual with a red flag perhaps six feet, rather than sixty yards, in front of a vehicle that would not have even been in existence at the time the red flag was a requirement.

The *Locomotives on Highways Act* at first stipulated a maximum speed of 14mph. In fact, this was reduced to twelve on advice from the Local Government Board, largely based on the pace of bicycles and thereby seeming to fall into line with existing road users. However, this was way above normal foot and animal traffic, while a motor car is a very different thing from a bicycle or tricycle. The speed limit was effectively nominal, given that few vehicles carried speedometers, and once the requirement for physical speed regulation was removed the genie was out of the bottle. There was only one way that speeds of motor cars would go, and that was up; while all other road users would remain physically restricted by the capability of limbs. ‘Emancipation Day’ (as motorists called it) was hardly very emancipatory from everyone else’s perspective, and certainly not for the hundreds and thousands who would be seriously injured or killed by motor vehicles driven at speed. The 1896 Act had nothing to do with red flags, but everything to do with road politics.

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Useful references

Alexander Glen *The Highways Acts 1862-1878, The Locomotive Acts 1861-1878 and the General Provisions of the Turnpike Continuance Acts 1863-1878.* Knight & Co, London, 1879 (5th edn)

John A Williamson *The Rights & Liabilities of Cyclists*. Illife, London, 1889. (2nd edn)

John A Williamson *The Motor Car Acts 1896 & 1903*. Autocar, London, 1903.