Nicholas Oddy

**History, Tweed and the Invisible Bicycle**

Introduction

There is an important catch in the theme of this book and this chapter with in it. It is necessary to differentiate between the bicycle and the bicyclist, as one can be more invisible than the other. At present in the UK the bicycle remains largely invisible, but the cyclist does not. To illustrate this, we need go no further than the nearest city street. One sees many cars, but how many motorists? As almost all motor cars are now made fully enclosed with tinted windscreens and windows, their drivers and occupants become invisible. In day to day language we acknowledge this difference of visibility by tending to give agency to the car: “that car nearly ran me down”; yet the chances are, when faced with a bicycle, we will attribute agency to the cyclist: “that cyclist went straight through those red lights”.

With this in mind, “History, Tweed and the Invisible Bicycle” develops the themes of a number of short papers delivered by the author to the International Cycling History Conference, and another delivered as part of the “Invisible Bicycle” strand at the ICHSMT Conference in 2013.[[1]](#footnote-1) It also touches on some of the themes raised in “This Hill Is Dangerous”, an article in *Technology and Culture* discussing road signage and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[[2]](#footnote-2) The chapter considers the way in which cycling has been perceived in the context of increasing “invisibility” during much of the twentieth century; then in the context of increasing visibility and assertiveness in recent years.

History has had a very significant role in cycling. The first written histories of the machine were published in the late 1860s, shortly before the high wheeled machine of the 1870s, the starting point of this chapter, was invented. They were the first ever histories that focused on a modern consumer durable.[[3]](#footnote-3) They set a pattern in which historic machines were presented mainly to demonstrate the superiority of newer ones, a model that remained dominant for well over a century and is still common. It was not long before actual demonstrations of ‘ancient’ machines were employed to do the same as a type of living history.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this chapter, such historical presentation is seen to become significant only during the first half of the twentieth century, when both bicycles and their riders became steadily less visible, even though there were far more of them than there had been previously. In contrast, the “antique” bicycle was often very visible as part of fairs and processions, this will be explored in some depth.

The growing invisibility of bicycles and their riders on the road was not only cultural; bicycles were seen as presenting a hazard to motorists who might not notice them. During the 1920s, against the advice of the Cyclists’ Touring Club (CTC), the most significant voice of cycling at government level, the UK government took steps to make *bicycles* more visible but not cycling, a key difference that subtly discouraged the activity. Attention waned as cycling diminished in the Post-War era, and with it what visibility it had.

However, in the last three decades, with an increase in the activity, cycling has become far more visible and, in turn, attention has turned to make *cyclists* more visible, something that has been reflected in wider culture. I conclude the chapter in looking at the “Tweed Run”, where once again “antique” (or now “retro and vintage”) bicycles are presented for public display, to explore the present state of visibility of bicycles and their riders.

Red lights for the hazardous bicycle

Undoubtedly, the bicycle enjoyed its moment of greatest visibility in the 1870s and 1880s when the “ordinary” bicycle was one with a high front wheel fitted to the inside leg of its rider, giving him (almost invariably him) the elevated riding position of an equestrian. The bicycle was the fastest vehicle on the road and it was the fantastic nature of the machine that captured the public imagination, as in this reminiscence by Flora Thompson in *Over to Candleford*:

“How fast those new bicycles travelled and how dangerous they looked! Pedestrians backed almost into the hedges when they met one of them...it was thrilling to see a man hurtling through space on one high wheel with another tiny wheel wobbling helplessly behind.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The bicycle’s visibility was compromised when that style of machine was superseded by the chain-driven-rear-wheel “safety” bicycle, a process largely complete by the mid-1890s. The ‘safety’ brought the rider down to the level that we are familiar with today, making the bicycle less conspicuous and adjusting downwards both the cyclist’s view of his (and now her) view of the road and the visibility of the bicyclist to other road users. The bicyclist’s head was now at the same level and sometimes slightly below that of pedestrians of much the same height, giving the possibility of direct eye contact; no longer did the cyclist take the elevated position of “king of the road”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The process of invisibility was slowed by cycling reaching a fashionable peak during the “bicycle boom”, which lasted from 1894–1897. Manufacturers were keen to sustain the bicycle’s visibility by constant (if minor) changes to fittings and details to differentiate the most recent from the previous; but the boom was a time when public attention was more focused on the bicyclists. Many were wealthy, powerful and/or famous and their cycling in the parks and boulevards of major cities, in full view of idle spectators, was the stuff of press reports. It could be argued that visibility had transferred from the machines to their riders.

Meanwhile, a much more visible machine had begun to appear on the road, the motor car. This would not have much effect on the number of cyclists in the UK until after the Second World War, but it did have serious effect on their status as road users. After the “boom”, the bicycle became adopted as a form of transport, mainly by the middle classes. For the first four decades of the twentieth century, bicycle use grew as it became more demotic and, as a consequence, was increasingly unremarkable. Both bicycles and their riders entered a period of increasing “invisibility” as part of day-to-day road traffic, while throughout a steady stream of wealthier cyclists abandoned their bicycles in favour of motor vehicles when they became within realistic financial reach.

The invisibility of both bicycles and bicyclists in the twentieth century is one that is entirely connected with the development of motoring and later road planning. Indeed, in the UK it can be almost pinpointed to a particular event in 1906, the case mounted in the High Court to test whether or not the CTC could expand its constitution to include motorists. The court decided that it could not and the die was cast - motoring and cycling clubs were placed in opposition to one another.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This was significant. In the UK, motoring had not existed to any extent prior to 1896 when the Locomotives on Highways Act of that year removed many restrictions to the use of “light locomotives of under three tons unladen”, which it defined as “motor cars”, on public roads.[[8]](#footnote-8) Until then, the “road improvement” lobby had been more or less entirely composed of middle and upper-class cyclists devoted to asserting their right to the highway. On the introduction of motor cars, many wealthy and influential cyclists began to turn their interests to motoring, taking their campaigning skills with them. The 1906 ruling effectively excluded cycling from being directly associated with motoring, placing it in what was to become the category of “other road users”, alongside foot and animal traffic. It ensured that many early motorists would become *former* cyclists, rather than *also* cyclists.

Anywhere there were motor cars there was heavy pressure placed on authorities to give them primacy over other road users; their expense restricted their market to the most powerful socio-economic groups and their size, power and potential speed was largely incompatible with normal traffic, which was steadily squeezed off the road. In most industrially developed nations the second paradigm of automobility, in which the motor car was accepted as the definitive road vehicle, had been achieved by the early to mid-1930s.[[9]](#footnote-9)

To illustrate how quickly cycling was downgraded and written out of road transport history in the UK, one only needs to turn to the seminal work by Sydney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government – The Story of the King’s Highway*,published in 1913, which devotes only a couple of pages to cycling.[[10]](#footnote-10) Had this book been written only a decade earlier, its content would have been very different.

This invisibility was paradoxical given that during the early twentieth century cycling was ever increasing and, during the inter-war years had never been so popular. However, its spread was simultaneous with steadily reducing social status. In 1903, cycling was still largely a middle-class leisure pursuit, with practical application. By 1933 a brand-new bicycle could be bought for between £3 and £4, and cycling had become a working class means of utilitarian transport. That it was more economic than public transport by train, tram or bus only served to emphasise that the bicycle was the transport of the poor.[[11]](#footnote-11) On the other hand, motor cars were still high luxury items, with makers such as Ford and Morris aspiring to bring the retail price of their cheapest models down to £100.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Clearly the socio-political context of both forms of transport was significant in the amount of political sway their lobbyists had at the government level, but it could be reasonably argued that the bicycle became “invisible” because of its lack of “presence” against a much larger, more powerful vehicle. Moreover, as mentioned above, the motor lobby was keen to create a paradigm in which “road traffic” became synonymous with motor vehicles. Both factors were to play out in what became the last serious attempt by the UK’s cycling lobby, represented by the CTC, to assert the visibility of the bicycle as a legitimate form of traffic, rather than an obstruction to it, in its opposition to proposals for a “red light act”. This would require cyclists to carry tail lamps at night to allow motorists to see them at a distance beyond the scope of their headlamps. The cycle lobby argued that motorists should not drive faster than their lamps allowed; it was the responsibility of motorists to assume that there would be unmarked traffic on the road travelling at low speeds and they should drive in accordance with it.[[13]](#footnote-13) The result of the debate was a compromise in 1927 and another in 1934. First; that a reflector should be fitted to a bicycle if no lamp was carried; then, that the reflector be augmented with eight square inches of white surface.[[14]](#footnote-14) While the CTC had fended off the requirement for tail lamps, it was a Pyrrhic victory that still demanded that bicycles be made “visible” to the drivers of motor vehicles driving beyond the distance of their night vision, throwing the onus of responsibility on to the cyclist.

It is important to differentiate this sort of constructed conspicuousness, in which today many riders bedeck themselves in fluorescent and reflective clothing, fearful of otherwise being overlooked by motorists, from the sort of visibility cycling had enjoyed in the latenineteenth century. Constructed conspicuousness is largely an imposition with the aim to aid the free passage of motorists; but, it is generally presented under a camouflage of “safety”, which acts as a tool of coercion. Whatever its value in preventing cyclists being run down by motor vehicles (or rather, their “invisible” drivers), it is tantamount to an acknowledgement of cycling’s invisibility as a legitimate form of traffic. Rather, it treats cycling as an obstruction. It would be reasonable to argue that the more visible cycling is in cultural terms, the less the requirement to make cyclists conspicuous.

In the context of road legislation in the 1930s, cycling tended to be allied to foot and animal traffic, the representatives of the past. Foot traffic was inevitable, but it was hoped could be restricted to sidewalks and “official” road crossing points.[[15]](#footnote-15) Cycles and horse drawn vehicles were often perceived as more problematic because they shared the road with motor vehicles. Typical of this view was a three-fold pamphlet put out by the British Roads Federation in the late 1930s, presented as a conversation between *The Railwayman and The Motor Driver*. Here cycling and horse traffic become allied by default as enemies of the modern transport systems. The text reads, “Look at the layout of your railways. They’re designed to serve horse transport instead of motor transport”, illustrated by two cartoons, one of a congested goods yard full of horses and wagons along with another captioned, “Horses and cyclists cause congestion and pay no tax”.[[16]](#footnote-16) In this model it does not matter how modern the cycle might be (the cartoon shows a lightweight type machine) it is representative of something that is rapidly becoming an obstruction to progress and will be displaced.

It is in this context that we return to the presentation of the antique machine. After the almost total transition from the high wheel bicycle to the safety bicycle, the former soon became derisorily known as the “penny-farthing” and, not long after, became an iconic bygone that could be wheeled out to demonstrate progress. Moreover, it was eminently display-worthy because of its obvious visual difference from more modern machines, its height and its riders’ seeming acrobatic ability just to ride it. Toemphasise the impracticalantiquity of the machine, the rider would often dress in “Victorian” costume of top hat and tailcoat, very different from the sort of clothing actually worn by bicyclists in the 1880s. The fact that the machines had been made in large numbers made them readily available, they became an expected part of processions at fairs during the period of increasing automobilism.

From the ancient machine to the mountain bike

The idea of the “ancient” machine being used as part of public exhibitions to illustrate notions of western progress is a fairly obvious visual trope that could be compared to the public display of motorists driving veteran cars, typified by the London-Brighton veteran car rally (first run in 1927 for pre-1905 motor vehicles).[[17]](#footnote-17) But, there was a significant difference. The veteran car was the predecessor of the motor car, the vehicle of the future, making its place honourable. Veteran motor cars were rather the same as modern ones, allied to thetwentieth century rather than the nineteenth. The London-Brighton run was (and remains) on the public road, in the midst of “normal” traffic, over a distance that would have been substantial when the vehicles were in their currency.

In contrast, the penny-farthing’s symbolic values were (and remain) more complex and demeaning. The penny-farthing was the predecessor of a transport form that was simultaneously losing a visible place on the road and seen as an obstruction to progress. As if to emphasise its uselessness, and unlike the veteran car, it tended only to be demonstrated over a short distance on roads closed to normal traffic. In overall effect, the penny-farthing became representative of obsolete pre-motor traffic, even though the bicycle itself was far from obsolete.

The linear nature of modernist ideas of history added to this. Commonly, cycle enthusiasts point out that without the technologies developed by the cycle industry, the motor car could not have been built, but this does not validate cycles built after those technologies have been adopted by the more advanced and modern transport form.[[18]](#footnote-18) The seemingly ludicrous nature of the penny-farthing as a bicycle type given the problems of height and balance, compared to more modern forms of road transport, further demeaned it and cycling as a whole as the product of Victorian eccentricity, unusable in modern road conditions.

As such, the penny farthing was seen by many to be an object of ridicule that represented the whole of cycling in a period of mass motorisation, a form of transport for the poor that would eventually be replaced by universal motoring. This was a very different reading from that of the 1890s and first years of the twentieth century when the historic significance of the high bicycle was merely that it had been superseded by another bicycle.

In the UK, there was little to challenge this perception of cycling until the early 1980s. A notable attempt was made by Alex Moulton in the early 1960s to offer a new type of bicycle for city riding that looked very different from established bicycle forms and was aimed at a middle-class, car-owning market. Small wheeled, ungendered and clearly modern, it seemed to have the possibility of repositioning the popular perception of cycling. But, although it was enthusiastically taken up by the cultural historian Rayner Banham amongst others, and widely publicised, generating significant initial sales figures, it coincided with the high-tide of motorisation in the UK and remained an eccentricity.[[19]](#footnote-19)

It could be argued that Moulton’s bicycle failed by being intended to fit into transport infrastructure, which, by the 1960s, largely ignored cycling. It can be compared to the most advanced designs of steam locomotives that were contemporary with it. They attracted the attention of enthusiasts, but in the larger scheme of things the steam locomotive was obsolete, no matter how modern. To become visible cycling needed to position itself outside of transport infrastructure and therefore outside of public expectations of a cheap form of short-distance travel that would be better by car. Yet somehow, this position would need to avoid falling into the “other” public perception of cycling provided by racing and overt competition against the clock. These placed the activity in the category of “sport” limited to enthusiasts and with as much relevance to transport as Formula-One motor racing had to day-to-day motor traffic.

The introduction of the commercial mountain bike to the UK market in 1981–1982 did just that.[[20]](#footnote-20) Is it just a convenient coincidence that this type of bicycle emerged as postmodernism became established as the dominant cultural discourse in western nations? Whatever the case may be, there is a good case to claim it as a postmodern bicycle, not only in its production and consumption, but even in its style, which to some extent reflected the revival of design discredited by modernist history, such as art deco and “50s contemporary”. Just as it was almost impossible to fit popular design styles into established modernist understandings of design history, the mountain bike’s large diameter tube construction, fat tyres, wide saddle and level bars could neither be easily related to modernist understanding of the machine beautiful as utilitarian transport, nor of cycle racing and time trialling.

Indeed, there was no intention to lock the mountain bike into transport infrastructure or established cycle sport. Its development was as a plaything in a context of Bay-area hippy youth, appealingly romantic to middle-class young adults elsewhere. The mountain bike was designed to be ridden down steep hillsides over rough terrain. It had its origins in American “balloon tire clunkers” from the 1930s-60s.[[21]](#footnote-21) These machines were despised by “serious” cyclists as triumphs of style over practicality, aimed largely at children and teenagers; completely outside of modernist expectations of technological development.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The significance of the mountain bike was that it re-established an understanding of cycling that had been lost with the rise of motoring, that cycling could be conducted for pleasure, by young (in particular male) adults, as a fashion statement. Indeed, to many non-cycling motorists, mountain-bikes were made most visible not by being seen on the road, but rather strapped to rear carriers on relatively expensive cars, en-route to the out-of-town, off-road sites of their intended use, emphasising their *pointlessness*. They seemed superfluous, both in the context of established transport and established forms of cycle sport, and, being in a position of being extra to them, were therefore clearly luxuries. This was significant because it was a clear indication that the bicycle could be a personal choice of vehicle for those who owned motor cars. This undermined the still commonly held belief that cycling was merely a cheap form of transport for those did not, in turn undermining the lingering assumption that bicycles were the poor-person’s substitute for motor cars. [[23]](#footnote-23)

The mountain biker *chose* to ride a bicycle for no good reason other than pleasure, and in doing so recaptured the high point of cycling in the 19th century when it was the stuff of the leisured classes. Then, even in sporting competition, the most influential proponents of the activity were keen to establish it as superfluous to necessity, jealously promoting its “amateur” status against those who might use it to make a living.[[24]](#footnote-24) Although manuals of the time sometimes pay lip service to utility, few cyclists seem actually to have used their machines for day-to-day travel; indeed, their major lobbying organisation was specifically for “touring”, distancing the activity from utility[[25]](#footnote-25). All this was important in terms of reflecting the social class of the cyclists. Cycling involved a fair bit of physical effort, the stuff of the working class, therefore cycling tended to be treated as a leisure activity that one would *choose* to do. It is not difficult to see that cycling’s invisibility in the 20th century in the UK was closely allied to how necessary it became as a cheap form of utility transport. The mountain biker repositioned the bicycle as a lifestyle and fashion accessory.

An important aspect of the mountain bike was its relationship to overt consumerism in the context of the then dominant belief in an entrepreneurial free-market economy that permeated US and UK politics. Mountain bikes tended to be made by small and medium-sized newcomers to the industry, trading on an international basis across the USA, the UK, mainland Europe and Japan. Rosen proposed that the manufacture of the machine moved into a post-modern framework of flexibility within globalisation, which allowed makers to respond rapidly to developments in technologies and styles.[[26]](#footnote-26) This was very different from the then established model of mass manufacturers such as Raleigh making utility machines and tending to operate on Fordist principles of standardisation, with the specialist market being supplied finely crafted, lightweight machines turned out by small workshops, with distribution usually contained within national or even local boundaries.

An essential feature of the mountain bike was its potential hybridity. Designed outside of any established expectations, its market had few preconceptions as to what it “should” be. The mountain bike was subject to variation in detail not seen since the bicycle boom with (often costly) novelties in suspension, gearing and frame design which often bore uncanny similarities to that earlier period, for instance the “biometric” chain ring.[[27]](#footnote-27) Bicycles again started to be able to be differentiated on a seasonal basis with such novelties quickly becoming dated. An observation here is that there is a clear link to the bicycle’s most ‘visible’ period in terms of fashion and status before it began to slip into invisibility against the motor car; it was almost as if the bicycle, if not the cyclist, had regained something of that time.

The commercial mountain bike might first have been designed with off-road conditions in mind; but, laden with gears and with an upright riding position, it could easily be ridden on-road to make an urban fashion statement. Its rugged design lent itself to kerb-hopping and “traffic busting” on road surfaces cut up by motor vehicles. As mountain bikes began to move from extreme leisure pursuit to a commonplace in city streets, they had the potential of making cycling a viable, fashion-conscious alternative to motoring in the urban context, at least to younger adults. But overall, whether ridden on road, or strapped to the back of a motor car on the way to some distant hillside, the mountain bike was very visible to all as something very different in cycling culture.

The mountain bike entered a streetscape already populated by “invisible” cyclists representing the remnants of utility riding. However, despite their relative rarity and the fact that they were inconspicuous on the road, they were certainly not an easily defined group in socio-economic class, values or beliefs. To a great extent the huge decrease in working class utility cycling had destroyed the previously most visible cycling culture, leaving an inhomogeneous mix of the remnants of utility riding on everything from small-wheelers to full roadsters and “club” style touring and time trialling on lightweight “racing” machines. The addition of the mountain bike to this could be seen to begin a process of multiplication of discourses of cycling practice and culture. The mountain bike itself diversified, the “ATB” (all-terrain bicycle) aimed at general off-road use and “hybrids” (mountain bike frames with higher gearing and narrower rims carrying lighter tyres) for the road.

While the mountain bike began a process of altering the perception of cycling in the 1980s, one should look at rising concern for health and increasing awareness of the environment and sustainability for what was to give it legitimacy during the 1990s. These were to give a moral imperative for using bicycles, but crucially, they were framed by an assumption that cycling was a preferable alternative to driving a motor vehicle for the same journey. It might be noted that few post-1980 exhortations to use cycling as an alternative to motoring focus on economy, which could feed lingering impressions of it being the transport of the poor.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Whatever the mountain bike might have achieved in terms of reviving a fashionability akin to the bicycle boom, its underlying values were more those of the 1870s and '80s; young, masculine and athletic. Of these, athleticism seems by far to have been the most significant in setting cycle fashion. An important factor here was rising awareness of competition cycling, fuelled by British successes on the track by the likes of Chris Boardman, using new and visible technologies. Boardman’s carbon-fibre monocoque, mono-blade machine was complemented by its rider clad in a skin of Lycra and plastic, all proven by wind-tunnel testing.[[29]](#footnote-29) Truly, it seemed, rider and machine were one, operating in perfect mechanical harmony. The aesthetic was taken up by cutting edge fashion that locked into gymnastics and dance in clothing ranges put out by edgy labels such as BOY London, DKNY, Bodymap and Pineapple Studios.[[30]](#footnote-30) Lycra lent itself to the psychedelia of rave dance culture of the early 1990s.

Meantime, an equal influence came from the do-or-die riding style of bicycle couriers. Couriers became noticeable during the 1980s as document delivery in financial centres could be achieved far more quickly by bicycle than any other way in a period before digital file transfers. This was largely because of the lax legislation applying to cyclists, who could “traffic-bust” with relative impunity; pavement hopping, breaking traffic signals, squeezing through narrow gaps and alleys. Most used ATB style machines, which lent themselves to mounting kerbs and running down steps. Couriering was a real rarity in that it was a truly utilitarian use for bicycles that made obvious commercial sense, but it was made far more extraordinary by the fact that it looked and was urban, rebelliously daring and exciting, with many of the characteristics of a youth sub-culture.[[31]](#footnote-31) This could hardly be said of any previous utilitarian cycle use.

Was all this positive in terms of cycling culture? While the machines were more and more variegated, it might be noted that they might not have been the most visible part of the equation. Lycra at raves, and the publicity surrounding the riding practices of couriers seems more a response to the visibility of cyclists, rather than bicycles. Although both couriers and lycra-wearing “hard” cyclists were small groups within a whole, their high visibility lent itself to stereotyping.

All these newly visible cycling forms were closely allied to overtly visible fitness and, in the UK, were dominant at the time that environmentalists and transport planners began to forward the idea that cycling should begin to replace motoring for short-haul journeys. Two imperatives underlay its uptake at government level. The first was long-standing but ever-increasing: namely concerns regarding global warming and carbon emissions by motor vehicles. The second was new: the cost to the National Health Service in treating rising levels of obesity in an increasingly sedentary population.

Responding to these new imperatives, many UK cities' local authorities began to reassess the place of cycling in motor-dominated road provision. Their aim is invariably to encourage a general uptake of cycling amongst all age groups and both sexes, and to achieve this laudable aim many of their policies have been based round increasing public awareness of cycling. Rather appropriately, many have adopted a technique of visibly marking the roads, a tactic first developed by cycling clubs on country roads by erecting “danger boards”, the first modern road signs, in the 1880s.[[32]](#footnote-32) Today, local authorities favour road markings more than signs alone, particularly in urban areas, in an attempt to encourage utility cycling, most obviously commuting. While the design and implication of these remains controversial amongst cycling lobbying groups, their effect has been to make the invisible far more visible by asserting a presence even when there are no cyclists on the road.[[33]](#footnote-33) Although such infrastructure is often accused of being tokenistic, its importance as an indicator of changing attitudes to cycling as day-to-day transport should not be underestimated. It serves to legitimise the activity on streets largely given over to motor vehicles.

The overall effect of all this is that in the UK, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen a marked shift in which cycling has been made visible in a way it had not been since the early 1930s. Moreover, for those who care to look, a multiplicity of *bicycles* has become visible, along with a multiplicity of riding styles and cultures to suit the bicycles. However, it could be argued that far more visible than the bicycles are the bicyclists who dress themselves up in the most conspicuous manner. Thus, it is that public perceptions of what a cyclist should look like seemingly remain dominated by modernist beliefs in technological progress, largely informed by cycle sport and enhanced by “safety” features. Indeed, in the UK, much of cycling's utility is concealed beneath a quasi-competitive aesthetic, with many commuters presenting themselves in full sporting gear. Fashionable it may be, but a long way from the sort of everyday practice that is associated with high percentages of utility cycling that can be seen in, say, Amsterdam or Copenhagen. [[34]](#footnote-34)

It is here that many of the values that are displayed in the Tweed Run come into play. What makes the Tweed Run significant is that it represents an overtly historicist view of cycling based on ideas of tradition and longevity. But this should not be confused with the rarefied, established collector/enthusiast groups devoted to veteran cycles that tend toward antiquarianism. Rather, the Tweed Run attracts those who see cycling as a part of retro fashion. It is the most overt manifestation of “vintage” in cycling, but it has a serious political undercurrent in terms of what type of cycling should be visible in the urban context.

Tweed Runs

The first Tweed Run was organised in London in 2009. It has since grown into a larger franchised event that has been taken up world-wide.[[35]](#footnote-35) Its success has spawned copyists under slightly adjusted names, for instance the “Harris Tweed Ride” in Scotland. With this has come diversity; the scale and commercial management of the events range from intense to non-existent. Not surprisingly, the more commercial, the more the sponsorship. This comes from fashion houses: The Tweed Run itself has enjoyed sponsorship by Rugby Ralph Lauren.[[36]](#footnote-36) In all of these cases the cycling is leisured: the opposite of those devoted to “hard riding” or distance achievement. As one might expect, riders are not expected to dress as “cyclists” as the term would be understood today. Unlike previous manifestations of cycling fashion which were informed by competition riding, the tweed run is informed by early-to-mid twentieth century images of bourgeois leisure and utility cycling found in commercial art, in which riders are respectably dressed in practical tweeds or city suits, able to go about their business without looking out of place, in the same way a motorist might.[[37]](#footnote-37) To emphasise this aspect one only needs to look at the itinerary of many Tweed Runs. A “Harris Tweed Ride” recently attended by the author as part of the research for this chapter involved meeting at a boutique hotel for coffee, then visiting a range of up-market city centre clothes shops, a cocktail bar and a fashionable eaterie.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Importantly, although the concept of the Tweed Run is informed by popular understandings of history, there is no demand for a historic machine. The choice of bicycle reflects the dress, encapsulating an attitude to cycling informed by an idea of “traditional” cycling employing a bricolage of historic and contemporary references that are loosely termed “retro”. Thus, while some riders ride older machines, many appear on updated takes on ‘traditional’ machines generally taking from the roadster (the upright “black bicycle”); others use machines that in some way encapsulate the nature of non-competitive bourgeois riding, but have little connection to traditional cycle design, for instance the folding, small-wheeled “Brompton”.[[39]](#footnote-39) In such a context, a rider on an Edwardian roadster, now some 110 years old, hardly stands out from the other bicycles present. This places it in a very different historical understanding from the penny-farthing ridden as iconic bygone. The veteran bicycle is notable in being so little different from its modern counterparts, the Dutch-style heavy roadsters and Pashley-style safety roadsters, that it demonstrates a type of timelessness largely immune from technological or stylistic change.[[40]](#footnote-40) It is, ironically, almost invisible; as at home on the city streets of 2018 as it was on those of 1908.

This is reflected in the pictures of the various Tweed Runs freely available on the web. Most of the riders, though dressed for the event, would rarely look out of place, were they cycling outside of it.[[41]](#footnote-41) Indeed, an obvious observation is that they would not look out of place if they were *not* cycling. Rather, they look like many of the day-to-day riders that Colville Andersen photographs to illustrate *Cycle Chic.*[[42]](#footnote-42)Moreover, the sort of cycling culture promoted by tweed runs tends to be gender equal, unlike the dominant masculinity of ATB and Tour de France-fetishising, sports riding that inform much visible cycling on UK streets. A likely reason for this is its close relationship to vintage and retro, which have become main-stream in feminine fashion idioms. Moreover, there is no referencing to athleticism, which gives a further distance from the idea that cycling is inherently about masculine competitive and/or extreme exercise (summed up by the current acronym MAMIL[[43]](#footnote-43)), rather than transport. However, to the larger public, which is more visible, the rider in “normal” clothes on some sort of utilitarian city-bike, or the MAMIL?[[44]](#footnote-44)

In spite of its cultural positioning moving away from established exclusive tropes, this does not mean that the concept of the Tweed Run is not without its own issues. Like historic bourgeois cycling that lies at its roots, it could be accused of being socially and racially exclusive. While open to all, the runs seem to tend to appeal to those who feel confident in matters of history and/or style, buying-in to the grand narrative of British history when “Britain was still great”. A comparison could be drawn to “reclaim the streets”, a cycle campaign that involves groups of riders taking up the road-space of motor vehicles to reduce traffic speeds to that of cyclists. It is open to all and is promoting general access through road-share, but is inherently exclusive to those who wish to be visible as activists and campaigners.

It could be argued that the Tweed-Run provides a visual display of what *should* be invisible bicycles and their riders, whose presence relies on being accepted as an integral part of the street, as they were a century ago. This is something very different from the idea of their having to be *made* visible to prevent being mown down by motorists who are expected not to notice them otherwise, a practice that has tended to inform UK traffic planning and official attitudes since the “Red Light Act” controversy in the late 1920s and 30s.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rather than invisibility being the issue for the bicycle’s place as part of road traffic, it seems that the opposite might be the case. Maybe the problem is to be found in the attempts to make the bicycle highly visible, particularly to motorists, to make it stand out as a potential hazard and obstruction? Looking at the way cycling was marginalised during and after the inter war years it is reasonable to argue that the CTC were right to be suspicious of “visibility” regulations in the inter war years, but perhaps not just for the reasons it gave at the time.

Rather, reflectors and white paint in 1934 have led to fluorescent reflective coatings, flashing LEDs and “high vis – hi tech” clothing today, effectively moving the visible bicycle to the visible cyclist, but one hidden beneath a shell of equipment that fits to assumptions regarding athleticism and road safety. The more visible does this style of cyclist become, the less visible and “other” are those cyclists who do not mark themselves out in such a way. To an extent, the Tweed Run does something to demonstrate to a larger public that there are others outside of the stereotype; but as yet, the visibility of one particular type of cyclist and the invisibility of others makes it still too easy for those outside of the activity (and indeed many within it) to fall into the trap of being able to define what cyclists *should* look like, whatever the diversity of cyclists themselves.[[45]](#footnote-45) Perhaps for cycling to take a fully integrated place in a shared road space, invisibility might be the best option?

1. Nicholas Oddy, “Let Bygones be Bygones”, Ch.6.3 in *Cycle History 21,* ed. Andrew Ritchie (Birmingham: Cyclin History (Publishing) Ltd, 2012) 11–16; “The Roadster – Iconic Bygone of the Future”, Ch. 2.4 in *Cycle History 24,* ed. Andrew Ritchie and Gary Sanderson (Birmingham, Cycle History (Publishing) Ltd,2014) 82–87; and “A Rather Tweedy History” delivered at Manchester University 2013 (unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nicholas Oddy, “This Hill is Dangerous”, *Technology and Culture* 56/2 (2015): 335–369. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance – Velox, (pseud.): *Velocipedes. Bicycles and Tricycles: How to Make and How to Use Them. With a Sketch of Their History, Invention and Progress* (London:G. Routledge, 1869). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One of the pioneers of cycle design, Pierre Lallement, rode his machine in such a demonstration in 1885: See David Herlihy, *Bicycle* (Yale University Press: New Haven CT, USA, 2004) 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Flora Thompson, *Over to Candleford* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This term was commonly used by riders of high bicycles to describe the experience of cycling. It was used as the trade name of a famous series of Lucas cycle headlamps and, in the 1970s, Andrew Ritchie used it as the title of his seminal history of cycling: *King of the Road* (London: Wildwood House, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James T. Lightwood, *The Cyclists’ Touring Club: Being the Romance of Fifty Years*’. (CTC: London, 1928) 84–92, 232–235; and William Oakley, *Winged Wheel* (CTC: Godalming, 1977) 19–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John A. Williamson,*The Motor Car Acts 1896 & 1903.* (*Autocar*: London, 1903). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Norton, “Four Paradigms of Traffic Safety”, *Technology and Culture* 56/2 (April 2015) 321–331. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sydney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government – The Story of the King’s Highway* (London: Longmans Green, 1913), 239,240. (Reprinted by ULAN n.d.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Hercules Cycle and Motor Company developed a sales policy based on the weekly price of tram and bus fares for an urban worker, with easy hire purchase for machines costing about £4. During this period Hercules was the largest cycle producer in the world, with an annual output of approximately 500,000 machines per annum between 1933 and 1939. Andrew Millward, *The Founding of the Hercules Cycle & Motor Co*. in *Cycle History, Proceedings of the 5th International Cycle History Conference*,ed. Rob van der Plas. (San Francisco: Bicycle Books, 1995), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ## In June 1935, the two-door “Tudor” 8hp Ford model Y was introduced at a retail price of £100, a price it held until July 1937. It became known as the “£100 saloon”; the price was never bettered by any other maker. See Ronald Baker, “Henry's Old Pop: comparison with Youthful Escort”, [*Autocar*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autocar_(magazine)). Vol. 130 no. 3806. (23 January 1969), 45.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Why Cyclists Object To Compulsory Rear Lights* (CTC, London, 1927). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gilbert Woodward, *Woodward’s Road Traffic Acts* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode,1934) 45, 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Woodward, *Woodward’s Road Traffic Acts*, 44,45. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. British Roads Federation, *The Railwayman* (London: British Roads Federation, 6174a, n.d. c1935)1i–1iii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Piers Brendon, *Motoring Century – The Story of the Royal Automobile Club* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997) 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Carlton Reid, *Roads Were Not Built For Cars–How cyclists were the first to push for good roads & became the pioneers of motoring (*Newcastle on Tyne: Front Page Creations, 2014) xi–xv, 3–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bruce Epperson, “A New Class of Cyclist”, in *Cycle History* 22, ed. Andrew Ritchie and Gary Sanderson (Cycling History (Publishing) Ltd: Birmingham, UK) 68–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Tony Hadland and Hans Lessing, *Bicycle Design* (Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2014)434–444. The Specialized “Stump-Jumper” was the first commercially made mountain-bike to be introduced to the UK market. It was soon followed by brands such as Muddy Fox. The names chosen reflect the style of riding. Alex Newson, *Fifty Bicycles That Changed The World* (London: Design Museum & Conran/Octopus, 2013) 58, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Frank Berto, *The Birth of Dirt* (San Francisco: Van Der Plas/Cycle Publishing, 2008) 34–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The first fully developed Balloon Tire machine was the Schwinn “Aero-cycle” of 1933. Its styling was derived from streamform motor cycles being developed by the Indian and Harley Davidson companies. Berto considers the near contemporary Schwinn “Excelsior” to have set the pattern for early mountain bikes. *Birth of Dirt,* 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It is now commonplace to find 4x4 car advertisements in cycling magazines. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The issue of amateur status in competition was particularly marked in cycling, with both the CTC and National Cyclists’ Union jealously guarding the concept that members be ‘amateur’ to protect the idea that cycle racing was merely done for honour. This model was copied by other cycling organisations, notably the League of American Wheelmen (LAW). As cycle sport developed in the late 1880s and 1890s, it became increasingly difficult for cycling organisations to control the amateur and professional issue, with the LAW facing the added problem of race. Andrew Richie, *Major Taylor* (San Francisco: Bicycle Books, 1988) 56–58, 101–107. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The CTC was founded in a context of middle and upper-class men riding high bicycles that had little practical application other than for leisure riding. Through the first part of the 20th century, bicycling became commonplace as a means of commuting, but the CTC persisted in focusing mainly on “touring”. After c. 1930 this was characterised by long distance riding on light-weight, drop-handlebar machines, very different from the kind of working class, short to medium distance travel to work on full roadsters that characterised most bicycle travel. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Paul Rosen, *Framing Technologies* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), 133–154. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The biometric chain ring used computer technology to develop a 19th century concept that an ovoid chain ring would more exactly follow the strengths and weaknesses of leg muscles in the circular motion of pedalling. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Typical is a recent campaign in Edinburgh using bus-mounted posters showing a large beer belly entitled “used a car” against a much leaner one “used a bike”. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Newson, *Fifty Bicycles,* 80, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Nick Clements, “This is Cycle Style Today”, in Horst Friedrich, *Cycle Style* (Munich: Prestel, 2012), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ben Fincham, “Generally Speaking, People are in it for the Cycling and the Beer”, *Sociological Review,* 55:2 (2007)189–202: and ‘Bicycle Messengers – Image, Identity and Community’, Ch.9 in *Cycling and Society,* ed. David Horton et al (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 180–193. The attractive nature of couriering to a youth audience was reflected in the television series *Streetwise* aimed at “tweens”, screened on ITV in 1989–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Nicholas Oddy, “Signing Off”, Ch.4.4 in *Cycle History 25*, ed. Andrew Ritchie and Gary Sanderson (Birmingham: Cycle History (Publishing) Ltd, 2015), 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In particular the extent to which they might be seen to be mandatory, rather than advisory. Nicholas Oddy ‘Signing Off’, fig3. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Although ‘Cycle Revolution’ an exhibition presented at the Design Museum, London

    18 November 2015 - 30 June 2016 proposed that there are four “tribes” of cyclists on UK roads, the exhibition was dominated by competition style “High Performers” and “Thrill Seekers”. See Nicholas Oddy “Bicycle Histories, they have a past, but do they have a future?” in *West86* 23(1) (2016) 129-130

    [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The official website of the Tweed Run is [www.tweedrun.com](http://www.tweedrun.com) (accessed February 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This was a brand of Polo Ralph Lauren aimed at the young adult market, it ran from 2004–2013. In February 2018, its website <http://www.rugby.com/> led direct to the parent company site. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Oddy, “Cycling, A Game for all Players”, 13–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. <http://www.harristweed.org/blog/2013/06/the-edinburgh-harris-tweed-ride/> (accessed July 2015) this source has now been deleted but see http://www.campaignforwool.org/2014/10/08/the-harris-tweed-ride-edinburgh/ (Accessed February 2018). Arguably Tweed Runs follow current trends for social activities and experiential cultural participation often related to visual media, such as ones in the manner of BBC television programmes Bake Off and Strictly Come Dancing on Tour. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hadland & Lessing, *Bicycle Design* 463,464. The Brompton rises to a “Brompton Championship” where “The 800 plus competitors have to wear jackets and ties”. Walsh, “No Froome”. In *The Times* 29 June 2013:

    <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/business/industries/consumer/article3827943.ece> (accessed February 2018); also:

    [https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=brompton+championship](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=brompton+championship+2015) (accessed February 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Dutch heavy, or full roadsters, follow the pattern of early 20th century “popular” models, typically they have high frames with 28 inch wheels, full chaincase and mudguards. The “safety roadster” is a similar machine built on 26 inch wheels and with a lower bottom bracket. It was introduced in the late 1920s to facilitate interaction with the stop-start of motorised traffic, police and light controlled junctions. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. <https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=tweed+run> [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Mikael Colville-Andersen, *Cycle Chic* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012). See also Friedrich, *Cycle Style* for a similar photographic survey, but based in London and with a more overtly fashion driven interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Middle Aged Men In Lycra. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. It might be noted that the lycra/crash helmet/high visibility of the MAMIL is such that the acronym is easily misapplied as the aesthetic conceals both age and gender; by so doing it plays into the acronym’s stereotyping. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Elaine Mullan, and Margriet Groot, “Obsessing on safety: teenage girls attitudes to cycling” **(**Paper presented to Cycling and Society Symposium, Newcastle, September, 2014).

    <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266698205_Obsessing_on_safety_teenage_girls_attitudes_to_cycling> . See also: *Obsessing on safety: Teenage girls’ attitudes to cycling*(second version)**.**

    <http://newcycling.org/wp-content/uploads/CSS2014_MullanEtAl_comb.pdf> and *Drivers, teenagers, danger and tolerance: Views from Ireland* (Waterford: Department of Health, Sport & Exercise Sciences, 2014)

    http://repository.wit.ie/2994/1/C%26S%20symposium%202014%20-%20Drivers,%20teens%20%26%20cycling%20presentation%202%20-%20E.%20Mullan.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-45)