

All Cyclists Fear Bad Drivers

My first reaction at watching the much-shared video of Jeremy Vine being intimidated by a driver for doing nothing more provocative than cycling in a straight line along a London street was appalled horror. My second might be more surprising to non-cyclists: I've seen it all before.

Ask most people who ride a bike regularly in the UK and they'll happily recount a list of terrifying or alarming incidents caused by the deliberate actions of another road user, usually someone in a motor vehicle.

My last such incident happened just under a week ago, when a driver decided to overtake my bike very closely and at speed on a narrow residential street near my home in south-east London. I was unharmed, but the driver was gambling on the assumption that I would not, for example, hit a sudden pothole and swerve or wobble.

Inevitably – as happened with Vine – the congested traffic meant I caught up with the driver at the next junction. His relatively minor but nonetheless very real roll of the dice with my chances of making it home safely that evening had all been for nothing. That's appallingly common.

A couple of caveats must be noted. First however distressing such incidents can be – and there is evidence they help keep levels of cycling in Britain as pathetically low as they are – riding a bike is still safer than many people think. The average Briton would ride 2m miles before they suffered a serious injury.

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Secondly, while some are tempted to characterise such events as part of a "war on the roads" it's nothing of the sort, not least as the majority of cyclists also drive, and would thus be somehow waging war on themselves.

The thing to grasp is that it's about the person, not the mode of transport they happen to be using at that time. As well as cycling, I walk, use buses and trains, sometimes drive, occasionally get planes. My personality is not changed, or defined, by any of those. I get the sense that all these forms of transport are populated by roughly similar proportions of idiots. They might push on to a train, barge past you on an escalator at an Underground station, recline their plane seat just as the meals are being served.

Driving is, however, different in one way. It is the sole event in most people's everyday lives where there is a plausible, if remote, chance they could kill another human being. It's not about morals, it's simple physics. If I hit someone at 12mph even on my solid, heavy everyday bike it would impart something like 1,200 joules of kinetic energy. If I were in the last car I owned, a relatively tiny Nissan Micra, doing 30mph, you're suddenly at 100,000 joules. It's a very different impact.

It's why police should take incidents like the one experienced by Vine more seriously than they generally do. It's why the driving tuition and testing system should be revamped to place far more stress on drivers' vast, overriding responsibility to look out for and protect vulnerable road users, those not cocooned within a tonne of metal. It's why the judicial system should take deaths and maiming caused by drivers a whole lot more seriously than it does.

Worksheet: Text B

Next time you're in a car and you think a cyclist in front is holding you up, I'd urge you to hold two very clear thoughts in your mind.

The first is this: despite the apparent belief of many drivers, cyclists are not obliged or even advised to ride in the gutter. If a rider is in the middle of the lane, it could be to stay clear of opened doors on parked cars; it could be because the edge of the road is rutted and potholed; it might even be, as with Vine, to stop drivers squeezing past when it would be clearly unsafe to do so.

Also bear this in mind: even if you're absolutely convinced the cyclist is in the wrong, hold back and be cautious anyway. In the majority of urban traffic situations, your overtake will be a very brief victory – they'll pedal past again in the queue for the next red light or junction.

But most of all, remember that these are human beings, unprotected flesh and bone seeking to get to work, to see their friends, return to their loved ones. However much of a rush you think you're in, it never, ever justifies putting them at risk.