

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WHEEL

It was Charlie Ug that invented the wheel way back when and by rights he should still be rotting in the lowest regions of hell for it. Fact is though that when Old Nick realized what a fine bit of devilry Charlie had come up with he gave him a job for eternity as Devil's Advocate.

I can picture the scene like it was yesterday. Charlie had been working on his invention for years. Everybody in the village from the medicine man on down said it wouldn't fly. For some reason Charlie believed it would fly and he had tried every shape imaginable in the pursuit of his dream to soar like an eagle. This particular morning he had arrived at the form of a big, flat wooden disc. The idea was that it would take off on water if fired from the shore with sufficient velocity (Charlie was still working on the catapult). It never came to take off because as Charlie set his disc on edge to do a little sanding it slipped from his inebriated grasp, rolled out the door and down the hill. The passage of Charlie's fiendish invention through the hamlet caused much consternation and confusion and no end of broken toes. From his doorway, Charlie watched the fun, filled with an inexplicable pride. His invention wasn't flying but it sure was moving.

Charlie's little moment of pride was the only short-term benefit he got from his wheel. The village decided that both he and his creation were a menace to society and pushed Charlie out to sea on his disc with a bottle of whiskey and some mouldy biscuits. That was the last anybody except the Devil saw of Charlie but not, unfortunately, of the wheel. It came floating back some weeks later waterlogged but ready to roll.

It's been rolling ever since.

The wheel's early career was humble. It spent millennia leading a relatively benign and rustic existence on donkey carts and hay wains. Relatively benign being a crushed peasant here, a squashed goat there. But the wheel was patient. It just needed to wait for other Charlies to come along to realize its potential for dealing death and destruction on the grand scale.

In this regard a great roll forward came with the invention of the war chariot. There is some dispute over whether it was the Hittite, Gilgamesh Ur, or the Egyptian, Ramses Papyrus, that thought of this first. Certainly, it is the Egyptian charioteers who went down in history, albeit through the very back-handed compliment paid by God when he drowned a lot of them in the Red Sea. But it was Judah Ben-Hur who, in AD 33, really made the chariot's reputation with his celebrated race against the sneaky Tribune Messala and his perfectly lethal wheels. Benny went on to a perfectly lethal career as president of the National Rifle Association but that's another story.

The wheel suffered something of a reversal when the introduction of head-to-toe armour made the chariot an impractical fighting vehicle. By the Middle Ages you couldn't give a chariot away

and for the wheel it was back to just moving stuff, not least all that heavy armour. Around this time, however, Charlie's disk did find a new career as hangman's aide. It was the Italian, Ragazzo Mortale, who realized that the wheel would make a good platform to hold the condemned as he was beaten to death. After a morning of breaking bodies on the wheel Ragazzo and his assistant were very appreciative of the convenience.

'You know,' said Ragazzo to his helper, 'When I was a lad we did it on a ladder. Very difficult on a ladder, almost impossible to smash the right side without busting the left. Couldn't drag out the agony the way we did this morning. Nice job on his pinky by the way, young fella, you've got the makings of a fine wheelman...'

The Chinese invented gunpowder but the development of artillery as an effective battlefield instrument was left to the Europeans who, being the clever people that they are, didn't take long to figure out how to mount their cannons on wheels so that they could rain ball and shot on each other, anywhere, anytime.

For hundreds of years the Europeans rained ball and shot on each other and anybody else that came in range, and the wheel faithfully moved their ordnance from battlefield to battlefield. Given how many battlefields the Europeans had it is clear that the wheel deserved a big gong for its services to the Grim Reaper. Humans aren't much inclined to gratitude however and Charlie's invention remained the unsung hero of the dynastic period. No matter, the wheel's golden age was just around the corner.

As every schoolchild knows, it was Robert Louis Stevenson who had the genius idea of putting wheels on a large kettle to make it go like a rocket. In 1830 he inaugurated the Age of the Iron Horse with the opening of the Liverpool to Manchester line. Before long the wheel was doing a brisk business in butchery. At the beginning it was easy because people didn't know to get out of the way when they saw steam rising from the kettle but they soon got wise and the wheel had to be inventive to keep up the body-count. It devised the loose bolt trick (always a loose bolt somewhere along the route) and the warped rail excuse (no self-respecting wheel could be expected to stay on a warped rail), and there was the ever-popular self-destruct technique where the wheel claimed to be feeling fatigued and collapsed just as the train was going over a deep gorge. Now the wheel was getting some traction in the mortality stakes; one wheel alone could send hundreds at a time plunging to their doom.

In 1878 a Spanish-German woman called Mercedes Benzin invented the internal combustion engine. Steam and kettles were passé and the lovely Mercedes' carburetors and pistons set about demonstrating what the wheel could do when liberated from the constraints of rails, switches and lots and lots of coal.

The potential of the motor car was obvious, so obvious in fact that at first the authorities required the wheeled beast to be preceded by a pedestrian waving a red warning flag, if you can believe it. The beautiful Mercedes wouldn't stand for this and went to bed with every Minister of Transportation in Europe to ensure an open road for her carburetors and pistons.

It has been an open road ever since, although open season is more like it. The wheels with attitude that rolled forth from the dark satanic car-mills were nothing less than man-eaters. At the time of writing, the man-eaters around the world are consuming three thousand humans a day not counting those gassed to death by Mercedes' noxious fumes.

The wheel is now only a few years away from achieving total hegemony. The last reservations of the die-hard pedestrian, the pavement, the park and the shopping precinct, are now being successfully colonised by the many contingents of the wheelista army.

The charge has been led by the bicycle brigade. The cyclist is now King of the Road, the noblest of the wheely nation. There is not a surface, not a terrain which the bicycle cannot dominate. Admittedly, a large number of suicide-cyclists are dying in their fratricidal war with the automobilistas and their man-eaters but the two-wheeled crowd are nonetheless triumphant on the moral high ground. The European Union has recently ruled that in the event of a collision between a car and a bicycle it is the car driver who is at fault no matter what; even if her car was parked and she was several miles away having a hernia operation at the time.

The cyclistas, it has to be said, are a very special breed of wheelies. It is their opinion that the rules of the road apply to everybody but themselves. Red lights are for sissies and sidewalks are auxiliary bike paths. To be a cyclist in the city of Berlin, to take one glorious example, is to rule the world. Car drivers approach junctions breaking their necks to see if there is a cyclist anywhere within a radius of ten kilometres. Cyclistas love catching out cars at junctions because then they get to do some self-righteous thumping on the car roof and leave spit on the windscreen. They also enjoy playing in areas packed with pedestrians where they get to ring their bells at the plebeian footies roaming like a lot of sheep, getting in the way of the two-wheeled nobility.

The cyclists are not alone when they mount the pavement on their noble steeds, for they are in the company of many studly wheelies, each doing their own wheely thing. There are the inline skaters and all the other people who put small wheels where God never intended small wheels to be put. Close cousins to the skaters are those that push along on wheeled boards that are specially designed to clatter very loudly so that the stupid sheep know when to get out of the way. For the less athletically inclined there are a variety of small machines, electric and two-stroke, that scoot, hum and stink their way through the woolly crowd.

The very latest in wheely wet dreams is the Segway personal transporter from the United

States of America, a country gifted at inventing things the world needs the way I need an extra hole in my butt. America's King George the Compassionate was photographed falling off one of these devices. Which is interesting because they had been touted as idiot-proof. Coming soon to some pavement very near you: idiots with gyroscopes who think they are royalty.