

On a Bicycle Made for Town

My first ever national newspaper article – published in The Times February 14th 1974

Every weekday morning I cycle six and a half miles from Islington, where I live, to Fulham, where I work, and every weekday afternoon I cycle six and a half miles home. My average time in each direction is 30 minutes giving me one hour's rational exercise per day. The journey squeezes me through the jampots of Holborn and Soho and culminates, as far as excitement goes, in the Picadilly underpass, where cars endeavour to turn one into sausages.

By tube the cost per day would be 40p; by taxi £1.60, including tip; by bus 20-30p depending on the time of day and route chosen; by private car a sum of several pounds to include capital outlay, tax, insurance, fuel bills, depreciation, maintenance, loss of interest on initial investment and so on.

I have three bicycles. The first cost me £10, plus £1 a month to maintain. The second, a Raleigh Mercury, cost £35 plus 20p a month to maintain. My third bicycle is a privately-built masterpiece costing me £200 – though this is not taken to work and represents the acme of bicycle luxury. Compared to the cheapest alternative methods of transport, my £35 bicycle is fully “paid off” after eight months and actually “earns money” thereafter. And my most expensive bicycle costs exactly the same as the cheapest viable second-hand car. The time saving is 5 minutes over the tube and 35-40 minutes over the rest.

A bicycle has many advantages over every other means of London transport. In 1885, a young lady wrote to a magazine to question the propriety of riding a bicycle at all. She was told: “The mere act of riding a bicycle is not in itself sinful, and if it is the only means of reaching a church on a Sunday it may be excusable”. In 1974, I would argue that riding a bicycle is to be encouraged as a species of virtue in itself: it is one of the few transport methods we possess which is not intrinsically anti-social.

Bicycles are supremely efficient in large towns because they “always keep going”. They are delayed neither by traffic jams nor by ascending or descending passengers. The average speed of a bicycle crossing Central London is now 12 mph compared to the 8 mph of a motor car.

On a bicycle you have 180 degrees of vision without blindspots, and you can look at the buildings and people you pedal past. Thus at the same time you are the safest road-user in terms of visibility, and the most aesthetic. Unlike the motorist, your speed and general physical condition are perfectly matched. You tend to go more slowly when you are tired, not faster; and if you're very tired, you're even inclined to stop altogether. In comparable situations, the motorist maintains his speeds, or accelerates, until he or she nods off, kills someone, or both.

The sheer physical joy of riding bicycles has often been celebrated. The Raleigh brochure for 1923 says: “Rosy health and a clear brain is what bicycling gives you!” Karl Kron, author of *Ten Thousand Miles On A Bicycle* (1887), writes: “No amount of absorption in study could deaden my ears to the bewitching rattle made by the approaching iron tyres upon the bricks; and when I gazed from my college window and actually saw an acquaintance proudly prancing by on a velocipede, my heart was quite gone. The charming spectacle enraptured my soul, and at the same time

embittered it. I felt that I, too, must be a rider, or die! This sensation stands unique in my experience, and I can recall it as freshly as if it had happened to me yesterday”.

Mrs Harcourt Williamson in *The Complete Cyclist* (1897) informs us that: “The very good riders all pride themselves upon being able to ride without touching their handles; and Miss Muriel Wilson, another smart cyclist, has been seen again and again in Hull with one hand thrust into her coat pocket and the other engaged in holding up her parasol”.

After my six and a quarter miles in the morning, I am certainly always warm, clear-brained and relaxed from negotiating the last Knightsbridge- Brompton Road obstacles. The satisfaction of making headway when all about you are losing theirs is immense. As a cyclist you know you are in turn with nature and you know you represent the future. Given its size and weight and dirt, the car has no future in this sense whatever. A cyclist can still indulge in relatively harmless speed dare-devilry. The sensation of acceleration and overall immediate velocity on a bicycle is greater than that of the most complicated snorting V12 E-type Jaguar. A fast cyclist entering the Euston underpass at 35 mph with cheery Bob Cherry grin can enjoy an experience of simple delight in speed for its own sake without a selfish consequence of any kind.

Bicycles are not subject to road tax and insurance and you don't need a licence to ride one. The legal position of bicycles is infinitely easier than that of motorized transport. If you're lucky enough to survive a road accident as a cyclist, it's the customary practice to win the case and receive tolerable compensation. There is a story of a third-year man who couldn't pay his book bill until he decided to cycle into an oncoming car, though this smacks of Russian roulette.

A cyclist can hoof or sneak through red traffic lights and wander the wrong way one-way streets without too many untoward results. He can always dismount and walk through red lights and “difficult” sections if his conscience forbids indulgence in either of these dubious alternatives. The town cyclist, by the way, is generally in favour of red traffic lights since they courteously delay his road competitors until he can assume his rightful place at the head of the queue.

If you have a lock and chain, a bicycle may be parked anywhere. Particularly favourable attachments are parking meters at absolutely no charge, area railings and as a jocular resort the handles of car doors. If a bicycle is stolen, the usual loss is some £20 only – the price of garaging your car for just three weeks in the attractive basement of one of the Centreparks or an NCP.

There is no truth in the rumour that bicyclists, especially female bicyclists, are forced to wear unattractive clothes or “rational dress” when out propelling their bicycling machines. Even in the 1880s, when women were really expected to show little flesh and cover up the rest with heavyweights of material, the scope for fashion on two wheels was limited only by considerations of price and personal taste.

“Few women ride more gracefully than Mrs W. H. Grenfell”, reported Mrs Harcourt Williamson. “I have seen her dressed all in soft green, a tweed skirt and velvet blouse, with gold belt and velvet Tam O'Shanter, looking more distinguished than anybody else as she passed through the throng in Hyde Park. At Battersea, which was always the most fashionable venue, Lady William, always neat and well dressed, looked her very best in navy blue, with a white sailor collar and cloth toque... I have seen black looking very well on a bicycle. Mrs Arthur Paget has a wonderful skirt –

made in America, I think – which makes her look even slimmer than she is: and many women look their best in white – for instance, Lady Warwick, who wears an all-white costume, with white hat and gloves and shoes to match her white machine. Lady Archibald Campbell is generally dressed in drab, and her smart machine is painted to match. After all, however, the skirt is the thing, and once having this perfect, there is no reason why one should not wear an elaborate blouse and really smart hat on a fine day”.

If you're still not satisfied and you object in any case that bicycles are inadequate as beasts of burden for parcels and shopping baskets, reflect that any change in clothing from furs to boiler suits may be accommodated in the modern panier-carrier and that the North Vietnamese transported field guns *a bicyclette* through rugged mountains to the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which they won. If they can manage howitzers, we can manage the odd Ascot hamper.

As a bicyclist you should know your rights and always attack an absence of deference on the part of rival road-users. The motorist as a menace-laden human failure requires large doses of castigation and perhaps Churchillian victory signs in such situations. I, indeed, have had very satisfactory results from smacking Renault Dauphines and Hillman Minxes encroaching on Knightsbridge. Both vehicles gratifyingly stalled. On another occasion, a Morgan roadster attempted to murder me outside Harrods and then added insult to near injury. In increasingly rousing tones, we proceeded to exchange epithets cheek-by-jowl with the suburban shoppers. I think I won due to early dramatic voice-training, but the budding cyclist should not neglect this aspect of general technique.

Of course, accidents will happen – the secret is to minimise their likelihood. I've had two in a year, both in the same week. The first time, a lady stepped off the pavement and enthusiastically embraced my front wheel. The second time a fellow-cyclist suddenly cut across my track from left to right and administered a shoulder-charge redolent of something from the *Best Of Match Of The Day*. In both cases, there were no casualties. The golden rules to follow are: Learn to ride straight; learn to ride straight while looking behind you; always knowing what *is* behind you.