

Cycling facilitated

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The proposed changes to the Highway Code have alarmed a great many cyclists, resulting in the most actively supported CTC campaign for decades. While everyone will have had their own reasons for joining in CTC's opposition to the changes, it is likely that most cyclists don't like the idea of being compelled to use cycle facilities, for the most significant change proposed is to extend the exhortation to use cycle facilities 'when practicable', interpreted by many as introducing mandation by the back door.

Britain is one of the few countries in Europe where the use of cycle facilities remains optional. We may owe this to Adolf Hitler, for at the outbreak of World War II the government was recommended to make cycle tracks compulsory. Ironically, it was the same Führer who was responsible for the laws in occupied Europe, intended to keep the roads clear for the passage of his military vehicles.

So what is it that incurs the wrath of so many cyclists about the prospect of being forced to use cycle facilities? And why do cyclists often ignore the facilities that exist? Is this just a British assertion of independence and civil liberty, or are there more substantive reasons?

First some clarification of the term 'cycle facilities' as used in this article. Here I am talking about cycle tracks, shared-use footways, cycle lanes and other types of segregated facility where cyclists ride separately from motor traffic. Of course, there are many other types of 'facility' – road closure and banned turn exemptions, bus/cycle lanes, cycle parking, etc. – but these are generally much less controversial and will not be considered further.

Many people perceive cycle facilities as ideal, safe places for cycling, epitomised by the cycle track which is a separate path for cyclists alongside roads. These originated at the end of the 19th century to provide a more comfortable surface for riding than the cobbled or rutted roads of the day. By the 1920s, however, roads had improved and cycle tracks were introduced less to benefit cyclists than "to relieve traffic ... of an extremely bothersome element: the cyclist". (Dutch Roads Congress, 1920)

There is little evidence of cycle tracks being advocated for reasons of safety before the 1970s. Indeed, much of the opposition to using these paths in earlier years was on account of cyclists' experience that they can increase danger. This is one of the great contradictions in cycling, for in most countries with cycle track networks, their safety record is poor.

The main problems occur at road crossings where the cycle track cyclist has to look through an angle of up to 270° for danger. This requires much movement of the head, which takes time, and the only way to be really sure that it is safe will often be to stop. Cyclists are on their own in taking care, for they are usually outside the zone where motorists concentrate their attention. On the road, on the other hand, you can use positioning and listening to reduce the angle to be scanned to less than 90°, which is within the compass of eye movement alone and can therefore be carried out much more easily and quickly. Road positioning can also be used very effectively to ensure that you are more easily seen by motorists and to deter them from putting you in danger.

More than three-quarters of the cycling crashes I've investigated as an Expert Witness have concerned cycle facilities of one kind or another. Even allowing for the bias introduced by the fact that claiming compensation after a crash on a cycle path can be more complicated than for a crash on a road, and thus more likely to require expert evidence, this number is out of all proportion to where most cycling takes place. So while cycling is generally a low-risk activity, it is a mistake to believe that cycle facilities usually make it any safer. Often it is easier to maximise your safety on road.

The rush to introduce cycle facilities for minimum cost has led to the shared-use footway, often little different to a pavement used by pedestrians only. These low quality facilities share all the problems of the traditional cycle track but accentuated due to their closeness to the carriageway. The low quality of shared footways also typically manifests itself with a less comfortable riding surface and conflict with pedestrians, so it is perhaps not surprising that they are so unpopular.

Many cyclists find roadside paths of any kind tiring, for it has been estimated that having to slow down or stop at each road crossing is the equivalent in energy terms to riding 100m further.

The main benefit of cycle tracks and (less often) shared footways is the ability they may afford to get past congested traffic where road space is at a premium and they are not themselves obstructed. They may also give you a bit more piece of mind along fast, narrow roads with a lot of traffic. It will be a matter of personal opinion as to whether the benefit is worth having in particular circumstances, but always take care not to be blinded to the hazards and be prepared to ride more slowly and submissively.

Off-road routes, which use corridors away from general traffic such as disused railway lines, can afford more beneficial routes and occasionally speedy ones, too, so long as the surface is smooth, visibility good, the route direct and access acceptable. Most paths are less good but may be acceptable for leisure cycling. In all cases safety is never as assured as it might seem. Principal hazards are uneven surfaces, bad visibility (particularly near bends), the behaviour of other cyclists (such as not keeping left) and dogs, each of which can lead to a spill with consequences little different to most road crashes. Road crossings can be hazardous and injuries are often serious if the cyclist is hit side-on. Safety features such as centre lines and hazard warning signs – standard in some countries – are unusual in Britain.

Cycle lanes are a relatively new concept, the first ones are believed to have been introduced in Davis, California in 1967. Unfortunately they tend to define misleadingly the lateral space a cyclist needs and motorists often pass closer and faster when overtaking than without a lane present. Any cycle lane less than 2m wide is hazardous, but even wider lanes (rare in Britain) can encourage bad practice by cyclists, who best maximise their safety by riding relative to traffic, not the kerb.

Cycle lanes are most advantageous as a way of passing congested traffic, but users are vulnerable to the opening of a stationary car door into their path, an increasingly common crash type. Car passengers take less care opening doors than drivers and most cycle lanes leave no room for escape.

More than any other type of cycle facility, cycle lanes impact on all cyclists, not just those who wish to use them, which is why they have become so controversial. They are not easy to ignore and a cyclist is often forced to choose between keeping within the lane and compromising safety, or riding outside the lane and incurring the wrath of other drivers. Some cyclists adopt the practice of riding the lane line as a compromise.

To leave a cycle lane requires the same lane changing procedure as when using any multi-lane road as vehicles in the adjacent lane have right of way. Be particularly sure to leave a lane in good time before side roads if there is any possibility that another vehicle might emerge because cycle lanes direct you to the very places where conflict is most likely.

Some people believe that cycle facilities are necessary to attract new people to cycling, but the evidence is unclear as some facilities have led to reductions in cycle use and many seem without benefit. When cycling, always be discriminating and cautious about cycle facilities, having regard to local circumstances and the purpose of your journey. Take advantage of facilities that help you, but do not feel obliged to use those that don't.

Perhaps the biggest problem with cycle facilities is that they divide cyclists, which is a pity as we might all fare better pursuing a more mutually acceptable agenda.