

“The sun was in our eyes...”

Posted online on July 28 2020



The road from Beamsley up to Langbar, north of Ilkley in West Yorkshire

After 20 years I had finally bought a road bike. It was great fun. Much had moved on since my steel-framed Dawes Windsor touring bike from the early 1980s. The countryside around Otley is ideal for cycling, with enough hills to test even the most fit of athletes, some relatively quiet backroads, and a range of great views. I was getting out for up to 50 miles (80 kilometers) a week and I was starting to feel better for it. But, as I lay flat on my back on the pavement staring at the sky, the joys and health benefits of cycling seemed a little less clear.

COVID-19 has rather stolen the headlines of late, with other major concerns such as the ‘obesity crisis’ and global warming pushed to the inner pages. But this has ‘suddenly’¹ changed with reports about how obesity may make us more vulnerable to COVID-19. Boris Johnson, the UK PM Boris Johnson, the UK PM has now announced that he is to promote cycling and that GPs

will prescribe bicycles to mitigate obesity (<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/transport/doctors-to-prescribe-bikes-on-nhs-under-plan-to-boost-active-travel-a4509996.html>).

Great!

Although one hopes not to be taken orally.

1. Actually this was being reported in the early days of the pandemic <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/health/coronavirus-obesity-higher-risk.html>

With atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations reaching 416.39 ppm in June (<https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends/>), even with lockdown, and rapidly heading to Miocene values, a geological time that ended some 5 million years ago, could this also be the start of mitigating both climate change and obesity by getting the population away from cars and out walking or cycling?

Possibly, hopefully.

But this needs to be more than a headline and more than just lending someone a bike.

I was certainly minded to think on this as I lay flat out on the pavement...

A car heading towards me had cut across me into a side road

without stopping. Unfortunately, I was in-between. I remember being hit, then nothing, and then looking up at the sky and people around me.

Ok, so there are bad cyclists, and certainly, in some of our cities, there are idiots without helmets or lights or, unbelievably, brakes, who are a threat to everyone not least themselves.

But car drivers have the upper hand. No matter how bad the cyclist, if you hit them in a car, the cyclist will come off worse.

So, let me suggest some ideas to mitigate the risks and get more people out and fit.

Some of you will disagree vehemently with some of these I am sure.

What can Governments and planners do?

1. Separate cyclists and motorists in cities and towns.

Look to the Netherlands for how. It is not enough to fudge the solution with quick fix-cycle routes jumping up and down sidewalks (pavements), not following the road preferences (i.e. having cycle give ways at every junction when the road you are on does not for cars), and who on Earth thought that having cyclists going against the flow of traffic on the wrong side of the road was a good idea? Seriously? Doh!

2. Slow down drivers in residential areas.

25 or even 20 miles an hour (look to the US states for examples, such as residential streets in Houston, with which I am familiar). This will reduce pedestrian injuries and fatalities.

3. Paint zebra crossings at all junctions in the center of towns.

Look at European cities, such as Huesca in Spain. This is something advocated by Chris Boardman, former professional cyclist, and the walking and cycling commissioner of Greater Manchester, though sadly blocked by the Department of Transport, because of

current rules on Zebra crossings (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/23/chris-boardman-at-odds-with-dft-over-zebra-crossings-in-manchester>). Numerous zebra crossings slow down traffic and, more importantly, calms traffic. The distinction is important. Many of the problems in British cities seem to center around people being in too much of a rush and too stressed, even when they only save a few seconds from heavy acceleration and heavy braking and then shouting. Calm the cities and towns down!

4. Look at providing better parking in towns and villages.

Get the cars off the sides of roads if you can. Look at some of the ideas from Tokyo with car stacking systems to maximize cars in limited spaces.

5. Fix the roads.

Potholes are a danger to motorists and can damage cars, but they can mean death to a motorcyclist or cyclist. Look at the plastic hybrid roads being developed to address the problem of plastic recycling and road maintenance (<https://www.macrebur.com/about-us/>).

What cyclists can do

1. Follow the rules of the road, which means stopping at red traffic lights.

Not doing so is a risk, but also upsets other road users. We need as many friends as we can get!

2. Cyclists must have working lights (at all times).

The new USB-chargeable LED lights are small, relatively cheap, and easy to fix on a bike, even a road bike.

3. Take a cycling proficiency course.

Get kids to take them to understand the rules of the roads

4. Make the wearing of cycle helmets mandatory

5. Wear something bright and colorful.

What is this predilection for always wearing black? It may have been fashionable for Queen Victoria (post-Albert), but in the 21st century? Get some color out there. Colors are easier to see and look far more fetching. They can be slimming too... I hope...

6. Be courteous to other road users.

Single file on country roads when needed.

7. All cyclists should learn to drive.

You will then appreciate some of the frustrations of drivers (and vice versa).



Grounds for a potential conflict in the kitchen...

What drivers can do

1. **Don't be in such a rush.**
2. **Follow the rules of the road, which means not jumping red traffic lights.**
3. **Take extra care at junctions.** Check twice. Most accidents involving cyclists that I know of happen at junctions.
4. **If you cannot see because of the sun, or a blind corner, or a blind hill, don't make the maneuver!**
5. **Be aware of just how fast cyclists can go.** A common problem is that drivers do not appreciate how quickly cyclists can ride, especially on road bikes.
6. **Be courteous to other road users.** That includes drivers, cyclists, motorcyclists, horse riders, and pedestrians.
7. **Use the "Dutch Reach" to open doors.** Take care when opening the car door. The "Dutch Reach" method in which you have to open the door with your inside hand, forcing the driver or passenger to turn to look behind them, is a simple but effective method. This is due to be added to the UK Highway Code (<https://www.driving.co.uk/news/dutch-reach-car-door-technique-added-highway-code/>)
8. **Go for a cycle.** You will then appreciate some of the benefits, frustrations, and dangers faced by cyclists (and vice versa).



At the end of the day, I was lucky. I didn't have a broken femur as initially thought, and my shoulder is still in one place, the right place. Yes, I did have to cancel a month of business meetings, but I lived to cycle another day, albeit with some 'major' scars to remind me of how vulnerable life is.

But in the two years since my accident, I have only ventured out on my bike once...

"The sun was in our eyes" is a very poor excuse indeed.



About the author

Paul is CEO of Knowing Earth Limited, as well as a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Leeds and Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Bristol. He graduated from St. Edmund Hall, Oxford University in 1987 and received his Ph.D. from The University of Chicago in 1996.

He worked for two years at BP's Research Centre in Sunbury-on-Thames before moving to Chicago, where Paul studied with Professor Fred Zeigler's oil industry-sponsored Paleogeographic Atlas Project. This was followed by a post-doctorate at the University of Reading researching the exploration significance of the paleoclimatic and drainage evolution of southern Africa using computer-based climate models with Professor Paul Valdes. He then moved to Robertson Research International Limited, now part of CGG, as a Staff Petroleum Geologist, where he developed global predictive models of source and reservoir facies. In 2004 Paul moved to Getech Group plc, to set-up the Petroleum Systems Evaluation Group with Dr. John Jacques. From 2006 to 2017 Paul served on the Getech board overseeing the strategic technical direction, which saw the business transition and grow from an academic research group to a multi-million-pound company with four offices, 120 staff and an international client base.

His active research interests include global tectonics, palaeogeography, palaeoclimatology, the history of geology and depositional modelling. Paul is the author of over 100 published scientific papers and articles.

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