



Cyclists: Saints or Sinners?

Opinion piece by [Denis Joe](#) April 2014

Since moving to Liverpool about 7 years ago there are two things that I have come to loathe: football and cyclists.

As a kid one of the great pleasures was to build my own bike. My mates and myself would go to the scrap yard near Victoria Park, in Leamington, and spend hours sifting through car parts, wrought iron and other discarded metal stuff, to find bike frames, wheels, pedals and chains. If we couldn't find parts that belonged together then it didn't matter, we were quite happy to have hybrids (not to be confused with the general purpose bike that can 'tolerate a wide range of riding conditions and applications').

The resulting vehicle spoke of our idiosyncrasies and our individuality - well I like to think they did. Usually we made our own handlebars in metalwork at school. The fashionable style was the 'Ape-hanger', which would sometimes be so high up that it posed serious problems when navigating corners. Some would make extensions to the front wheel fork in order to emulate the motorbikes seen in the film East Rider.

Cycling was not just a passion, it was second nature. Thanks to the scrapyard, poverty was no excuse for not having a bike and those that didn't have a bike had their sexuality questioned. There was also a sort of pecking order established with the home-made bikes at the top, new bikes second and at a very distant third were 'no bikes'. Like youngsters today we engaged in stunt riding: wheelies; ramping and the like. What we didn't do, however, was wear a helmet (I don't think they were actually on the market then) or ride on the pavement.

There is much debate around the issue of compulsory cycle helmets that has been ratcheted up by incidents such as that of 16-year old Ryan Smith, who was knocked off his bike and suffered brain damage as a result. His family set up an online petition calling on the government to make the wearing of cycle helmets compulsory. A report for the Department of Transport concluded that:

Compulsory laws would therefore cause significant enforcement difficulties and without greater public acceptance could have a negative effect on levels of cycling with direct disadvantages and costs in terms of health.

Groups, such as **No Helmet Law** welcomed the government's response. But whilst I recognise the need for debate over safety, nobody seems to raise the most objectionable aspect of cycle helmets: they look stupid; they make the wearer look like a moron (think Boris Johnson – though

some might say he looks like a moron wearing a helmet or not).

Admittedly many of the cyclists in Liverpool (well the north part of the city: Everton; Tuebrook; Walton; etc.) don't wear helmets. They have no need to as they prefer to use the pavement instead; without any regard for pedestrians or the law which states that:

Cycling on the footway (pavement) is an offense under Section 72 of the Highways Act 1835 as amended by Section 85 (1) of the Local Government Act 1888.

Walton Vale, for instance, is a busy shopping area with barriers between the road and the pavement, allowing for about three people walking abreast. Yet cyclists will quite happily pedal their way through groups of shoppers.

I was hit by a cyclist a couple of years ago. Fortunately for me he caught my prosthetic leg and ended up going over the handle bars. I asked him why he didn't use the road, he responded by telling me that it was too busy. I imagine that this is the excuse most would give. I find it a rather lame one as nothing is stopping them from getting off their bikes and walking.

And it is not just young people who cycle on the pavement. I've noticed quite a few elderly people who share a total disregard for pedestrians. And though it is against the law, the police (who regularly sit in their cars, watching the world go by) take no interest in enforcing it. There seems to be two types of cyclists: those who use a variety of trail bikes and those who kit

themselves out in Lycra and use racing bikes. The former are the ones that I have my biggest beef with. However the 'real' cyclists can prove equally annoying.



The section of the Trans Pennine Trail, although intended for walkers and cyclists, gives the latter precedence. The section that runs through Walton/Aintree is a popular walk for dog owners. It is also a favourite spot for young drinkers to congregate (as the price of pub booze is prohibitive and many pubs enforce a policy of not serving under 21s). I don't have a problem with this but I do have a problem with the amount of broken glass they leave behind. A part of me likes to think that they do this to get back at the lycra-clad cyclists who sneak up behind you, then make a loud 'tsk' or a sarcastic 'excuse me' to remind you that they are more important than you. Unfortunately the glass also cuts the paws of dogs.

The cyclists that ride along the Trans Pennine Trail are acutely aware of their superiority compared with those who are capable of using their legs. There are signs, along the trail, reminding pedestrians that cyclists have priority. And don't they love it? Cyclists think nothing of riding three abreast, forcing walkers to stand aside as if peasants regarding the train of a liege. The cyclists do not seem to think that a bicycle bell or some other mode of attention grabbing is necessary when coming up behind a walker, who are expected to have eyes in the back of their head. This attitude makes it nigh on impossible to create any etiquette between the cyclist and the walker and so resentment builds up.

The other offender is the daddy (it is always the father) who, in teaching their children to ride a bike, thinks nothing about the kids swerving from one side of the path to the other at a whim: no apologies; it is as if knocking into a pedestrian is perfectly acceptable. Maybe I'm a little bit too harsh on cyclists. Of course they are not all like this. I have come across many (though only on the Trans Pennine Trail) who are considerate of other people and don't lord it over them. I admire the fact that people wish to be fit and that riding a bike is a lot more strenuous than walking. But the emphasis placed on cycling; the idea that it is some sort of spiritual activism and a panacea to all social ills, makes me wonder that if there is to be a second coming Jesus will arrive on a racer or mountain bike.

It seems that for many the bicycle has become an extension of the body; as if it were grafted on to them. As a dog lover I despair of the idiots who force their pets to run after them while they are on bikes, irrespective of the weather or the conditions of the paths/roads they are on. Yet I am acutely aware of the joys of cycling.

To return to the beginning of this rant; cycling was a real pleasure. Certainly it got us from A to B but we were also aware that we could also walk. There was little need for us to create concord between us and other road/pavement users. Whilst I appreciate that there is far more traffic on the road, there are also bicycle lanes. And where these don't exist I trust that drivers, however reluctantly, will be considerate towards the cyclist. Is it too much to ask that cyclists show some consideration to those of us who travel about on foot?