

Pedestrians and Motor Roads - A Walk on the Wild Side

by **Francis Bennion**

Cross-country main roads are now very dangerous for people who walk along (or alongside) them. For that reason, the Ministry of Transport tells me, it usually declines to include footways in new road schemes.

I would say this constitutes some sort of public scandal. Many people reasonably feel a need to use their feet along what are today called motor roads (in the old days a road was a road). Official attention is not paid to such awkward folk, who may be dedicated walkers or simply locals just wanting to get into the nearby town but lacking wheels. With the decline in rural bus and rail services, theirs is a growing problem.

Oddly, it was something in an old railway booklet that prompted me to ask Marsham Street for their policy about this. I picked up the booklet, entitled *Walking at Weekends* by S P B Mais, at a preserved railway station. It was published by the Southern Railway at sixpence. No year is shown, but I guess 1936. The cover is a suitable rural green. Upon it is gummed an enticing coloured view of Ha'nacker Mill in Sussex. Many remember with affection that poem in which Hilaire Belloc announced that

Sally is gone from Ha'nacker Hill
And the sweeps have fallen from Ha'nacker Mill.

When this view was painted the sweeps were still in place, and walking along English country lanes remained a peaceful pleasure. In those days guide books for ramblers or hikers suggested breaks for lunch at pubs which served no food but bread and cheese. But the landlord got his bread fresh from the village bakehouse, and his butter and cheese from a nearby farm. The ale too had its local provenance.

I found the introduction to *Walking at Weekends*, contributed by Sir Laurence Chubb of the Ramblers Association, surprising for the year 1936 (or thereabouts). He grumbles that the growing use of the motor car means that no country lane is now safe for the pedestrian, and the proportion of roads furnished with footpaths is quite inadequate. He adds: 'Let us hope that very shortly steps will be taken to ensure that these ways are furnished with paths, if necessary on the field side of the hedges . . .'

Such steps were not taken, and the pedestrian has increasingly suffered motorised interference with a right the law always gave, which was to walk in peace and safety along any highway dedicated to the public.

It is true that a legal change was made 40 years ago, when Parliament passed an Act to authorise the creation of the motorway system. Under this certain roads are legally barred to some classes of traffic, including pedestrians. But the point about this Act which has been overlooked is that Parliament intended it to be used to provide special pedestrian ways also. The Labour minister who presented the Act in Parliament specifically said: 'These same powers can - and, I sincerely hope, will - be used by county highway authorities for the construction of special roads for pedestrians and for cyclists . . .'

One does not complain that motorways provided under the 1949 Act and its successors are pedestrian-barred, since this was intended by Parliament. What is anomalous is that other cross-country roads have, through the growth of dangerous motor traffic, become in effect forbidden to walkers and that footways are not provided.

Parliament should be asked to debate this. It may be necessary (though I doubt it myself) to legislate the ancient right of the walker away. What is not acceptable is that it should effectively disappear simply through being rendered unusable by the growing speed and size of road vehicles and the decaying standards of courtesy displayed by many of their drivers.

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NB THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION (SIC) WAS FOUNDED IN 1935, SO THE BOOKLET CANNOT HAVE BEEN EARLIER

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