

Segregation: are we moving away from cycling safety?

John Franklin argues that the policy of segregating cyclists from vehicular traffic does not have a proven record as a 'stepping stone' to either cycling well or more widely. Nor, he says, does it make cycling safer.

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The term 'Vehicular Cycling' comes from America, but the phenomenon that it describes is intrinsically British. It describes the style of cycling whereby cyclists ride as part of the general traffic mix, enjoying the same rights as the drivers of other vehicles and accepting the same responsibilities. Cyclists share common road space and they interact with other drivers in such a way as to maximise their safety and progress.

It is quite distinct from the style of cycling practised in many northern European countries, where cyclists are kept apart from motor traffic as much as possible, riding on separate cycle tracks or lanes.

TRENDS AND SAFETY

Though most people would not recognise the name or, perhaps, the formalisation of its principles, vehicular cycling has always formed the basis of how people in Britain cycle, and for the greater part this is still the case. In recent years, however, the practice and status of vehicular cycling has diminished. In part this is a consequence of more traffic using the roads, but of much more significance has been the change of image given to cycling by those concerned with its promotion and accommodation. Cycling is now promoted by many people who have not themselves inherited the skills of past generations. Indeed, it is the environmental movement rather than traditional cyclists that has spearheaded much of the new enthusiasm for cycling. Believing that there is little cyclists can do to protect themselves from the assumed dangers of today's crowded roads, they have articulated the

need for cyclists to be given their own space, in cycle lanes, tracks or other special facilities.

Additionally the countries of northern Europe have more cyclists than Britain and a better safety record. They are also the showplace for cycle facilities and a direct connection is drawn. Politicians, engineers and planners have responded. Even more than the population at large, they are now motorists first, the majority having lost their association with cycling. So the segregated approach to cycling has moved forward, at the expense of vehicular cycling, and probably without many people realising the loss or balance of advantage.

VEHICULAR PRINCIPLES

Vehicular cycling is based on the principle that the traffic system is overwhelmingly a co-operative one. Whilst there is much bad driving, most of this is highly predictable and capable of accommodation through skills that are easy to acquire. Time and again people who cycle vehicularly have been shown to have a much lower likelihood of injury than those who use every opportunity to keep out of traffic's way, and they usually enjoy a quicker and more comfortable journey too.

John Forester, a principal advocate of vehicular cycling, gives five basic rules as underpinning the technique. Translated to UK conditions they are:

1. Cycle on the left side of the road, never on the right and never on the pavement.
2. When you reach a road with priority over the one you are on, give way to traffic on it.



3. When you intend to change lanes, or to move across the road, give way to traffic in the new lane or line of travel.
4. When approaching a junction, position yourself according to your intended direction.
5. Between junctions position yourself according to your speed relative to other traffic.

These rules are not difficult for people to understand, and do not differ from the rules for driving a car. In the great majority of traffic circumstances they are straightforward to put into practice. However, the confidence of many people to do so is being greatly undermined by the exaggerated 'danger' basis of so much current cycling promotion. At the same time application of the rules is frustrated by many of the cycle facilities now being introduced.

CYCLING ON THE ROAD

The reason for cycling on the left is obvious, and most people would not think it otherwise. But in the past few years there has arisen a tendency for some cyclists to ride appreciable distances on the right, particularly in the

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vicinity of off-road cycle paths. A reason is almost certainly the confusion brought about by off-road routes, where centre lines and other reminders to keep left are rare and wrong-side riding common. Is a cyclist a vehicle driver or some kind of rolling pedestrian? Pedestrians, of course, walk to face oncoming traffic.

The instruction of Rule 1 never to cycle on the pavement reflects the inadequacy of footways for cycling in terms of width, sightlines, interruption by side roads and accesses, the incompatibility of cyclists and pedestrians, and the awful safety record of road-side paths in general. But none of this has stopped the widespread provision of shared footways in Britain, which have encouraged cycling on pavements and in pedestrian areas more generally, and done much to convince many people that cyclists are no longer expected to follow the normal rules for traffic.

Efficient and speedy cycling is important if cycling is to compete as a mode of transport with the car. Road-side paths of almost any kind prevent this and make cycling slow and dangerous.

RESPECT FOR PRIORITY AT JUNCTIONS

Failure to observe traffic and to give way at junctions has long been one of the common causes of crashes where cyclists are at fault. In recent years, the deliberate disobeying of red lights and other controls has much increased – all practices that are consistent with the changing perception of cycling to a non-vehicular activity.

The greatest risk of injury, indeed, comes when other vehicles fail to cede right of way to cyclists at junctions. Keeping well away from the give-way markings of side roads provides an extra margin for error, and makes it easier for the cyclist to be seen in the first place. Cycle lanes at junctions, on the other hand, direct cyclists into the very location of highest risk.

CHANGING LANES

Multi-lane manoeuvres (such as to turn right off a dual carriageway) are generally regarded as some of the more difficult ones for a cyclist to make. In fact, cyclists can make such manoeuvres without great difficulty, but to do so requires knowledge of the appropriate vehicular cycling technique.

It is ironic, then, that even novice cyclists are expected to cope with the close parallel situation of an obstructed cycle lane. It can be more difficult to move out from a narrow cycle lane than from a traffic lane. Cutting out without looking behind is a common cycle lane user response, and from time to time someone is hit.

POSITIONING

Position on the road is by far the most important influence that a cyclist has over his safety. Indeed, the loss of this ability to influence the actions of others is one reason why road-side cycle tracks and shared footways increase danger at junctions. Many cyclists fail to position themselves properly because of their fear of traffic, yet it is this very fear that puts them most at risk. Encouraging unsafe behaviour by directing cyclists to more hazardous positions does nobody any favours.

Riding too close to the edge of the road leaves a cyclist with no escape room in the event of an emergency. Drivers concentrate on that part of the road where there is potential risk to themselves, and notice much less outside this zone of maximum surveillance. After crashes, motorists will often relate how they did not see a cyclist until just before impact. It is always safest to ride within the zone of maximum surveillance, not outside it.

For this reason the vehicular cyclist rides relative to traffic, not the road edge, in order to stay in a driver's field of view. Cycle lanes dictate the opposite; that a cyclist should always be close to the kerb even if that makes it more difficult to be seen and compromises the ability to react to changing circumstances. Indeed, cycle lanes create their own boundary to a driver's concentration, whilst at the same time the dividing line becomes a target to drive up to. It is a common complaint from cyclists that they receive less clearance from passing traffic when in a cycle lane.

At junctions the need to be seen is all the more important – 75 per cent of serious crashes happen at these places. The main inference of Rule 4 is to keep away from the left side of the road unless you're intending to turn left. Cycle lanes make cyclists particularly vulnerable to vehicles turning left across their path. Danger from HGVs cutting the corner is only the most extreme example, but a good enough reason to encourage better practice. The vehicular

cyclist uses positioning to give effective protection.

Lastly, learning when *not* to ride too far left is an essential prerequisite to avoiding the common problem of a car door being opened into a cyclist's path. Ironically again, most cycle lanes make it almost inevitable that a cyclist will be hit if a nearside door is opened (the side on which passengers take least care) and people are known to have suffered serious injury as a result.

ROAD USER HARMONY

An important tenet of vehicular cycling is co-operation with other road users. There is good reason to believe that people who practice these principles are at lower risk. However, there are increasing reports of aggression from drivers towards cyclists who do not use cycle facilities, especially cycle lanes. This poses particular problems for vehicular cyclists – those who otherwise would rarely provoke confrontation – for they may have to choose whether to compromise their safety by using an unsuitable facility or experience the wrath of those who expect any provided to be used.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING CYCLING

Segregation is often advocated by the wish to attract new cyclists, and to give less confident people a foothold from which they can become more able. However, the majority of cycle facilities require *more* skill and *more* experience to be used safely, not less. It is the least experienced who most often suffer the consequences.

Whilst off-road routes may provide somewhere for a novice to learn basic bike control, and may be scenically more pleasant, they do very little to teach the skills that are needed to cycle with traffic. Too often, indeed, they

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Vehicular cycling

A one-day conference, Achieving Cycle-friendly Infrastructure – The Practical Application of Design Guidance, is being held in Nottingham on April 16th. It is organised by the University of Nottingham in conjunction with the DTLR and CTC (Cyclists' Touring Club). Details from Lynn Cooper, email: LynnCooper@nottingham.ac.uk Due to demand, a second conference will take place on June 27th.

ingrain bad practices and make the transition to on-road competence harder than ever.

Many people are becoming stuck in a vicious circle where, fearing traffic, they ride away from it as much as possible, frequently in places where cyclists should not ride and where actual danger is greater. At the same time, they forego the skills they would otherwise acquire through interacting with other road users, which makes them all the more vulnerable and afraid when they do have to share the same space. Fear grows and safety declines, for unskilled cyclists are at risk wherever they ride.

Vehicular cycling, on the other hand, was the basis of cycling in Britain when this country *did* have a large cycling population, and acquiring the basic skills is no more difficult than learning to drive a car, which is clearly within the capabilities of most of the population. Moreover, the person who cycles vehicularly learns a discipline that serves them well wherever they cycle. The extra care enforced by the presence of motor traffic, generally results in the safest cycling environment overall.

This does not mean, of course, that all is as it should be in the world of road-sharing. Large roundabouts are one of the few places where speed and

strength can be needed as well a vehicular technique. Centre islands and other pinch points on busy roads are causing real increases in risk that vehicular cycling cannot always counteract. High traffic speeds make interaction with drivers more difficult, whilst the performance of modern cars can encourage their drivers to drive more aggressively than they should. None of these problems, however, has a segregated solution, but needs redress in the context of a genuine mixed traffic environment.

CONCLUSION

Like so many of the practices it encourages, the undermining of vehicular cycling in the hope of getting more people to cycle through segregation is not a fail-safe strategy. The further loss of good cycling skills will not enhance the image of cycling, whilst segregation has no proven record as a 'stepping-stone' to cycling well and more widely.

The connection between segregation and more or safer cycling is in any case suspect. Most of the cycle paths in Europe were introduced to facilitate motor traffic, not to improve the safety or convenience of cyclists. There is extensive research that shows that many of these facilities do not assist safety,

and that many of the countries would have an even better safety record without them.

Recent research in Europe and America suggests strongly that the greatest influence on cycling safety is the number of cyclists, not infrastructure. Better safety comes from more cycling, not the other way about, nor is safety in any way improved by moving away from a vehicular basis.

Someone learning to drive a car is not taught to fear and avoid traffic, but how to cope with it, yet a car driver is not that much less at risk than an adult cyclist. If cycling is to have a future as a universal mode of transport, then we should be encouraging techniques that assist rather than frustrate that end.

The author

John Franklin is a Cycling Skills and Safety Consultant and author of *Cyclecraft*, a book on skilled cycling technique for adults, published by The Stationery Office. It has been acclaimed as the definitive work on its subject and on a par with the Police Roadcraft manuals. John is currently a member of the Government/CTC steering group that is co-ordinating the development of a national cyclist training scheme for adults and teenagers. *Cyclecraft* is likely to be the recommended course book for this scheme.

*This article was published in the April 2002 edition of **tec**: Traffic Engineering & Control.*

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