

Keep Left.....or Right?

By Brian Judge

Why do we British drive on the left whilst the rest of the world drives on the right?
Could it be that we are just bull headed and won't give in and accept the majority line?

Well, let's consider the history. Up until the seventeenth century all road users (where roads existed) tended to travel on the left, due it is believed to horsemen, most of whom would be right handed and therefore wore their swords on the left. They would similarly mount and dismount from the left. In those violent days, attacks by highwaymen were always a possibility and it was important to be able to quickly defend themselves. This practice endured until the French Revolution in 1789 gave a boost to travelling on the right by default. Previously, the aristocracy travelled in their coaches on the left and the peasants walked on the right but after the revolution, wishing to keep a low profile the toffs, now without their carriages, joined the peasantry on the right. This practice thereafter became established in France.

Later with Napoleon's conquest of much of the European continent, 'rightism' spread to Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, part of Austria, Poland, large swathes of Russia plus parts of Spain and Italy. But since Napoleon failed to make it across the English Channel, Britain oblivious to what was going on elsewhere continued to travel on the left. Naturally in time, the countries of the former British colonial empire adopted the same system as the mother country. But other states outside the British Empire also drove on the left. Indonesia did and still does today. The reason was that although Holland originally drove on the left, despite the change which took place there thanks to Napoleon, the Dutch East Indies carried on as before. Japan which also drives on the left was influenced by the British who helped them construct their first railways and also much later, their emerging motor industry. At this point a pattern was developing in Europe and Asia.

In the United States, after they gained their Independence, being anxious to throw off all facets of colonial rule they gradually moved from left to right. The influence of immigrants from European countries of course added to this movement. Laws were passed making the move mandatory in Pennsylvania (1792), New York (1804) and New Jersey (1813). In Canada some parts drove on the left until after WW2 although in the province of Quebec – right driving had always prevailed. In Spain for many years the north kept right (Barcelona) but in the south they drove on the left (Madrid).

Now we come to the twentieth century and after WW1 with the break up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, no changes took place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary or the then Yugoslavia which all continued to drive on the left. In fact today in Prague, pre-Second World War - locally built cars, which are ‘right hand drive’ - convey tourists around the city centre. Austria incidentally, together with Italy and Spain were by this time in the peculiar position of having half their country driving on the left and the remainder on the right which reflected the part conquered by our old friend Napoleon.

Portugal fell into line by giving up the fight in the 1920s.

Then from 1938, and throughout his conquest of Europe, Hitler in time completed what Napoleon had begun so many years before. After the annexation of Austria it was decreed that all traffic would from then on drive on the right and as the war progressed, all states at that time driving on the left which were overrun by the German armies crossed the road and remained there after the war’s end.

In 1946, China joined the majority and from that point on took to the right side of the road.

So thanks to the French Revolution, Napoleon, Hitler and Mau Tse Tong (four bloody instigators), the situation today is that approximately three quarters of the world drives on the right whilst the others remain on the left.

So which system is the correct one?

Well as we have seen, history comes down squarely on the side of the 'Lefties' since extreme violence and it's consequences can never be condoned. So yes, it transpires that in this particular case, 'Left' turns out to be right and 'Right' is unquestionably wrong. Whilst shedding no blood the 'Lefties' have maintained the status quo in sticking to the original practice.

So finally it is with confidence that we can now clearly state what we have always believed, that THEY are driving on THE WRONG SIDE OF THE ROAD.

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