

Making roads convivial again

Former Department for Transport director and current director of the RAC Foundation, Steve Gooding, looks at the way forward for our roads

Imagine, if you will, a keen cyclist, a lively young person with a thirst for getting out and about, becoming so frustrated with the state of the roads on which they rode that they embarked upon a life's mission to do something about it.

I wonder whether the image that sprang into your mind was that of William Rees Jeffreys, who became honorary secretary to the Cyclists' Touring Club way back in 1900. Rees Jeffreys went on to ride motorcycles, to be a leading light in the early days of motoring, but above all to become a widely recognised expert in the field of road design and construction. For Rees Jeffreys, the development of well-engineered roads was the key to a better quality of life for all.

Toward the end of his life, as a successful businessman and connoisseur of the arts, Rees Jeffreys, by now living in a handsome house down a narrow country road – the romantically named Slugwash Lane in Sussex – established a charitable fund with an endowment to take forward his work. The fund was established in 1950 and exists to this day, providing bursaries for engineering qualifications, and giving grants for research and projects relating to the improvement of roads and, importantly, of roadside facilities.

Rees Jeffreys died in the mid-1950s, leaving a substantial art collection which increased the value of his endowment - 127 of his paintings (including works by Braque and Matisse, which he purchased from the artists themselves) were auctioned at Christie's.

I researched all this because I have for some time now had the honour of being a trustee of the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund, and I can say on behalf of all the board of trustees that we are acutely conscious of the fact that Rees Jeffreys saw roads not just as a way of fuelling an economy, but of giving people more opportunity to get out and enjoy the countryside – hence the funding of numerous roadside rests around the country.

At the point coronavirus hit we were in the throes of organising an event to mark the 70th anniversary of the creation of the fund. Within days of the lockdown, road traffic had fallen back to levels that Rees Jeffreys would have recognised in 1950.

1950 was, of course, a world away from 2020 – the UK population in 1950 was around 50 million; today it is 68 million. The average



A stop with a viewpoint, provided by the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund. Picture by the author

new car cost in the region of a third of the cost of the average house. The number of licensed vehicles in Great Britain was around four million in 1950; today it is approaching 40 million, with over 30 million cars. The technology of 2020 is also a long way from anything that might have been applied, or even imagined, in 1950.

But our ambitions to promote a thriving economy and happy, healthy lifestyles are still with us, and for a moment we were offered the tantalising opportunity to contemplate a reset, to create a new and better 'normal'.

So, since normal conferences were off the agenda for the foreseeable future we organised a webinar, drawing in the expert views of a panel comprising Lynn Sloman of Transport for Quality of Life; Ginny Clarke from the CIHT and former chief highway engineer at the Highways Agency; Rachel Skinner, the next president of the ICE; Natalie Chapman from the FTA; and Sujith Kollamthodi, Ricardo's sustainable transport practice director, to discuss where we might go from here in respect of our roads: what have they ever done for us, and what would we like them to do henceforward? In doing so, we were keen to keep Rees Jeffreys' guiding principles in view: that roads should be well-engineered, well-maintained, and designed with – in his own words – beauty in mind.

Hopefully, this has piqued your interest enough to go and have a look at the recording of our discussion which can be found online ⁽¹⁾

or if – and I have some sympathy with this – you may be feeling you have enjoyed a surfeit of webinars over lockdown you can read my fellow trustee Glenn Lyons' write up of the event ⁽²⁾.

There were plenty of interesting ideas aired, including the thought that Highways England could be fundamentally repurposed and spend some of its RIS 2 budget on setting up a national network of shared office spaces so office workers unable to work from home could still work within modest – walking or cycling – travelling distance of home.

The three observations I came away with are that the scale of the challenge involved in meeting our zero-carbon ambitions means we do need some fresh, big-impact ideas. We are not, as one of my former bosses was fond of saying, going to get where we want to be just by pedalling faster.

Second, that as people professionally involved in planning, managing, maintaining and building roads, we collectively need to be both ambitious and optimistic about what we can achieve. And third, that beyond being efficient and economically valuable we want our roads to be connected and convivial places – perhaps those are words we should propose for the current refresh of the Highway Code. 🚗

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHbTuUirTKw

² www.linkedin.com/pulse/never-waste-crisis-rethinking-what-we-want-our-roads-do-glenn-lyons