

## Cycling on the Bridgewater Way

I have ridden a bike for most of my life, and it has been my main means of transport for the last forty years. During that time, cycling has been through up and down cycles, fashions in cycling have changed, and the number of people cycling has gradually grown.

This has been very satisfactory to me, as the health and environmental benefits of cycling are very clear, and in addition the growth in the number of people on bikes has raised awareness of their needs amongst the general populace. More of the people who drive around in cars also ride bikes, and attitudes to bicycle riders have improved on the whole.

I was also very pleased when the towpath of the Bridgewater Canal was opened up to bike riders, as this constitutes a major motor traffic free route into and out of town. I have been riding up and down the Bridgewater Way on a regular basis ever since it opened.

For the most part it has been a pleasant experience, though I do sometimes wonder who thinks that gravel constitutes a good surface either for walking or cycling, but that is by the by; the relief of not having to share the track with motorists has been ample recompense.

I have however become aware of a new cause for concern, and it upsets me that it comes from cyclists, and I use the term advisedly; when I use the term “cyclist”, I refer to the sporty end of the spectrum. Now I do sometimes ride fast, well I try anyway, but I do not do so where the conditions are not appropriate, i.e. in heavy traffic, or where there are pedestrians about. However, there do seem to be quite a number of (men mostly) who regard their morning and evening commutes as a training opportunity. I see them in their uniform of helmet, Lycra and frown, charging along the towpath as if nothing is as important as improving their Strava rating. (I see similar people tearing through the streets too, and on the occasions that they don't violate red lights, I have to say it gives me a certain amount of satisfaction to catch up with them while tootling along at a stately pace.)

On the one hand, I would like to say to them that the amount of time they save by going fast is probably vitiated by the need to change and have a shower when they reach their destination. But more importantly, I would like to tell them that I find their speeding quite intimidating and bullying. This is the crux of the problem with speeding cyclists on the towpath, and unfortunately it leads to polarisation and conflict between cycle riders and other users of the towpath. There are those who just don't like cyclists, under which rubric they include anybody who rides a bike, and who I'm sure would like to see cycling banned not only from the towpath but from all roads. History is probably not on their side – the numbers of people riding bikes is increasing all the time. However, their feelings should be taken into consideration, as should those of walkers, old people, children and slow bike

riders like myself. I think it is important to emphasise that this is not a simplistic walker/cyclist divide, and that the different groups of users have a common cause, which is the control of intimidating behavior.

Undoubtedly, there are occasions when it is not inappropriate to hare along the towpath, such as when there is a long stretch in front with nobody on it. However there has to be a way of communicating to the sporties that they have to give consideration to other users of the towpath.

My feeling is that this would best be done by some sort of action that can be clearly be seen to represent all users, and therefore that any such action should involve members of each of the groups that comprise the “usership”. I would be in favour of actually talking to the people who race along, and therefore that there should be some means by which a representative group of people can somehow engage the speedies to stop and discuss the matter. Usually, if people are made aware of the anti-social effects of their behavior in a calm and measured way, they can be persuaded to see another point of view. If this is met with an aggressive, negative response, there is always U Tube and public shaming. As a last resort, if there are those who consistently ignore efforts to make them conform to the requirements of public safety, there might be the possibility of banning particular errant riders from the towpath on penalty of legal action.

This begins a discussion of how to deal with errant cyclists. There are sadly also errant pedestrians, who make it their business to harass bicycle riders. In this case, the response is a bit simpler as harassment is a criminal offence. However, I am aware that there is a long distance between the offence and legal restitution, but I would suggest that a similar constituency of different users might make the public case more palatable to the anti-bikers if they see that there are pedestrians and dog walkers who don't share their viewpoint.

Another potential cause of friction comes from dog walkers who either allow their animals to worry other users, or don't reign in long leads when others are coming along.

In all these cases, it is only a small minority who are making life hard for others. I find almost everybody friendly and courteous on the towpath, and I also find that having a bell and using it politely avoids friction.

So, it seems to me that the starting point is to form a coalition of bicycle riders, walkers, parents, old people, to meet and discuss particular actions to be taken in concert so that it is clear that the group represents the widest possible variety of towpath users and to ensure that the focus of any action is bullying and aggressive behavior, from whomsoever.

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