

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



THE FREEDOM OF THE
OPEN ROAD

Hilton Holloway

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

academyofideas.org.uk/letters



Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:
free speech allowed.

academyofideas.org.uk

What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

THE FREEDOM OF THE OPEN ROAD

The UK's disdain for open roads - and, by extension, the freedom, liberty and luxury they offer to ordinary working people - is deeply woven into the national psyche, both locally and nationally. It's as recognisable in 'progressive' thinking today as it was embedded in government thinking over 100 years ago.

Britain's remarkable unwillingness to allow unfettered travel, trade, exploration and personal expansion is rooted in a very conflicted relationship with powered travel. The idea of ordinary people being allowed to travel almost at whim - at speed, even - independent of all but the most reasonable oversight of authority has never not been contested on this island (outside of the railways which, of course, are very prescriptive in where and when you can travel). Even today's latest road-space conflict around 'low-traffic neighbourhoods' (essentially a campaign to block roads) is a continuation of centuries of deep ambivalence, if not outright hostility, to open roads.

There's something about powered travel and the amazing freedom enabled by energy-dense fuels that brings out the worst in some Britons, particularly those of a statist and metropolitan bent. And where open roads have been - reluctantly - provided during

the twentieth century, there is a contemporary glee in narrowing, blocking or allowing them to become unusable. But what many don't realise is that the roads we have were almost all created by public, 'the people', not invented by those at the top.

The free roads of the past

*Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,
And after him the parson ran, the sexton and the squire;
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread
The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.'*¹

GK Chesterton's observation on the form of Britain's mass of backroads and lanes was sharp. But his highly amusing assertion that the roads were carved out by centuries of English drunkards was, sadly, not the case.

What is classified by government as the 'local minor road network' makes up a massive 88 per cent of road length in the UK. We covered 118 billion road miles in 2019 on these backroads and lanes, making them the most used roads in the UK - even more than our motorways. These roads were carved out by man and

animal over more than 2,000 years, formed almost naturally by following the path of least resistance, using the best-drained ground as well as avoiding forests and other obstructions. Were it not for our predecessors, the UK road network would be comically restricted. Travelling on these roads brings one remarkably close to the work and effort of the distant past.

It's a remarkable thing to consider: an Iron Age motorway that was used by the Romans and remained a main thoroughfare throughout the centuries.

Not far from where I'm writing this, in the Surrey Hills, is the most magnificent Holloway. Heading North-South, it's a sunken lane (a hollow way), ground down into the landscape by two centuries of human and animal feet. It was only given a layer of preserving tarmac in the past hundred years or so. At the southern end, as it crosses Abinger Roughs, the Holloway is especially deep. Last summer, I was able to see it in its unshorn state, almost a tunnel, hemmed in by densely packed overhanging trees and lined with large ferns. It must have looked much as it did when the Romans invaded. There is but one intrusion from the modern world besides the tarmac - built into the

side of the track at the point is a concrete pill box, built as the Second World War approached.

It's a remarkable thing to consider: an Iron Age motorway that was used by the Romans and remained a main thoroughfare throughout the centuries. This quick route across a ridge of hills was in use into the eighteenth century and beyond; in 1940 it was still seen as a strategic route that might be exploited by an invading German army. Having struggled - especially in winter - to move goods for sale and export out of the tight folds of the Surrey Hills, our Regni entrepreneur under Roman occupation would have eventually connected with Stane Street somewhere along today's Dorking High Street. What they found was a modern road that was dry, well drained and ran straight as a die to the south coast.

Following the withdrawal of Roman legions after 410, the British tribes and, later, local parishes, did not properly maintain the Roman network (though the underlying quality of the Roman roads meant that they remained the UK's main road system even into the 1600s). Alas, this is where the British experience and belief in the freedom, liberty and economic opportunity provided by the open road stuttered and died.

Historical NIMBYism

London has long been the centre of resistance to the open road. The open boulevards of the European capitals seem to offend the British state's sensibilities. Our capital city is a magnificent example of the willingness to live in a state of noise, mess, inconvenience and incivility.

One of the first plans to give Britain a civilised road network was a proposal to clear up the capital's notorious streets by Daniel Nis in 1634. He is said to have proposed to Charles I:

'The beautification and better accommodation of the city by raising them to a convenient height, evenness and decency, having ample passage for coaches carts and horses and reserving a competent part to be made even and easy in a far more elegant and commodious manner for the convenience of foot passengers, besides a handsome accommodation of water for continual cleansing of the streets by lead pipes.'

It never happened. Two hundred and fifty years later, London was a desperate swirl of horse excrement, urine and incredible noise. An essay by architect HB Cresswell recalled the London of 1890 in which all vehicles - lorry, wagon, bus, hansom and "growler", and coaches and carriages and private vehicles of all

kindsⁱⁱⁱ - were pulled by horses. Stables could be three or four stories high, and the mix of mud and mess lapped up the walls of houses. Cresswell describes how this mixture induced clouds of flies which would collect on the chandeliers in smart houses. Noise from horses on cobbles and the creaking of the carts and carriages was also said to be excruciating. In fact, if you look today you can still see evidence of the wooden-block road surfaces used to try to subdue the noise of late nineteenth century London. One can only ponder the damage done to the economy and general health of London over centuries as it persisted with narrow lanes and streets as well as massive congestion (never mind the damage done to the regional cities, which were connected by nothing more than tracks).

Most impactful, though, has been the capital's role in underpinning Britain's resistance to building a serious network of national roads... a political tradition that's been stubborn, pig-headed and 2,000 years in the making.

A last-gasp major London road scheme - via the rapidly rising influence of Corbusian planners - appeared in the 1944 Greater London Plan. The idea of three ring roads and expressways inside Greater

London led to one of the longest-running political scraps in UK history. While only tiny sections of the intended urban motorways were built, the row lasted from 1944 to 1998 when the M11 link road was finally opened. In contrast, Paris is today completing its third ring road.

Having beaten off desires for the kind of urban motorways familiar on the continent (even bicycle-obsessed Amsterdam is surrounded by a motorway ring), London has, over the past 20 years, been gripped by a major experiment in reversing the freedom of the open road. For example, main road bridges have had their number of lanes stealthily reduced. London Bridge is now closed to cars, vans and lorries during the daytime, and, after 134 years of use, Hammersmith Bridge is now open only to cyclists and pedestrians. London's roads have been extensively narrowed, with bus stands built out into the traffic flow causing congestion and - most incredibly - pollution hotspots as diesel vehicles are forced to idle or stop and start. The Congestion Charge has not been expanded outside of the capital, with attempts to introduce mass road-tolling to Greater Manchester and Edinburgh overwhelmingly rejected in local referendums.

Most impactful, though, has been the capital's role in underpinning Britain's resistance to building a serious

network of national roads - separating the farmer herding sheep and the farmer moving grain to market, as well as the articulated lorry from the bus and bicycle. It's a political tradition that's been stubborn, pig-headed and 2,000 years in the making.

The crackdown on self-propulsion

'Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes which is the goode way, and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refesshyng for youre soules.' ⁱⁱⁱ

- Chaucer (via Jeremiah 6:16)

Let's return to our Surrey farmer in the 1600s. He is still knee-deep in mud and going nowhere fast. Seventeenth-century attempts to get local parishes to maintain their roads via a payment system known as 'pavage' never really worked. Long-distance travel in the UK was only helped by the slow and uncertain establishment of the decidedly uneven turnpike trusts (toll-collecting bodies created by parliament) to maintain roads for long-distance traffic. Many rural locals didn't care much for paying turnpike tolls on what had previously been local tracks. The so-called 1840s Rebecca Riots in Wales were triggered by agricultural poverty and a local turnpike trust run by a particularly extractive regime, which began to charge

farmers for local inter-field trips. Tolls, gates and toll booths were destroyed.

The promise of decent roads and steam technology from the industrial revolution was combining to create the reality of freedom of movement - at speed and without the limitations of animal power.

Perhaps the stand-out Briton, who propelled us closest to open-road freedom, was Ayr-born John Loudon McAdam. He made a fortune in the US around the time of the revolution but returned and became head of the Ayrshire turnpike trust (then the Bristol turnpike trust in 1816). He roughly reinvented and improved upon the Roman method of roadbuilding, using crushed stone and gravel on a bed of large stones which was cambered to allow rainwater to run off the road. His 'Macadamisation' technique spread across to the US and was likewise used with glee by European countries for main roads. McAdam's radical ideas of bypasses (building more modestly graded roads and rebuilding the existing tracks from scratch) brought down the time that mail took to travel from Holyhead to London from 45 to 17 hours across 20 years of construction.

But even the obvious advantages of faster travel failed to inspire Parliament to embrace the open road. In fact, the nineteenth century was a high point in the British state's attempts to throttle self-propelled transport. Steam buses date back to 1823 (with a steam traction offering travel between Gloucester and Cheltenham) which, according to the transport historian Peter Gould, were physically sabotaged. Turnpike trusts were also levied with huge tolls on self-propelled vehicles. According to Gould, a regular 'steam carriage' service running from London Wall to Islington and Paddington began on 22 April 1833, but this service was also frustrated by the dominance of the horse.

By the mid 1800s, it's clear that the promise of decent roads and steam technology from the industrial revolution was combining to create the reality of freedom of movement - at speed and without the limitations of animal power. It's no surprise, then, that it was at this point that parliament decided to crack down on self-propulsion and the liberty to travel. As Gould points out:

'Harsh legislation from 1861 onwards virtually eliminated mechanically propelled vehicles from the roads of Great Britain. The Locomotive Act of 1861 imposed speed limits on 'road locomotives' of 5mph in towns and cities, and 10mph in the country. Four years later, the Locomotives Act of 1865

(the famous Red Flag Act), reduced the speed limits to 4mph in the country and just 2mph in towns and cities.’

Gould continues:

‘In addition, the act required a man bearing a red flag to precede every vehicle and at the same time gave powers to local authorities to specify the hours during which any such vehicle might use the roads. It effectively killed development of the mechanically propelled omnibus for some 30 years.’^{iv}

This legislation came on top of a massive rise in railway use (and the cutting of canals after the Industrial Revolution took hold). It is remarkable that the infrastructure-heavy, expensive and complex railways were given their head, but serious road building was not. It took until 1896 for the Red Flag Act to be repealed (the flag requirement was dropped in 1878) and speed limits raised. This time, the advance of the internal combustion engine in France and Germany could no longer be held at Dover. In addition, the popularity of cycling really did mean that the desire for freedom of movement was out of the box. But that didn’t prevent the British elite remaining remarkably resistant to building roads for the future.

Even by the 1930s, proper expressways with cycle lanes were being built in some areas - the Kingston bypass and the East Lancs road being good examples -

but plans for expansion were never carried through. The upshot is that the UK's main A-roads are now little more than Victorian high streets which sprawl out in endless ribbon developments. Like the turnpikes and pre-Roman tracks, local traffic comes into direct conflict with long-distance traffic.

Britain came very late to the motorway age, as Whitehall was caught out by the huge rise in car ownership by the late 1950s. The 1959 Preston bypass was the first stretch of motorway, but it took 50 years to the day for the Department of Transport to cheerfully declare that a continuous motorway now ran from London to Glasgow. A lamentable delay by any measure.

The ultimate democratic service

Things were looking good, finally, when the M1 was opened in 1959. But by the end of the twentieth century it was no longer lords and monarchs standing in the way of road-building - instead, the progressive left were trying to lever people out of their cars.

Environmental politics is a new means of playing out old ideas about tolls, parking charges and stopping road-building. It is quite remarkable that the freedom

delivered by the car on the open road, especially for working people, is so roundly dismissed by left and liberal thought today.

Has anything widened and improved the living standards and lives of ordinary people more than the car? I remember hundreds of men leaving the local factory on bicycles in the 1970s - the affordable car has enormously expanded the ability of people to find work well beyond a reasonable bike ride in mid-winter. Whitehall may still be a Tube ride away for the mandarins, but the people from my home town can no longer work in the factory at the end of the street. (They probably rather like the option not to have to.) And how about considering what the car has done for female autonomy? Women can be safe, comfortable, warm in winter and capable of making it to Manchester by teatime.

Liberty, autonomy and true luxury within the law are the biggest rewards possible for working-class people.

One thing I learned while travelling the world with the automotive industry is that luxury is really about the removal of inconvenience and annoyance. Yes, private jets are plush - but they also allow you to speed from Birmingham to Geneva and be driven directly off the

airport apron to your destination. Today's cars are probably the most truly democratic luxurious device yet devised - a personal private jet. Climate controlled, audio equipped with peace, isolation and protection from all weathers. You can enjoy 500 miles of autonomy after three minutes of re-fuelling.

Britons waited a long time for this level of liberty and luxury. The post-war economy didn't recover until the 1980s - yet Margaret Thatcher's 'great car economy' was mocked by the metropolitans, who are even now telling workers to 'get on their bike'. The drive to get people to buy expensive, short-range, battery-powered cars is all politics rather than policy - revealed in the punitive fashion for cycle lanes, 24-hour bus lanes, banning the same diesel cars the government told you to buy a decade ago and higher parking charges.

Liberty, autonomy and true luxury within the law are the biggest rewards possible for working-class people. The hard-fought British freedom of open roads - literally cut into the landscape by our ancestors - will not be surrendered easily.

References

- i Chesterton, GK, 'The Rolling English Road', 1913
- ii Creswell, HB, (quoted in) Jacobs, Jane, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, 1961
- iii Chaucer, Geoffrey, 'The Parson's Prologue and Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer* (third edition), Oxford Paperbacks, 1988
- iv Gould, Peter, 'The Steam Bus 1833 - 1923', petergould.co.uk

— LETTERS on LIBERTY

Letters on Liberty publishes regularly. If you want to ensure you don't miss a single one, you can now subscribe and get the next five bundles for just £25 by heading to www.academyofideas.org.uk/letters



UNFUCKWITHABLE MONEY

Jeremy Hildreth argues that those resistant to Bitcoin should remember how much technological growth has taken place in the last 20 years – and how letting go of old ways can be painful, but necessary for progress.

FOLK AND THE ENGLISH RADICAL TRADITION

Brian Denny argues that we must remember the working-class history of radical folk and rebellion in order to build a more democratic and freedom-loving future.





UNSHACKLING INTIMACY

Ralph Leonard champions sexual freedom, arguing that while taboos around sex and intimacy have shifted over time, prejudices still abound.

TAKING CONSCIENCE SERIOUSLY

Dolan Cummings writes that we must not simply defend conscience from overt censorship, but champion it as a bulwark against groupthink and moral conformism.



THE SCOTTISH QUESTION

Alastair Donald looks at how age-old questions have re-emerged related to liberty, democracy and sovereignty in Scotland, but with a modern twist.

GREENS: THE NEW NEO-COLONIALISTS

Austin Williams argues that the contemporary environmentalist obsession with stopping development is a bigger threat to society than climate change.



Author

Hilton Holloway grew up in the Lancashire industrial town of Leyland and left, enthusiastically, to study product design for six years at three Polytechnic art colleges. He briefly practised in mountain-bike design in the US and UK before moving to motoring journalism, working at three London-based titles for over 22 years. He has received numerous awards, including the Guild of Motoring Writers' Journalist of the Year and News Writer of the Year three times. The job had a global brief and cumulated in a decade of intensive hyper-mobility and a BA Gold card. Hilton is currently recovering in the Surrey Hills.



Illustrations

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at janbow.com

Letters on Liberty identity

Alex Dale

Pamphlet and website design

Martyn Perks

— LETTERS on LIBERTY

academyofideas.org.uk/letters

