

Mayer Hillman – a giant in the research community

He is still alive, although this may read like an obituary.

Mayer Hillman of London's Policy Studies Institute is, I think, the cleverest man I have ever met. History has people who tend to argue against conventional wisdom, be rubbished at the time, and then years later recognised as fore-sighted and thanked for the "out of left field" type of disturbing "but you've forgotten about X" contribution they have brought. Mayer is one of these.

Sometimes they are very influential. For example, who's heard that the health benefits of cycling outweigh the crash risk by a ratio of 20 to 1? Probably many *Roundabout* readers. It came from Mayer Hillman – although it is actually a misquote (read on).

Mayer started professional life as a partner in a successful architects' practice. He gave it all up after the publication of the ground-breaking 1963 report *Traffic in Towns*. Mayer considered that the classic prescription of *Traffic in Towns* – a network of urban arterial roads – would devastate, not save, cities, so he resolved to fight against the ideas contained within it. He joined the Policy Studies Institute, part of what is now the University of Westminster, where he remains an Emeritus Research Fellow.

Out of a massive list of publications to his name, Mayer is perhaps best known for two studies, each breaking new ground: *One False Move: a Study of Children's Independent Mobility* in 1990, and *Cycling: Towards Health and Safety* in 1992.

Although both of these focused more on cycling among motor traffic than on off-road paths, Mayer was not against the latter. Today, when it's easy to dismiss a focus on cycling in space shared with motor traffic as "vehicular cycling" and opposition to cycleway infrastructure, it's worth remembering that Mayer was on the board of Sustrans, well-known for developing an extensive network of what we would today call rail trails throughout Britain.

One False Move focused more on walking than on cycling, was co-authored with John Adams and John Whitelegg, and published by Mayer's Policy Studies Institute. It is probably best known for a sound-bite statistic that in 1971 80% of seven- and eight-year-olds walked or cycled to school unaccompanied by adults, whereas in 1990 that figure was 9%. The whole area of children's independent mobility has been one of Mayer's major focus areas in other publications too. He strongly challenged the prevailing road safety orthodoxy (a challenge which came through even more strongly in *Cycling: Towards Health and Safety*) that safety was best served by taking those under threat away from the source of the danger. He pointed to the road safety benefits reaped through children walking to school unaccompanied by adults, in terms of their encountering hazards and through this learning how to cope with them. He pointed out that, if ferried by well-meaning parents in cars, they would never learn this and would thus be exposed to greater, not less, danger through the conventional road safety response. On a wider level, he also pointed out the benefits in terms of children's psychological development of being able to roam 'free range', learning to form their own relationships and how to make their own decisions through the myriad of

situations they find themselves in through 'free range play'. All this is additional to the health benefits from regular physical activity, arguments now well-recognised for which much of the credit must surely be ascribed to *Cycling: Towards Health and Safety*.

The first suggestion to restrict children's independent mobility, at about the time *One False Move* was published, came as a suggestion from some in the UK motoring lobby that children under the age of 10 should not be allowed to ride on roads unless accompanied by an adult. This was ostensibly in the interests of road safety, but its originating with the motoring lobby should at least raise suspicion that part of the reason was to get annoying child cyclists out of the way of motor traffic. Since then, a further reason was added that children's faculties were not sufficiently developed to enable them to cope with traffic. Against this, of course, is the argument, characteristic of Mayer, that children will only develop these faculties, and become able to cope with traffic, through some experience – possibly under the beady eyes of accompanying parents in some situations – but certainly regulatory restrictions would hinder, not help, children's safety. In England at the time Mayer was writing, just as in New Zealand today, a great many road situations are not in themselves hazardous to children.

Cycling: Towards Health and Safety was a more direct challenge, not only to road safety orthodoxy but to medical orthodoxy, especially since it was published by the peak body representing medics, the British Medical Association. The prevailing medical view of cycling at that time was along the lines of "don't tell us it's healthy – we treat the crash victims", and of course in other quarters a compulsory helmet lobby was starting to form (something else Mayer opposed). I first met Mayer while sharing a taxi with him on the way to a conference on cycling and health (at which, of course, he was speaking). I recognised him from his description of the type of work he did, and when I asked him what he was working on now, he mentioned this study, saying "I really hope the BMA allow me to publish what I've found, but I have doubts they will". I also knew from a leading cycle planner on the BMA committee overseeing this work that there had been protracted and heated arguments about the 'shock-horror' idea that the BMA could in any way condone cycling as good for health. In the end, Mayer got most of what he wanted – except that famous '20 to 1' ratio (and it puzzled some readers why *Cycling: Towards Health and Safety* was so keen to stress the health benefits of cycling compared to the crash and injury risk, but wouldn't put a figure on it!).

But you can't keep a good researcher down. Mayer published the 20 to 1 figure later the same year in a paper to the PTRC conference (the UK's rough equivalent to our own Australasian Transport Research Forum). The ratio was of years added to life expectancy through regular cycling compared to statistical years lost, which is not the same as health benefits compared to risks; misquoting as the latter has become something of an 'urban myth'. Mayer also stressed, in his keynote address via video link to New Zealand's Palmerston North *Making Cycling Viable* conference in 2000, that that ratio was based on road safety conditions in Britain at that time, and that the ratio would be much wider if safety conditions on the roads were improved.

Mayer is, I gather, still battling, in his 80s. I wonder what he would make of current suggestions in New Zealand that because of dangers on the road (supported by regular

citing of the “faculties not sufficiently developed at that age” argument), children under 12 or 14 have “no alternative” but to ride on footpaths? Maybe I could ask him. But then again, maybe I’d rather let him enjoy his ‘retirement’.