

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

CYCLING

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

CYCLING



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Published 2013
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Publisher: Thomas Drewry
Publishing Director: Brooke McDonald

Series Editor: David Allsop
Design and Illustration by Jim Shannon

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A CIP Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 978-1-909365-40-7 (print)
978-1-909365-41-4 (ePub)
978-1-909365-42-1 (Kindle)

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Tell a non-cyclist you ride a bike
and they assume you must be fit,
sustainable, resourceful and self-reliant.

THE CYCLE OF LIFE

Like a retro music artist rediscovered after decades out of fashion, cycling is suddenly cool again.

From hip ad campaigns to mundane council leaflets, we're bombarded with images of happy people on bikes. Briefcase-toting commuters eager to get to work; carefree families bonding on a rail trail (*see* 'Glossary', page 119); racing pelotons cresting a mountain pass; flowing-haired young women in summer frocks with a puppy in their front basket...

The reality is often different: mending your second puncture on a windy November night on the bypass; being cut up repeatedly by the same bus; getting thrown off a train because your reserved bike space is blocked by a hen party's airline baggage.

Cyclists know this. Tell them you ride a bike and they will welcome you as a fellow chosen one – a member of the special people – who knows about quality of life, and who won't harangue them about jumping red lights, or cycling on pavements, or 'road tax'. But non-cyclists don't know this. Tell them you ride a bike and they assume you must

be fit, sustainable, resourceful and self-reliant.

They're instantly on the defensive, burbling excuses about needing their car because they live so far away. And they have to live so far away because nowhere else has parking. They know they should use their bike but it has a flat tyre. And there's a hill.

With all those media images in mind, they're envious of, and a little intimidated by, the vibrant, sociable and healthy lifestyle they presume you must have.

Riding a bike is great. It saves temper, time and money. You glide past traffic queues, arrive early feeling fit, and get 300 miles per gallon of coffee. It puts you in direct control of your resources.

Bluffing about it is even better, because it puts you in control of other people. And that's what being a bluffer is all about.

This short guide sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in discussions about cycling, and to equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques that might even allow you to be accepted as a cyclist of rare knowledge and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your wisdom and insight – without anyone discovering that until you read it you probably didn't know the difference between a velocipede and a centipede.

BIKE MYTHS AND MILESTONES

No one country, let alone one person, invented the bike, which evolved from the collective efforts of many people. But that hasn't stopped various people claiming otherwise, through bicycle creation myths.

As with regular history, the way to sound knowledgeable is to wait for people to make some assertion. Then, you rebut what they've said as commonly held myth, very misleading, or, at the very least, 'I think you'll find it's not as simple as it looks' (a good fallback position that can be used for pretty much everything, except perhaps daytime TV).

The most surprising thing about bikes is how early all the technology familiar on modern machines was in place. The Rover safety bicycle of 1885 looks very much like a modern town bike (it even had mudguards – though it would handle rather differently, as you'd soon find out when trying to brake going downhill).

MYTH: DA VINCI DESIGNED A BICYCLE

In Leonardo Da Vinci's notebook *Codex Atlanticus*, there's a drawing resembling a nineteenth-century 'velocipede'

with the addition of a startlingly prescient chain and pedals. It's sometimes credited to Leonardo's pupil Gian Giacomo Caprotti, circa 1493, but overwhelming scholarly opinion now is that it's a forgery. Profess amazement that so many were taken in by a patently anachronistic fake: 'Didn't the writing on the frame, "RALEIGH – MADE IN NOTTINGHAM", give it away?'. (Ideally, the other person will refer to 'da Vinci', which you can correct to 'Leonardo' – surnames hadn't yet caught on in fifteenth-century rural Italy. Calling him 'da Vinci', you can say, is like referring to John of Gaunt as 'Mr Of Gaunt'.')

MYTH: STOKE POGES CHURCH HAS A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BICYCLE WINDOW

St Giles' Church in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, has a stained glass window dating from 1643 which shows an angel apparently riding a prototype 'hobbyhorse' (*see below*). In fact, it's only a one-wheeled contraption of a sort that cherubim, seraphim and angelim are often shown sitting on in stained glass windowim; a curve at the back, largely hidden by a strut, misleads the modern eye into thinking there's a back wheel somewhere.

That said, the angel is stark naked and blowing a trumpet, which is spookily predictive of the annual fleshfest that is the World Naked Bike Ride.

MILESTONE: DRAIS INVENTED THE HOBBYHORSE

The first practical two-wheeled personal transport mode.

Between 1817 and 1819, the laufmaschine, or velocipede, or draisine, or draisienne, developed by Baron Karl von Drais of Germany, was all the rage. Though pedal-less – riders used their feet to scoot along – it established several things we now think of as essential to the bicycle: two in-line wheels, the front being steerable; the rider sitting on a platform in between the wheels; and most important, pavement cycling, which became such a menace to pedestrians that it led to the first laws banishing bicycles from footways, in 1835. It was around the time of Drais's invention that the word velocipede really caught on as a generic term for describing a human-powered land vehicle with two wheels.

If someone calls Drais's version a hobbyhorse, furrow your brow and point out that this particular term came in when Denis Johnson, a London coachmaker, tweaked the draisienne, calling it a 'pedestrian curricle', though the public preferred 'hobbyhorse' or 'dandyhorse'. This established another bicycle essential: a eurobabel where every language has a different word for each cycling term.

On 12 June 1817, Drais took the very first bike ride in the world. He covered eight miles from Mannheim in just under an hour. Presumably the first instance of a cab driver shouting that the cyclist should pay road tax happened the same day.

Sadly, the sheer discomfort of Drais's machine meant that most people bought it in a flush of enthusiasm, rode it a couple of times, then – with sore behinds and aching legs – chucked it to the back of the shed. Another bicycle essential established.

MYTH: KIRKPATRICK MACMILLAN INVENTED THE FIRST PEDAL BICYCLE

In 1839, a Dumfries smithy called Kirkpatrick Macmillan built the first pedal-cranked two-wheel machine, or so the tale goes. He was supposedly fined five shillings for colliding with a pedestrian in a very painful place – the Gorbals. However, there's no evidence. The legend arose from a dubious letter sent decades later to a newspaper by his nephew claiming the whole thing, citing a vague old newspaper report (which doesn't mention Macmillan) as evidence. Modern opinion, including yours, is that the story is a load of cobblers.

MILESTONE: PEOPLE START RIDING BONESHAKERS

From the 1820s to the 1850s, huge, unwieldy machines with three or four wheels appeared (mention Willard Sawyer of Dover). Most were driven by cranks, although some were relatively sane. Propelled by pedals, treadles and paddles, they never really took off. Except down steep slopes.

But then, in the 1860s, a Frenchman had the bright idea of adding pedals to the front wheel of the draisienne, and the first popular pedallable bicycle was born. It was either Pierre Lallement or his rival Pierre Michaux; whomever people suggest, insist it was the other. Mass-produced and relatively cheap, it sparked a brief velocipede craze in France, England and the USA, with races, magazines, and rants in the popular press about these dangerous imbeciles on velocipedes. The iron-banded wooden wheels gave a

jarring ride – hence the nickname ‘boneshakers’. You can take issue with anyone using the term, though, insisting that in Paris, on nice, smooth ‘macadamised’ roads introduced in the centre, and on the many velocipede rinks which sprung up, it was perfectly comfortable.

MISLEADING MILESTONE: PEOPLE RODE ‘PENNY-FARTHING’S’

From the 1860s to the mid-1880s, the standard bike – especially in England – was the ‘penny-farthing’. This was a sort of logical extension of a boneshaker, with the front wheel massively enlarged to make speeds above crawling pace possible, and to better cope with bumpy roads. Except that, at the time, it was called a ‘high-wheeler’ or ‘high bicycle’, and later, in retrospect, an ‘ordinary’. So, feel free to rubbish anyone who tries to call it a ‘penny-farthing’. The father of the high bicycle was either James Starley of England, or Eugene Meyer of France – again, whichever people put forward, insist the other was the true pioneer.

High-wheelers were difficult to ride and dangerous, and almost exclusively the preserve of daring young men, one of whom – Thomas Stevens – was the first to cycle round the world, in 1884–1886. He took little luggage apart from a raincoat that doubled as a tent, and a gun. (He’d clearly cycled in London.) Many others only got as far as the first downhill before being thrown over the handlebars, ‘coming a cropper’, and breaking their wrists in the fall.

Talk knowledgeably about the technical challenges –

the unreliable spoon-shaped brakes pressing down on the solid rubber tyre, the difficulty of pedalling the wheel while turning it, the mounting and dismounting – as if you had personal experience ('I had a go once' – in other words, you were politely asked not to touch one in Hull's transport museum).

MILESTONE: STARLEY INVENTED THE MODERN-PATTERN SAFETY BICYCLE

High bicycles with smaller, geared wheels, and a back-to-front design (with the 'farthing' at the front) were actually called 'safeties'. But the term quickly became applied to the revolutionary new shape of the 1880s. A rush of new technology between about 1885 and 1891 established the familiar modern bicycle: pedals driving the rear wheel via a chain and alterable gears; steerable front wheel of the same size; diamond frame; sprung saddle...and punctures.



Gene pools diversified as suitors were no longer confined to a walking radius (or a running radius when they got caught).

The first modern bicycle was indeed the landmark 1885 Rover, designed by John Kemp Starley (nephew of James). Racing, touring and utility cycling boomed in England, France and the rest of Europe, as the middle classes could

now afford to ride in comfort and safety. A bike felt about as expensive as a car would today, usually bought on credit, and the idea of 'this year's model' was already established.

Gene pools diversified as suitors were no longer confined to a walking radius (or a running radius when they got caught). Women, discarding their skirts in favour of 'rational dress' such as the more practical bloomers (named after Amelia Bloomer, the American social reformer who had started the long ride to emancipation). In 1895, Annie Londonderry became the first woman to ride around the world, which can lead you neatly into talk of feminism if you need to change the subject, or just annoy someone.

MYTH: JOHN BOYD DUNLOP INVENTED THE PNEUMATIC TYRE

The Scottish vet working in Belfast certainly patented the inflatable tyre, and mass production by his Dunlop company revolutionised cycling. The tyres made it far more comfortable and gave cyclists the chance to enjoy the view for three hours while they repaired punctures (which initially involved ungluing the tyre from the rim). However, he had unwittingly reinvented what had already been patented for horse-drawn carriages, making his patent worthless; deft legal work with modified designs managed to save his business though. Contrarians can claim Frenchman Édouard Michelin as the real cycle-rubberwear pioneer, with his 1891 patent for the more convenient detachable inner tube.

MYTH: ROADS WERE BUILT FOR CARS IN THE EARLY 1900S

Cars began to sweep bicycles aside, almost literally, from the early 1900s, and the great cycling boom faded: first in the USA, then, in the second half of the century, in Europe. But it's quite wrong to associate better roads with cars: surfaces had already started being tarmacked and improved, largely due to pressure from cycle campaigners.

MYTH: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY HAD ALL THE TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Technology through the twentieth century grew by evolution rather than revolution; you can correctly claim that all 'modern' advances, including derailleur gears, aluminium frames, disc wheels, anatomical saddles, clipless pedals, suspension and folding bikes, in fact originated during the reign of Queen Victoria (who owned a Starley Royal Salvo tricycle, a whirling iron monster – though she never actually rode it).

MISLEADING MILESTONE: MOUNTAIN BIKING WAS INVENTED IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Mountain bikes were first mass-produced in 1981, following a 1970s downhill craze in Orange County, California, and have become the standard pattern leisure bicycle. But this is nothing new – people have been falling off head-first into mud in hurtling descents since high-wheeler days. Describe mountain biking as marketing,

rather than technological, progress. Or, if you don't understand why a bike in a rainy town centre has no mudguards, regress.

MYTH: HG WELLS AND OTHER QUOTES

Challenge anyone who cites a juicy quote about cycling to provide a source that isn't merely someone's blog, or a webpage anthology. Take the much-pasted one attributed to HG Wells, for instance: 'When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race'. The trouble is, no one has ever found a source for it. Wells did, however, say 'Cycle tracks will abound in Utopia' (*A Modern Utopia*).

MYTH: CYCLISTS SHOULD PAY ROAD TAX

In the early twenty-first century, questions of how cyclists and motor vehicles should share resources have become major agenda items. Again, this is nothing new – 'scorchers', or reckless cyclists, were already the subject of endless diatribes in newspaper letters pages 120 years earlier.

Rebuttals to the road-tax myth are detailed on page 52. In practice, you'll only get halfway through the first one before most cyclist-baiters get bored and go away. Which is probably what you wanted all along.

MYTH: THE TOUR DE FRANCE HAS THE MOST AND BIGGEST MOUNTAINS

The routes of the Giro d'Italia and Spain's Vuelta are tougher and have more climbs with a height gain of over 2,000 metres

than France. You can risk quoting the world's most infamous cyclist if you feel brave: Lance Armstrong says Mortirolo on the Giro is the toughest climb he's ever done – over 10% gradient. But then it's amazing what a transfusion of freshly-oxygenated blood can do for your stamina.

MYTH: ALPE D'HUEZ IS THE TOUGHEST CLIMB ON THE TOUR DE FRANCE

The climb's 'beyond category' status comes because it usually falls at the end of a stage, when riders are knackered. In steepness and length, Alpe d'Huez is a mere 7.5% for nine miles, making it what would normally be a humdrum Category 1 climb.

Imply that you know the Tour's classic climbs (Galibier, Mont Ventoux, Iseran, etc.; if you run out of names, use nineteenth-century authors or car manufacturers) from experience, perhaps having cycled in France, and therefore having seen them first-hand, on postcards.