

Freedom of the Road

by John Herbert Marr

Smoke from the incinerator stack blew to the west like a thin white ruler against the scudding, grey clouds, before breaking up to disappear, no higher than it started. Mr Williams shivered as he drove past it, and flurries of late March snow pelted his car window. Since the abolishment of the Highway Acts two months earlier, people were driving like maniacs, weaving crazily past him as though the end of the world were upon them.

He passed another smash, and dodged a police car coming against the traffic, its siren howling. It clipped his wing and he cursed again the weak-minded politicians who had voted to repeal the Acts. There had been a long drawn-out stalemate with a hung parliament until, at the last election, a sensitive opinion poll found that the single most unpopular item among voters was traffic regulations; people were tired of parking tickets, speeding fines, and no entry signs. The prevailing attitude was, "If I want to kill myself, it's up to me!" Regulations were seen as a contempt of freedom and, from now on, if people wanted to drive like imbeciles then they could, subject only to avoiding wilful damage to property, or injuring or killing a third party. Needless to say, on such a platform the Party for the Restoration of Liberties, commonly known as the PROLs, had swung a huge majority. Mr Williams had voted for them too, but now doubts were creeping in.

He arrived home a full two hours later than he used to, and was annoyed that yet again there were no parking places outside his house. He had to walk a block back in the snow and it was then, as he thought of what a wreck his new car had become in just two months, that he had his idea. Next morning he phoned work with an excuse, visited a tool hire firm, drove to a local scrap yard where he obtained a good collection of ironmongery, and began to assemble and rivet and weld a monstrous contrivance for the front of his car. The metal was old and rusty, with a certain asymmetry which gave it added strength rather than beauty, like a great snow-plough. Finally, he was satisfied, and leaned back in admiration.

The car was awkward to drive and sluggish, but he noted with secret pleasure the many glances he now received from other road users. No one hit him on the way home; indeed, people particularly kept to one side and gave him room, and this was probably what encouraged him to

act as he did. Arriving home, there was one car parked already, just inching onto his bit of road. Setting his cap firmly on his head and checking his seat belt was secure (for old habits die hard), Mr Williams moved forward. There was a resounding crunch, and the tinkle of breaking glass was as music after so many months of frustration. The neighbour ran out, alerted no doubt by the noise, but could only dance in anguish. Mr Williams had done nothing against the law (there was no law regulating damage to vehicles any more); but the law against persons was still intact and inviolable. Indeed, since the relaxation of the car laws, it had been applied even more stringently as tempers became more frayed, and this poor man could only shout and swear vengeance.

The following day he returned to work without further incident, but the car park was full as ever and it was snowing. Two days ago, Mr Williams would have parked at the far side and walked across and been late as usual. But today he drove straight to the main entrance and bulldozed a small mini to one side, before neatly reversing into its place. The manoeuvre gave him great satisfaction, and he had a warm glow from it all day. That evening, his neighbour had not moved his car back, but some other fellow had already taken the place and Mr Williams shunted him unceremoniously onto the pavement before going in to a welcome tea of bread and jam. It was not long before he found that his place was generally left vacant when he arrived home, and he could slide in comfortably (though of course he did take up a little more room now, and didn't always judge his length accurately).

On Saturday, he decided to drive to town. This was something he had not done for a long time because, though all parking restrictions were gone and there were no charges in the car parks, the traffic jams and accidents were so abysmal that only the most intrepid ventured out. Some people made the journey in the early hours of the morning while it was still quiet, and parked on the pavements outside the main stores. Others enjoyed the cut and thrust as they used to enjoy football matches; but for many, it was a time of dread, dependent on battered buses, or simply parking well outside the danger zone and walking in. Mr Williams had had enough of walking. He drove like a man crazy, weaving in and out, and not caring in the least which car he wacked. Those who saw him coming tried to avoid him, while the others were dispatched to one side. He reached the town centre in record time, and with a little judicious juggling he managed to clear sufficient space to park on a broad pavement. Thoroughly satisfied by his achievement, he marched into a nearby restaurant to order a coffee.

Of course such a good idea quickly caught on, and soon most of the cars were sporting some sort of over-grown bumper of rough steel, and there were many fine gladiatorial combats. Mr Williams himself was the victim of just such a one, when some low bandit banged into his rear at a traffic-light queue and edged him off the road, with considerable damage to his back lights and fender. (Not that anyone took any notice of traffic lights anymore - which is why there was such an impatient queue.) Following this, Mr Williams hobbled home as best he could and took another day off work. This time, he built an even stronger structure which covered the sides and overhung at the back, and looked truly impregnable. Indeed, he could not get into the car himself at first, and had to re-light his welding torch to force an entry through a weakened side panel. This accomplished, he drove off once more, determined that this time he would be beaten by nobody.

It was on the way home from work the following week that he came across the road works. To be accurate, these particular road works had been going on for some time (for no-one is keen to work outdoors in the snow with cars likely to drop into the ditch one is digging,) but they had never particularly troubled Mr Williams since fitting his novel car-catcher. His record now stood at six cars forced into this ditch; it would have been seven, but one enterprising woman managed to spin round and drive off in the same direction ahead of him - but I digress.

Tonight he was in a benevolent mood and looked forward to reversing for a parking place as well as moving forward when finally he reached home, and thus it was that when he came to the traffic light controlling the road works he decided to stop while it was red, and had the added satisfaction of feeling someone bump onto his back. At that moment the light turned green, and he moved forward.

It was hard to tell just what sort of car he met. In the half gloom of distant street lamps he could see the diggers and road rollers parked by the dug-up roadway where they'd been left for the night, and at first glance he thought it was one of these advancing towards him. A rapid and logical appraisal of the situation soon assured him, however, that beneath the mass of waving ironwork tottering towards him was just a normal, old, battered car, and he determined to advance as he had always done.

The crash was horrific. He juddered to a halt and found he had slid half round, but was determined not to retreat or be forced to the ditch or pavement. He backed away slightly to better

position himself, then advanced again, this time in a lower gear. The other vehicle had not moved, but it was like hitting a wall; there was another terrible crash and he juddered to a halt, but nothing happened: the enemy had not been forced back by one centimetre.

Again he retreated, ready to charge again, but this time his enemy backed away too. Thinking he had the advantage he began to rush forward once more when, to his horror, he realised that his opponent was doing the exact same thing and in a moment, with the most almighty crash of steel on steel, the two monsters mixed in combat. Mr Williams could see that his battering ram was already dented and was dragging on the road with sparks shooting out as he tried to dodge and turn. Several cars had moved in behind each combatant, and they were all sounding their horns in a fearful cacophony; for the new Abolishment of Rules Bill applied to motor horns too, and people had been quick to fit dreadful sirens to their vehicles. One man behind Mr Williams had fitted a large klaxon on his roof, and was making the most of its power by trying to blast the two juggernauts off the road.

By now the two cars were locked inextricably, their front wheels lifted clear off the ground, and they seemed to circle each other in wild, unpredictable ways as first one and then the other gained some advantage in traction on the narrow ground. Mr Williams began to think he had taken on more than he had allowed for, in the joy of beating off lesser motors, but he could not back down now even if he wanted to (and in truth he didn't, for he rather liked being the new centre of attraction). The police had been called and were in attendance but were powerless to act, for neither driver was breaking any law - unless they actually left their vehicles and started attacking each other physically!

Finally the two sets of amateur steel tusks gave up their struggles. Each seemed equally mangled and incapable of fighting off anything more than rotten eggs or cabbages; they certainly were incapable of defending their owner's pride. By this time, the traffic queues on both sides of the road works were so long it looked impossible for them ever to move again, and many drivers were leaving their vehicles and beginning to walk home. Mr Williams and his antagonist glared at each other, then managed to crawl from their mangled wrecks to walk haughtily past each other as they continued home by foot. The other drivers jumped out and, with an almighty heave, managed between them to shove the combined dead weights, now locked as one inextricable

tangle, into the ditch. With an ironic sense of humour, one wit climbed into the parked road-roller and drove it over both of them to finish the job.

For a long time, Mr Williams didn't get another car. But it was not long after this incident in his hitherto gentle life that several opposition groups in parliament began to hold secret meetings, and formed an unofficial coalition dedicated to a new society, with the slogan "Restoration of the Road". The driving voters had learnt their lesson.