

Cycling and cars

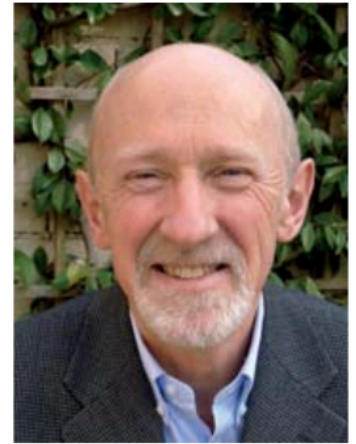
Until now, I have avoided writing about cycling and cars in the Park. It's partly because the role of the Friends is protecting the Park, not arbitrating between Park users, and partly (I confess) out of cowardice in the face of such a contentious issue. However, the recent death of a cyclist (see page 6), the almost daily incidents, and the rising level of complaints have changed my mind.

The rapid growth in road cycling started five years ago, accelerated with the Olympics, and is still growing. A recent count by Friends' volunteers showed over 1,000 cyclists an hour passing Sheen Cross at the Saturday morning peak. With it has come increasing friction between cyclists and car drivers. Car drivers complain about cyclists exceeding the speed limit down hills and overtaking them dangerously, sometimes on both sides. They feel that if anything happens it's the driver who will be blamed. They also complain about cyclists riding two abreast, which makes overtaking difficult.

Cyclists complain that drivers regularly speed and that they overtake with little room and then cut in, forcing cyclists to take avoiding action.

Spend ten minutes by one of the Park's roads on a Saturday morning and you will see that all these complaints are justified. I drive, cycle and walk in the Park and I know the irritation and intimidation I feel as a driver with cyclists crowding me on all sides; if I make a mistake I might kill someone. I also know the mix of adrenalin and fear I feel as a cyclist with drivers close; if they make a mistake it's me who will be hurt. But in spite of these complaints, there are few collisions between cars and bikes; the vast majority of incidents are cyclists coming off their bikes with no one else involved.

In all of this, the most vulnerable users – pedestrians, horses and wildlife – suffer. Ten years ago, cars and cyclists stopped for pedestrians and deer. Today they hardly ever do, and if a car does stop, cyclists will carry on. Incidents of pedestrians, horses and deer being hit are mercifully rare but they are increasingly intimidated and need more protection.



For the last five years, I have been involved, through the Friends and on the Richmond Park Police Panel, in trying to find a solution to these conflicts. There isn't one, or at least we have not found it. More or higher speed-bumps risk more cyclists coming off their bikes and ending up in hospital. A one-way system could just allow both cars and cyclists to go faster. Two hours on a Saturday morning for cyclists alone and they would go faster – and the Park become a velodrome. More education? 95% of drivers and cyclists are regulars and know the rules and risks.

Some smaller things have been done: new signs, an "On the Road" leaflet, speed bumps – and so on. But these are nibbling at the problem. The ultimate solution is just more consideration for other users, and especially for the vulnerable. At one time, I thought that as cars and cyclists got accustomed to each other, they would become more tolerant. That hasn't happened. Let's have another go, please.

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