

## Cycling at the Crossroads

The “self-propelled traveller” was seen as something of a curiosity or a source of bemusement when the first bicycles took to Scotland’s roads. **Ken Thomson** reviews some of the evidence to consider if the situation has changed today.

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Can the history of cycling give us clues about the prospects for self-propelled travel? Speaking to the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport in February, Dr Nicholas Oddy of Glasgow School of Art pointed out that when cyclists are shunted to the side of the road (literally and metaphorically) by motorists, they aren’t experiencing anything new – it was just as much an issue in the early 1900s, when motor cars first appeared.

With Fort William hosting World Championship Mountain Biking events on the slopes of the UK’s highest mountain, Perthshire’s Mark Beaumont defying the odds to conquer some of the world’s most challenging terrain on two wheels, Glentress in the Borders attracting cycling enthusiasts from across Europe in their thousands, and the gold-medal winning successes of Sir Chris Hoy commemorated in the opening of Glasgow’s spectacular Velodrome, you would be entitled to think that cycling is at Scotland’s heart – North, South, East, and West.

The culture of cycling has reached further into the lives of communities all across the country than could ever have been imagined – even just a few short years ago. So why then is cycling still struggling to be accepted as an everyday travel choice, leaving it fighting for road space, or even just equality of treatment in our towns and cities? Dr. Oddy argued that cycling in the modern era is portrayed more as a means of exercise than a convenient and cost-effective form of transport.

That can hardly have been what the early promoters of the modern bicycle envisaged – or what pioneers such as Scotland’s Kirkpatrick Macmillan had hoped for when he designed his lever-framed bicycle in 1839. Contraptions of all shapes and sizes took to the roads in the years that followed, bone-shakers and penny-farthings among them, before “the improved velocipede” was introduced by Thomas McCall of Kilmarnock in 1870.

By the time that the Glasgow great exhibition took place in 1888 however the chain driven safety bicycle was at the breakthrough stage, set to become the “definitive” design, and whilst bicycles proliferated, so too did the organisations and societies dedicated to their use and enjoyment, none of which (with their club uniforms and race events) really helped to establish the position of cycling as an everyday means of getting from A to B. Similarly, the cost of a bicycle at this time effectively put it out of reach to all but the most affluent members of society. (Accusations of “elitism” were just as prevalent in those days).

By the time the inventor John Boyd Dunlop patented the pneumatic tyre bicycles had become recognisable as the vehicles we are familiar with today and cycling was becoming a mainstream activity. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century approached, it was growing in popularity, even if the motivation for

might have been to qualify as a traveller on arrival at a suitable tavern beyond city boundaries, thus evading the new licensing laws.

The cycling landscape today supports a diverse number of stakeholder groups and organisations – some of which continue the work initiated by organisations such as the Scottish Cyclists' Union, (whose efforts included the erection of the first modern road signs), and the Roads Improvement Organisation (which campaigned for improvements which would benefit all road users, not just cyclists).

The expansion of industry in the inter-war years, and the focus on defence-related manufacturing during the Second World War, meant that bicycles became ubiquitous – they were commonly viewed as “the working man’s commute”, and whilst cycles manufactured in Scotland were not unknown, demand was satisfied more by the supply coming from the English Midlands.

The bicycle however was still only viewed as a ‘stepping-stone’ – car ownership and the personal mobility which it offered was the goal in post-war Scotland. Congestion in our cities, environmental impacts, and the scarcity of road space has not suppressed the allure of car ownership.

So where does that leave cycling today? Perhaps the views expressed by the 2015 ‘Social Entrepreneur of the Year’, who established the Glasgow Bike Station, Gregory Chauvet, put cycling in perspective:

*“It's a real car culture (in Glasgow). The mentality is that when you turn eighteen you leave your bike behind. Cycling is for kids. If people see you on a bike, they think it's because you're skint and you can't afford a car. People don't think cyclists belong on the road. When I first started cycling here, people would shout at me because they thought bikes were meant to be on the pavement”. Referring to the work of his centre, he said: “We try to create new cyclists every day. When people see bikes on the road, they start to realise that it's faster than driving, it's cheaper, it's better. When you start to build a cycling community, people start to feel safe on the roads. Suddenly cycling becomes cool”.*

Maybe Edinburgh is pointing the way forward – the capital city has a well-established cycling community with campaign groups, blogs and online forums providing information for new riders and pushing for better cycling conditions in the city, and in 2012 the City of Edinburgh Council committed 5% of its transport budget to cycling.

Cycling needs to accomplish a particularly difficult balance – it has to be recognised as an activity which is geared towards fun and fitness, but it also has to be accepted as a credible, healthy, and sustainable form of transport, offering positive social impacts, and with an important part to play in Scotland for many years to come.

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