

## **DEATH ON THE ROAD – A PERSONAL VIEW.**

I never met Barry Cawley. We are of different generations. He was a young man of 37 who had made his name in Rock and Roll, whereas my knowledge of the genre was a café in Queensferry in the mid 50s which always seemed to have on the juke box some character called Bill Hayley making a date with an alligator. After completing National Service, and with friends from Merseyside, I was invariably heading for one of the Youth Hostels in North Wales, with bike saddlebag stuffed with the necessities for an adventurous weekend away at Rowen, Lledr, or one of my other treasured destinations.

But on the day Barry died on the 23rd July, we were close. Like him I was also cycling along the B5106 towards Betws y Coed, but about three miles to his rear. I recall it was a mild day, the sort to make you feel it was good to be alive. About the time of Barry's demise I chanced upon a cycling friend of old, Rupert, also on his bike, and who like Barry lives in Llanrwst. I hadn't seen him for many a long year and together we retired to the lounge of the Old Ship at Treffriew. It was good. We talked of mutual friends, and of the many rich yet simple experiences we had had cycling over the years.

It was whilst we were chatting that we were reminded of the reality of life on modern roads. There were the now familiar sirens of emergency vehicles heading to yet another road incident. Little did we know that it was one of our own kind that had been involved in the sort of happening which cyclists try not to think too much about, as cars and lorries roar by with little thought for how vulnerable they leave us at times. My friend and I set off for Llanrwst afterwards, still not aware of the events up the road which had apparently left Barry at the bottom of an embankment and under a car. Since hearing of the tragedy Barry has not been far from my thoughts.

I now know he was a fellow it would have been a pleasure to have known. He was carefree, with lots of friends, and a full life to look forward to. In the music world he played a key role in the Catatonia back-up team and with them toured Europe. As a member of Y Cyrff, he played his part in ensuring the Welsh language maintained a place of merit in the world of Rock and Roll. When relaxing there was apparently nothing more he liked to do but ride his bike, and must have been a familiar figure around local lanes. On his final journey his cycling jersey went with him.

Mixed with my feelings of sympathy for Barry and his family, I feel angry. Not because of the circumstances of this particular incident, as we have yet to hear exactly what happened and why. And not because this involves two sets of family and friends, as we must not forget that the driver of the car also died in the incident. I am angry because these are yet more deaths on the road, and society will no doubt find its usual way of shrugging them off, and rationalising that this is the inevitable price we have to pay for our modern hyper-mobile life styles. Seemingly it matters not that six children are killed on the roads of this country every week, and approaching 4000 people die on our roads every year. This is in addition to the 300,000 plus who annually suffer injury, and the millions who share the often traumatic consequences.

Barry's death occurred on a road identified as safe and attractive for cycling. It is a beautiful road, lightly trafficked, and a delight to travel along with the exercise of a modicum of caution. It twists and turns with gentle gradients, and for the discerning traveller this is its attraction. It's just the sort of road you would hope to find in a National Park. Whether walking, cycling, or riding on horseback, the traveller is entitled to feel

safe in the expectation that he or she will receive consideration from those travelling by motorised transport

But the reality is that this latest tragedy will add yet another piece of folklore to the outrageous notion that roads like this are primarily for people in cars, not for those who travel as nature intended. To those who inevitably demand that roads should be widened and straightened in the interests of safety, I would say that no road is dangerous - it is how we use them that is dangerous.

In 1998, eleven thousand pedestrians, and over three thousand cyclists were either killed or seriously injured on the roads of this country. The year before, fifteen thousand horse related incidents involving motor vehicles were recorded. In the majority of cases excessive vehicle speed was the prime factor. It is now a reality that but for the fact that more and more people are afraid to use our roads, other than in a car, the figures would be much higher. And everyone should feel very angry about that. We are all the losers when our movements are restricted by the culture of the roads that displays so much insensitivity to the needs of vulnerable users.

It has been shown that a pedestrian hit by a vehicle travelling at 40mph has only a 5% chance of survival. At 30mph it is 45%. At 20mph a good shaking is guaranteed, but the chances of survival rise to 95%. These are figures well known to traffic police and members of the medical profession, who on our behalf are daily expected to deal with the misery of traffic deaths and injuries.

In 1997 the DETR in its Road Safety Strategy stated 'The enforcement of speed limits is potentially one of the most effective ways of reducing casualties among vulnerable road users'. With the recent reports of the successful trials of digital cameras in detecting speeding motorists, and the likelihood of these being taken up all over the country, there are the predictable cries of 'Big Brother !', and claims that our civil liberties are under threat. One is entitled to ask, 'What and who's civil liberties are we talking about, those who's lives have been destroyed by the tyranny of our road culture? What is it about our motor journeys, which makes them so sacrosanct that we couldn't have started out earlier, and ensured the safety of ourselves and other road users by travelling that much slower and safer?

I live in hope that the time will come when we can set out in our car, on foot, or on a bicycle, in the knowledge that society no longer tolerates what is in effect a pecking order of road usage, with the vulnerable at the bottom of the pile, and avoidance of speed limits as something you get away with if no one is looking. My vision is to see towns and villages giving priority to the needs of the people who live within them, and not to those anonymous individuals who use our streets en route to goodness knows where as fast as possible. I want to see our country lanes with realistic speed limits, so that everyone can use them in safety. And for us all to take personal responsibility for slashing the 70 deaths and over 7000 injuries a year on North Wales roads.. Is this really too much to expect of a society which demands justice in all things? After all, it could be ourselves or a member of our own family next.

Roy Spilsbury

Hon. Sec. CTC/Cymru

(Wales sub division of the 70,000 strong national Cyclist's Touring Club)