

by Derek Morrison

*Riding abreast dialogue flowed
As they joined the busy road
Single up! Came leader's behest
They ignored; they knew best
Important to assert two-up mode
They all know the Highway Code
Behind; impatient engines gunned
But closed ears this cue shunned
Single up! Came leader's shout
Again failed to insert some doubt
Single up! Came leader's scream
Words still flowing like a stream
Riding abreast dialogue flowed
Until silenced; as heads hit road.*

[To listen to this verse select below]

<http://www.cyberstanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/TwoUp.mp3>

Commentary

A relatively frequently-observed behaviour is cyclists who ride more than two abreast on a busy road or cycleway unaware – or indifferent – to their impact on other users. That said, however, the common two abreast practice, however, is a source of some confusion for both cyclists and motorists . For example, [Rule 66 of the UK Highway Code](#) states:

“You should ... never ride more than two abreast, and ride in single file on narrow or busy roads and when riding round bends.” [my emphasis]

Note that *“ride in single file on narrow or busy roads and when riding round bends”*. How busy? How narrow? How bendy? Busy would cover most UK main roads and narrow would cover most country lanes. Bendy would cover both. Note also that *“You should ...”* not *“You must ...”* *Should* indicates an advisory rather than a mandatory requirement.

Seeking to reduce the confusion travel and cycling writer [Carlton Reid](#) has recently published (August 2015) a couple of short but very polished online videos featuring Chris Boardman and driving instructor Blaine Walsh. In [Side by Side](#) the message is that side-by-side riders take up less room on the road and so its often safer and quicker for a motorist to overtake them than a long tail of single riders. It's the final message by Boardman in Side by Side, however, that needs to penetrate deep into the behaviour of some motorists, i.e. whether riding side-by-side or single file cyclists need to be given plenty of room when overtaking. That plenty of room is the focus of the second video [SPACE](#) which highlights Rule 163 of the UK Highway Code:

"Give vulnerable road users at least as much space as you would a car."

One of the most common near misses featuring in my forthcoming *Close Encounters* series is the failure to follow Rule 163. In SPACE Boardman highlights the dynamic envelope required by cyclists because of either the basic physics of cycling (we wobble) or as a result of negotiating our increasingly poor road surfaces, but some motorists appear unaware or indifferent. While I think both Side by Side and SPACE are excellent educational resources I have a few concerns.

1. Who is likely to see them if the videos remain viewable only via a cycling oriented online environment? If every driving school and driving theory test guide incorporated them into their portfolio of learning material then that might just have some impact on those whose thinking most needs influencing, i.e. car drivers.
2. While Boardman and Walsh make a powerful and rational case, some drivers are far from rational. The hostility of some drivers to side-by-side riding can translate into aggression and risky driving on their part and a large mass of white van pouring forth verbal abuse and revving engine from behind sometimes requires nerves of steel to hold a course.
3. Boardman appears to assert that side-by-side riding should be viewed in the same way as a driver sitting next to a passenger in a car with the two chatting to each other at times. This comparison is flawed and potentially dangerous because it understates the risks. A car is a single mechanical entity that moves in response to controls manipulated by a single driver. A more accurate and less attractive comparison perhaps would be two thin cars with their windows down driving parallel

to each other. Or perhaps two motor bikes. (see 4)

4. Boardman focuses on a single cyclist's dynamic envelope but with side-by-side riding the envelope needs to be much greater. Riding two abreast on our increasingly potholed and busy roads can place particularly the inner cyclist at increased risk of not being able to escape an obstacle and, if in a group, like dominoes, others may also fall; on a busy highway that's not a good situation.
5. The Carlton Reid videos, perhaps inadvertently, give the impression that side-by-side riding is the norm and Boardman's authoritative presence reinforces this. Despite the logic of the assertions by Boardman et al in the Carlton Reid videos the vagueness of Rule 66 of the UK Highway Code does not make side-by-side riding the normal case – it only indicates cyclists can. Whether they should have will become manna for expensive lawyers when disputed causes of an accident come to criminal or civil court. To restate my earlier extract from Rule 66:
"You should ... never ride more than two abreast, and ride in single file on narrow or busy roads and when riding round bends." [my emphasis]
 How busy? How narrow? How bendy?

Whatever the legal rights and wrongs my short rhyme 'Two-up' attempts encapsulate a few other issues.

First, because cycling can be a potent social activity. Consequently, when conversation is in full flow this can impede responsiveness to changed circumstances or perception of risk. That's why an alert group ride leader is essential and why they should be listened to. Full conversation flow plus the cycling specific phenomena of 'brains moving into legs', however, can sometimes make the ride leader's task an unenviable one. One of the essential cognitive skills of the group rider, therefore, is to develop the ability to hold multi-part conversations with different people at different times in a ride which are interrupted by the need to break dialogues and somehow thread them all together by the end. Something akin to reading bits of many books or newspapers over a period of time and finally assembling the full stories when in a position to do so.

Second, while riding abreast may appear rational because it takes up less road space, explicitly or tacitly asserting this rationale in the hope of normalising the practice is a high risk behaviour. I suggest that the average UK motorist doesn't currently perceive riding

abreast in this positive way. There is a longer educational process that needs to be undertaken and one that shouldn't involve cyclists offering themselves as live demonstrators.

Third, ignoring a group ride leader is at best impolite and undermines team cohesiveness. At worst, it exposes the whole group to risk because cyclists in a group are like dominoes, i.e. when one goes down others tend to follow.