

Britain's Forgotten 1930s Cycleways¹

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In September 2012 the Google Street View car was driven slowly along a road in Twickenham, London.² It had to reverse when the driver found three wooden bollards blocking its way. The road was not a road at all, it was a cycleway. A cycleway built in – wait for it – 1937.

Originally surfaced with red concrete, the cycleway has faded to light pink but the granite kerbs are still in place and, fooling the Street View navigation

Britain's Ministry of Transport would only give fat grants to road-building schemes if they included wide, protected cycleways on each side of the road. The MoT was aided in its cycle-friendliness by plans and guidance supplied by the Rijkswaterstaat, the ministry's Dutch equivalent.⁴ Five hundred miles of such cycleways were planned; I've discovered that more than 300 miles of them were built. [Figure 1]

Today, a few of these cycleways are wholly or partially buried. Others are

the 1930s cycling in the UK would soon go into steep decline, with a precipitous drop from 25 percent of daily journeys being cycled in 1949 to under 2 percent just twenty years later.

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Britain's first cycle track was built in 1934, a two-and-a-quarter-mile stretch of uneven concrete from Hangar Lane to Greenford Road in Ealing, London, kept separate from, but adjoining Western Avenue, a relatively new arterial speedway, today's A40. [Figure 2]

A voiceover on British Pathé cinema news said the Western Avenue cycle track was a new safety innovation and that motorist users of the road will be equally appreciative of this new boon.⁵ A large crowd witnessed Leslie Hore-Belisha, the new Minister of Transport, cutting the ribbon officially opening the experimental cycling track.⁶ [Figure 3]

At the opening, Hore-Belisha said the track, created at the behest of the previous Minister of Transport, was for the "comfort and safety" of cyclists. Cycling organisations begged to differ – opposition to the Western Avenue path came from both the Cyclists' Touring Club and the National Cyclists' Union.

The *Perils of the Cycle Path*, a CTC leaflet produced in 1935, made it plain that cyclists did not want to be fobbed off with sub-standard cycle tracks, and feared being compelled to use them, as had happened in Germany. The leaflet was sub-titled *How Confusion Would Occur at Road Junctions* and complained that the proposed paths provided protection on the straights, but none at junctions. One of the supposed designs had a central cycle track sandwiched in the middle of two carriageways – with cyclists left to their own devices at cross-roads. The Club upholds the view that special paths would not prove a remedy for the existing problems of the roads – would, indeed, increase and complicate them.⁷

One newspaper was incredulous that cyclists would be opposed to "special tracks" and that compulsion to use them would, therefore, be required: It is evident already that this innovation is strongly resented by a section of cyclists who see in it a formidable conspiracy to deprive them of their right of access to the roads. [The] General Council of the National Cyclists' Union passed a reso-

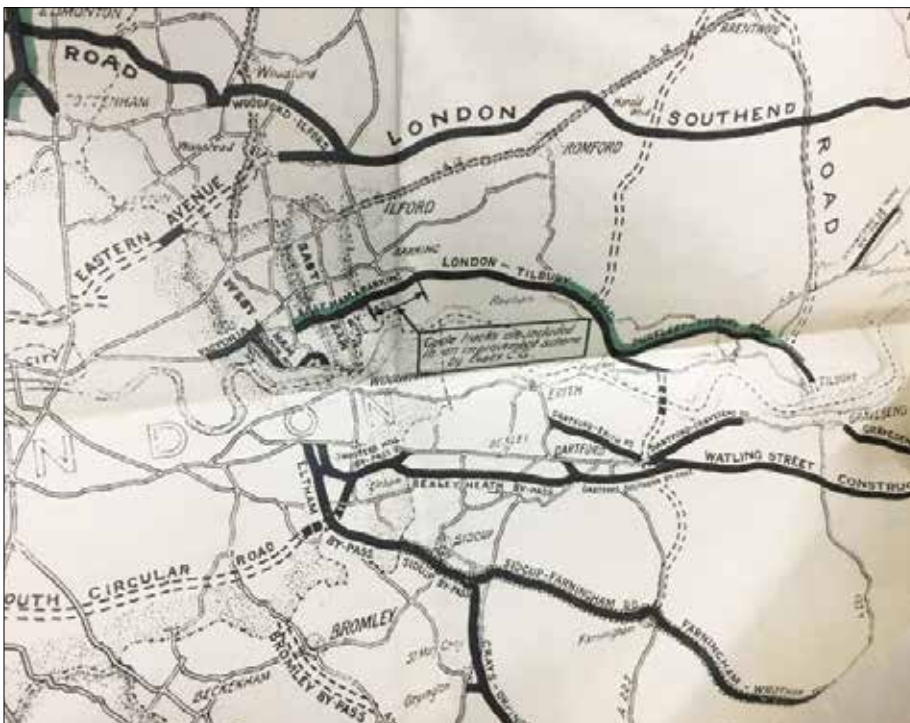


Figure 1. A map of London prepared by the M of Transport in the 1930s showing planned cycle paths (double dashed lines) and the completed concrete surfaced cycle paths (thick black lines).

algorithms, it looks like a narrow road instead of the normal kind of "crap cycle lane" that UK cyclists complain about.

The wide, protected cycleway beside the four-lane Chertsey Road in Twickenham is no freak. It's one of more than 90 similar cycleways I uncovered while researching the 1930s chapter for "Bike Boom", a cycle-activism history book.³ Between 1934 and 1940,

hidden in plain sight, not listed by officialdom as cycleways. Many are treated as private roads for motorists, used as linear car parks when, in fact, they were originally meant as dedicated routes for people on bikes.

One of the reasons these cycleways were commandeered by motorists was lack of use by cyclists. Despite the provision of Dutch-style cycleways in

lution calling for a united front against "any attempt to curtail their rights on the King's Highway" and suggesting, besides monster meetings and a national petition, mass rides along highways where cycle paths are being built.⁸

The *Western Morning News* then editorialized: "One trusts that when it comes to the point, more prudent tactics ... will prevail." Admitting that cyclists were a numerous contingent – but not stating they were, as most people would have understood, the majority users of the road – the newspaper claimed cyclists have nothing to gain by closing their eyes to the tremendous changes that have taken place on the roads during recent years and which make further rationalisation unavoidable.

The impetus for building cycle tracks came not from cyclists but from motorists, many of whom wanted to drive fast on the new arterial roads that had been built in the 1920s. The first, and greatest number, of these roads were built in London, where there were the greatest number of motorists but also where political power resided. London's arterial roads were often used by members of the upper classes to speed them twenty miles or so from Mayfair to newly-built decadent "roadhouses"



Figure 2. Work in progress on construction of a 1930s cycle path in London. The designated path is being dug out in preparation for filling with concrete to form a solid smooth surface.

with their swimming pools, clubrooms and all-night drinking, where "high-rolling, metropolitan members of London society" would "race down" for a night

of debauchery.⁹ "Their number included ... the Prince of Wales, which gave the royal seal of approval for attending roadhouses rather than his more usual choice, the Embassy Club in Piccadilly." The Ace of Spades roadhouse at Heston on the Great West Road, further along from Western Avenue, did a "roaring trade" with these high-rollers, and had been built at a time when many parts of Britain were enduring desperate poverty.¹⁰ "One of London's richest men, Lord Londonderry, who kept four chauffeurs for his Park Lane home, was happy to drive himself along arterial roads at great speed," recounts the motoring historian Michael John Law.¹¹

The high-speed socialites were often the same politicians who demanded that cyclists should be removed from roads "for their own comfort and safety". They blamed cyclists for the fact that fast travel on the arterial roads was becoming more and more difficult. The number of cyclists on these roads did, indeed, increase in the 1930s – the average number of cyclists on Western Avenue at one point increased from 1,772 in 1931 to 6,515 in 1935 reported the *Yorkshire Post*¹² – but there were other, probably greater, reasons for the slowing in speeds including the increasing number of cars



Figure 3. Shown here is an example of a concrete cycle path in the London area that has been finished with a solid, smooth surface for comfortable cycling.

on the roads. In London's Home Counties there was a four-hundred percent increase in car ownership between 1926 and 1938.¹³ As suburban car-ownership increased, progress on the arterials was interrupted by motor vehicles entering from the side roads that housed new homes and factories.¹⁴ Cyclists, in effect, became scapegoats for the congestion that they didn't cause, a blame game that's still played today.

Some modern bicycle advocates suggest it was the opposition of cycling organisations to the cycle tracks of the 1930s that prevented national take-up of these tracks. A typical claim is that if only CTC and the NCU had supported the Western Avenue experiment, a Dutch-style cycle network might have later evolved. This does not fit with the evidence. Many powerful and influential (non-cycling) organisations did want such a network of tracks to be built, and so only 300+ miles of them were built. Opposition from cycling organisations (the CTC had only 34,000 members in 1939) would have been of little consequence against the British Roads Federation or the Automobile Association or, for that matter, the Ministry of Transport.

The 1930s cycle tracks were provided for working class riders. This can be deduced from both ministerial statements and from the great number of cycle tracks built beside the wide roads that bisected the new pre-war "council house" estates. Social housing, built and owned by municipalities, sprang up in British cities in the 1920s and 1930s: urban cycle tracks connected workers with factories. For instance, Nottingham's council-house estates had cycle tracks that led to major employers, such as Raleigh.¹⁵ Similarly, the social housing provided on the expansive St. Helier Estate in Morden, London, was ringed with cycle tracks.

Cycle tracks were also placed on the new-build radial roads leading out of London and other British cities. Some of the cycleways built between 1934 and 1940 were long. For instance, postwar Ordnance Survey maps show that the 22-mile Southend Arterial Road from Gallows Corner in Romford to Southend once had cycleways along its full length, and this cycleway linked to others in the area.

The reason Britain didn't expand its putative Dutch-style cycle network is

almost all down to the war. Post-war austerity meant no new tracks were built, nor were existing ones improved to the standard that CTC and NCU said would be required.¹⁶ Had the cycling organisations of the time reversed their opposition to cycle tracks it would have made no difference. In the 1940s and 1950s there was little appetite to provide anything at all for cyclists despite the fact they still far outnumbered motorists. Post-war politicians and planners were deeply dismissive of "proletarian" mass cycling – instead, they were attracted to the social and economic potential of motoring. It was felt that cycling was outmoded, not suited for the motor era and most certainly not worth spending any money on.

While it's true that many cyclists were forced from their bikes by the growth of motoring it's also true that many cyclists – especially working-class cyclists – aspired, instead, to become motorists and, as soon as they could, they did so. The 1930s cycle tracks, although innovative for the time and appreciated by some, fell out of use, hidden from view – they were repurposed or simply forgotten.

Today, with cycling on the rise again, there are calls to again build separated infrastructure for people on bikes. It's entirely possible that many of the "forgotten" 1930s cycle tracks could be revived, and meshed into modern networks. The Department for Transport – successor to the Ministry of Transport – was more than 80 years ahead of this desire to "go Dutch", but it remains to be seen whether today's DfT has any desire to ape the MoT of old. ●

End notes

¹ Maps, plans, and photographs of Britain's 1930s cycleways can be found on Flickr.com: <https://flic.kr/s/aHsm177CTm>

² <https://goo.gl/maps/Xh3eer6JH12> Google Street View is an off-shoot from Google Earth, the descendant of EarthViewer, a CIA-funded project that was used by the US military in war zones from the late 1990s onwards. Google acquired EarthViewer in 2004 and rebranded it as Google Earth in 2005. Archaeologists often use Google Earth – and other open-access satellite-imagery services – to find hidden hill-forts and even buried treasure, but this is the first time the satellite and street-level imagery had been used to discover 1930s-era cycleways.

³ Carlton Reid (2017). *Bike Boom*, Island Press, Washington, DC. www.bikeboom.info

⁴ Cycleway plans were provided to the UK's Ministry of Transport by W. G. C. Gelinck, chief-engineer and director of Rijkswaterstaat, "Government Public Works", 1934. See: *CYCLE TRACKS: Proposed construction, 1926-1943*, Ministry of Transport, MT 39/127, National Archives, London.

⁵ <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/new-cycle-track-opened>

⁶ The dedicated track disappeared years ago and cyclists, where provided for at all on this stretch of the A40, are expected to share the slim footway with pedestrians.

⁷ "The Perils of the Cycle Path" was a re-print from *The CTC Gazette*, July 1935.

⁸ See: "Cycle Tracks," *Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, December 6, 1934.).

⁹ Michael John Law (2016). *Driving to the 'Super' Roadhouse*, Aspects of Motoring History, The Society of Automotive Historians in Britain, 12. See also M. Pugh (2008). *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars*.

¹⁰ Outer London Clubs And Cabarets - 'the Ace Of Spades' (1933) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84w9HCsZKH0> The Ace of Spades service station and swimming pool alongside the Great West Road (A4), Heston, 1934. <http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw045358>

¹¹ Michael John Law (2016). *Driving to the 'Super' Roadhouse*, Aspects of Motoring History, The Society of Automotive Historians in Britain, 12, 2016; See also M. Pugh (2008). *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars*.

¹² *The Yorkshire Post*, 7th October 1936.

¹³ *The Motor Industry of Great Britain 1939*, Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, 1939.

¹⁴ *Ribbon Development and Sporadic Building*, Greater London Regional Planning Committee Report, 1929.

¹⁵ Chris Matthews (2015). *Homes and Places: A History of Nottingham's Council Houses*, Nottingham City Homes.

¹⁶ Many of the CTC and NCU officials were elderly in the 1930s but could remember the halcyon days of cycling on car-free roads in the 1890s. There was a strong belief from the cycling old-guard that the right to the use of the highway had been so hard to win, it should not be given up. However, organized cycling's main fear was that only a very few highways would be segregated, the width given over to cyclists would be too narrow and that motorists would then consider the rest of the (unsegregated) road network to be off-limits to cyclists.

Some additional thoughts on roads & bikeways:

In 1939, during the House of Lords debate welcoming the Alness report, the Marquess of Reading worried: *I find it extremely difficult to accept the doctrine put forward on behalf of the cyclists that in some peculiar way segregation and degradation are synonymous words. You have a highway, and the cyclist says, "It is my right to use that highway." Does the highway consist only of that part of the road upon which motor cars proceed, or does it include that part of such roads as may be reserved for cyclists and that part reserved for pedestrians? Does any sane pedestrian expect ... that he should be allowed to walk upon the middle of the Great West Road on Sunday morning, and say that unless he is allowed to do so he is being deprived of the right to use the King's highway? One wonders what would be the attitude of cyclists if, in a place where there was a cycling track, a motorist suddenly took it into his head to proceed along that cycle track. Yet, if the cyclists have a right on the motorists' road, why, on similar terms, have not the motorists a right on the cyclist's road?*

The use of the phrase "motorists' road" is telling.

H. R. Watling, director of the British Cycle and Motor-cycle Manufacturers and Traders Union, had voiced this fear at one of the Alness committee hearings: *I think cyclists in general fear that if cycle tracks are provided in certain places the psychology of the motorist will be affected adversely ... they will regard the cyclist as more and more an undesirable person on the road, and it may lead in some cases to an increase in the degree of carelessness exhibited by drivers of all types.*