

Despite complaints it's power to the peddlers

During the 27 years in which I edited the Richmond and Twickenham times series a subject that cropped up with predictable regularity was the merits and demerits of cycling. Were those who took to two wheels heroes or villains?

It is reassuring to see that nothing changes and that the debate continues today with equal passion and intelligence in the news columns and letters pages.

Back in the seventies when I was first handed the editorial reins, pedal power was considered a mark of second class citizenship. Even the cycle tracks which were provided with such foresight in the thirties on either side of the Great West Road through Brentford and Isleworth had been abandoned and taken over for car parking and rubbish dumping.

The conventional political wisdom was that no one who mattered cycled, and those who did ate red beans and were sordid - and belonged to the kind of minority fringe who wave placards promising that the world end in nigh, and whose voting influence was minimal.

With the Tory leader now in the saddle things have changed radically and one of the glories of the 18 years of the Lib Dem administration and indeed the more recent rule of Ken Livingstone's mayoralty has been the incentives offered to get people back on their bikes - with cycle paths, signposting and the provision (sparse though they are) of parking racks.

Cyclists' most vociferous critics are prisoners and the disabled who complain that roadsters speed furiously

showing no respect for those with whom they share the pavements. They are accused of treating pedestrians with disdain, causing them to leap to avoid being mown down.

Recently they were charged with environmental pollution and a reader has complained that a network of bare earth paths are being created on some open-spaced commons like Barnes, killing off grass and wildflowers.

Certainly there does seem to be a strong case for creating a legally enforceable code of conduct for cyclists - which gives absolutely priority to those on two legs and makes them follow strict guidelines for safety and environmental protection. Some high profile prosecutions of the worst offenders would get the message home.

I feel well qualified to add my two

penn'orth as I now hold a freedom pass which I use extensively. Recently, while waiting at a bus stop in Moulton, I was hit in the back by a handlebar in the grip of an abusive middle-aged lady cycling on a pavement. No apology was offered - in fact I was accused of not "watching out" - but I forgave and remain on the side of the peddlers.

It was my policy while editor to encourage all my editorial staff to use bicycles when ever possible when going about their journalistic duties.

Many followed my advice, so it was horrifying when on a press day in the eighties we heard that one young journalist had been knocked from her bike in Twickenham by a lorry and suffered severe back and neck injuries.

She spent several weeks in West

Middlesex hospital with her head pinned to a board - unable to turn her neck or do anything but stare at the ceiling - a sight so dreadful that the image returns to the every time I see young cyclists sandwiched between belching trucks on major roads.

The journalist in question recovered 100 per cent I am glad to say and went on to become a distinguished columnist for a national newspaper.

But in our endeavours to make sure that those who use bikes do so with proper respect for nature and other users - and in reminding them that their freedoms also bring responsibilities - we must never forget how vulnerable is a diminutive figure balancing on a couple of steel tubes and two pieces of rubber when engulfed by 40 ton juggernauts and Chelsea tractor.