

The trouble with you cyclists...

Some become apoplectic with rage, others pitch tabloid complaints at you in the pub. **Victoria Hazael** offers calm counter arguments

(Right) Don't bother arguing with drivers who are this angry – they are past rational debate

It's an anti-social activity for lawbreaking adrenaline junkies!! Whenever the topic of cycling crops up, newspaper letter writers in Tunbridge Wells and white van men start peppering their statements with exclamation marks. Even friends and family can chime in with criticism. How do you convince them that cycling is good, not only for the cyclist but for society as a whole? Here are some answers to the most common complaints.

The roads are too dangerous

It's a tragedy that 104 cyclists died on our roads last year, but the reason we hear about those deaths is that they are newsworthy mainly because they are so rare. If every fatal car crash were reported, there wouldn't be any space in the newspapers for anything else.

On average, one cyclist is killed on the roads for every 1,050 times cycled around the world, or one per 26 million miles cycled. Cycling to work, school or the shops is statistically very safe. Over the same distance, you're more likely to be killed if you walked there instead.

Comparing the dangers of cycling to other activities puts the risks of cycling in perspective. Take gardening. You are more likely to be injured in an hour of gardening than in an hour of cycling. If you play rugby, on average you'll be injured 30 times per 1,000 hours you play, and incur up to 283 injuries per 1,000 hours of playing rugby sevens. The risk of injury from cycling is just 0.05 injuries per 1,000 hours.

And we haven't touched on the benefits from riding a bike. According to research from the Policy Studies Institute, the benefits outweigh the risks by as much as 20:1. In other words, *not cycling* is far more dangerous than cycling.

You don't pay 'road tax'

It's a common mistake to believe that only motorists pay 'road tax'. There is no such thing as road tax – no



All photos: istockphoto.com

one pays it anymore as it was abolished in 1937. In fact, Winston Churchill argued against road tax, as he feared that 'it will be only a step from this for [motorists] to claim in a few years the moral ownership of the roads their contributions paid for'.

'Road tax' is a misnomer: what motorists pay is Vehicle Excise Duty (VED), sometimes referred to as car tax. VED is what you pay to get a tax disc for your vehicle. The amount a motorist is taxed is based on the vehicle's fuel type and CO₂ emissions, so it is essentially a tax on the amount the car pollutes – not on the right to use the roads. Like a low emission car, a bicycle (being zero emission) is exempt. The money from VED doesn't even pay for the roads: it goes into the general taxation pot.

If you get accused of not paying 'road tax', point out that cyclists do pay just as much as motorists for the roads, as the money for highways comes out of Council



Tax and Income Tax. Cyclists tend to be motorists as well and are often wealthier than non-cyclists so in fact pay more tax! Moreover, cyclists only cause minimal wear and tear on road surfaces, as it is heavier vehicles that cause potholes, so any talk of 'paying for the upkeep of the roads' is moot.

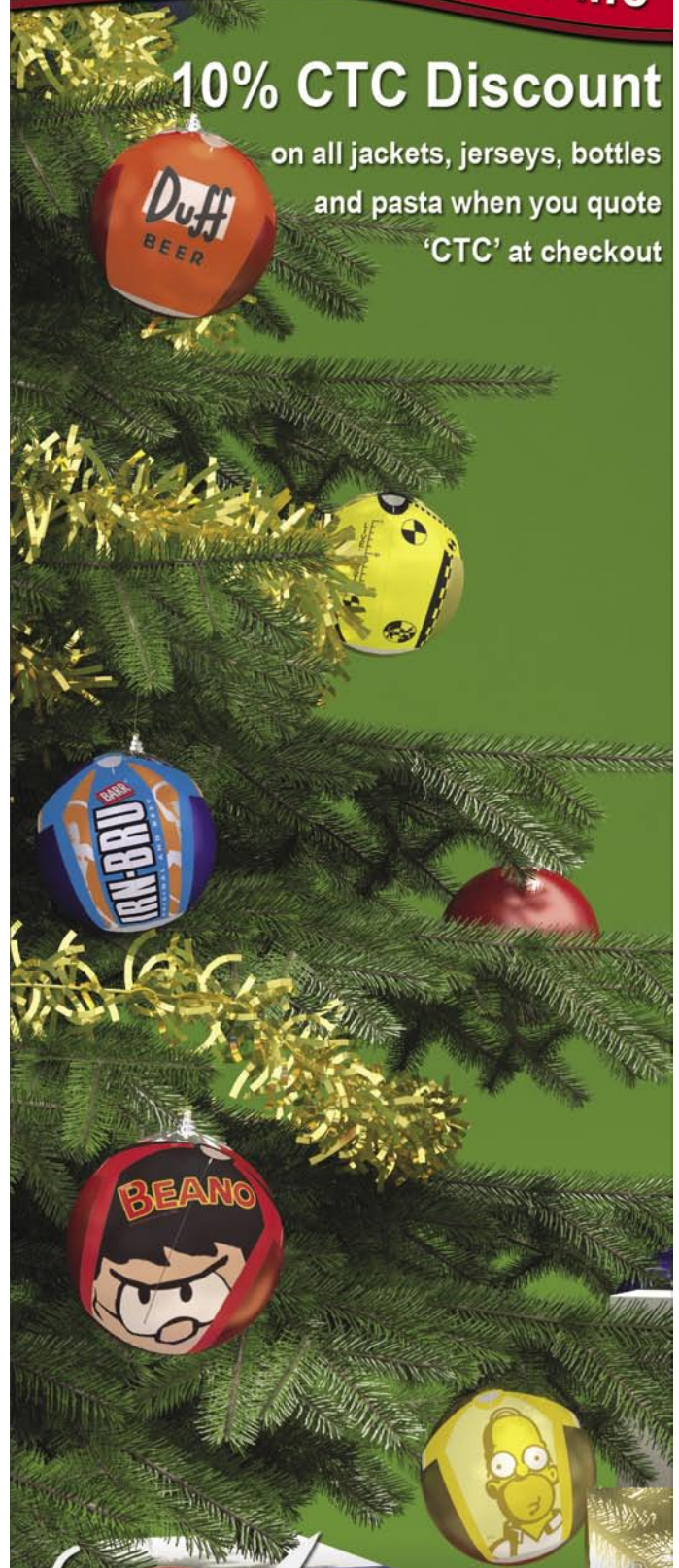
You don't have insurance

As a CTC member, you already have third party insurance cover to the tune of £10 million. So you can ride with the confidence that you are covered. If you have a crash that is not your fault, you have free access to legal help. Unlike for motorists, it's not a legal requirement for cyclists to have insurance, but CTC advises that all regular cyclists make sure they are protected, in case they cause damage to another vehicle or crash into another cyclist or pedestrian.

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DEALING WITH DIATRIBES

Get outta my way

Cyclists have a right to ride on the road. Motorists often forget that more cyclists on the roads mean fewer cars and therefore less congestion. One lane of the road has a capacity of approximately 2,000 cars or 14,000 cycles per hour. In urban traffic cyclists actually travel faster than cars, a fact even Top Gear had to admit after a commuter challenge across London.

There is sometimes pressure for cyclists to get off the road and on to the cycle path or track provided. After another CTC-led campaign, cyclists fought to retain the right in the Highway Code to have the choice not to use cycle lanes or paths, as they are not necessarily the safest place to be.

You ride on the pavement

The biggest danger to pedestrians on pavements is not cyclists but drivers, who kill around 40 pedestrians on pavements and verges each year. Cyclists on pavements are responsible for, on average, fewer than one pedestrian death per year.

There's no denying that cycling on the pavement is anti-social: it scares those who are walking and can't hear a bike coming. However, it is understandable that some cyclists lack the skills and confidence to ride on the road, so feel more comfortable on the pavement. This is why CTC recommends cycle training rather than a fixed penalty notice for cyclists who are caught illegally cycling on pavements.

Another reason some cyclists don't use the roads is the proliferation of shared-use pavements, which can cause confusion about the legality of pavement cycling. In some places, you are told that cycling on what looks like an ordinary bit of pavement is the safest place to be, then the shared-use pavement ends and it's not clear that cyclists have to be back on the road. This is a key reason why CTC urges engineers to introduce shared-use pavements only if there is nothing else they can do to improve the safety of cyclists on the road.

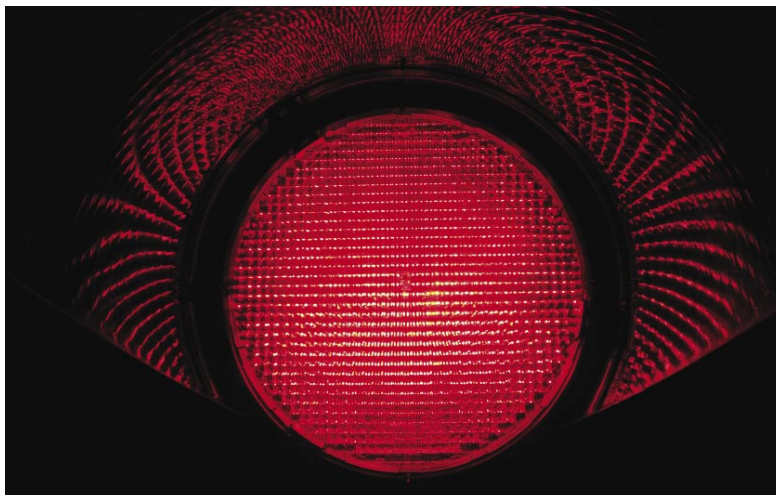
You all jump red lights

Some do, and every time a cyclist goes through red it reinforces the stereotype that all cyclists are antisocial lawbreakers. It's worse in some areas than others. Data shows that cyclists account for just under half of the traffic light violations observed by Transport for London, and are proportionately more likely to jump lights.

While this is unacceptable, it is also important to put it into context. In the last decade in London, not a single pedestrian has been killed, and only five pedestrians were injured, by cyclists going through a red light. Overall, there is less red light jumping by cyclists than motorists, and jumping a red light in a motor vehicle is just as illegal as it is on a bike – and causes more death and injury.

You should all wear hi-viz

Should all pedestrians have to wear hi-viz too? There is not enough research into the effectiveness of wearing of hi-viz to demand that all cyclists wear it. In fact, CTC campaigns against any law or policy requiring cyclists to wear hi-viz, as it could then be inferred that any cyclist involved in a crash and not wearing hi-viz could be partly to blame.



“Danger? You are more likely to be injured in an hour of gardening than in an hour of cycling”

(Top) And yet no one asks about protective clothing on Gardener's Question Time...

(Above) While London cyclists disproportionately do jump red lights, overall more car drivers than cyclists jump lights – with much more damaging results

You never use lights

Don't bother arguing this point. Between sunset and sunrise, cyclists must have lights, a red rear reflector and pedal reflectors on their bikes. It's the law. You must have a white light at the front and a red light at the back. Thanks to years of campaigning by CTC, it is now legal to have a flashing light on a bike, provided it is an appropriate colour and flashes from 60 and 240 times per minute. (See also p63.)

Oi mate, get a number plate

The administration costs of registering and providing a licence plate to every cyclist would be astronomical, and they would have to be paid for either by taxation or by individual cyclists. It would be tricky to register everyone who cycles as a large proportion of cyclists are children, and, as 45% of the population owns a bike, that's a lot of extra admin. More to the point, there is no evidence that registration would make our roads safer. Having a number plate does not stop many motorists from breaking the law. Making cyclists pay for a licence plate would deter occasional cyclists and would undermine efforts to get more people riding a bike, so the health and environmental benefits of cycling would be lost.

If you want to check all the sources and facts used in this article, download a copy of CTC's briefing sheet 'Ten Common Questions': ctc.org.uk/pubarguments. The next edition of Cycle will look at the issue of helmets.