

Accidents waiting to happen

switch off

TRAFFIC: Why We Drive the Way We Do (And What It Says About Us) by Tom Vanderbilt

Allen Lane £20 pp402

BRYAN APPELYARD

Pedestrian KSIs (killed or seriously injured) on Kensington High Street in London fell by 60% when the council removed most of the "safety" features — road markings, railings and signs. Why? Because these devices take responsibility away from the driver or pedestrian. They make them feel they are being looked after so they take stupid risks and die. The apparently safe road is, the research tells us, the most lethal.

Like the discoveries that dieting makes you fat, that economists cannot make predictions and that Einstein was probably right about the cosmological constant, the Ken High Street experiment overturns a century of misconception. From the

man with the red flag onwards, the assumption was that the car was inhuman. It had to be caged with safety precautions and its ravenous appetite for space demanded priority in towns and villages. Like a god, it was worshipped and feared.

This is understandable. It took us millions of years of evolution and 10,000 years of settlement to improve on the horse by inventing the railway. It then took us a few decades to come up with the internal combustion engine. An animal designed to stroll across the African savanna suddenly found it could streak up the M1. The power bequeathed to the individual was terrifying. There are 500 horses waiting to be unleashed in that red Ferrari nosing down Ken High Street. And it's being driven by a jerk.

But it's not just the power under citizens' right feet, it's also their exclusion from normal human intercourse. Pedestrians or, indeed, men on horses make eye contact, they are forced to acknowledge their mutual humanity. But at anything over 20mph you can't make eye contact, and

Confused? You will be: a forest of signs on the A3 at New Malden in Surrey

contemporary car design is unhealthily obsessed with convincing drivers and passengers that they are in another, better world than everybody else. People in their cars, watched only by researchers' cameras, sing, nospick and cry, the latter behaviour having its own special name — "grieving while driving". In addition, of course, otherwised mannered people drive like complete bastards.

They think they are alone simply because they are enclosed and moving quickly. Break through this cocoon and everything changes. There are many striking revelations in Tom Vanderbilt's *Traffic*, but perhaps the most poignant is the fact that people driving convertibles with the top down take more care. They are more exposed to the censure of others. No wonder it seemed logical to plant forests of signs, to

Continued on page 38

► Continued from page 37

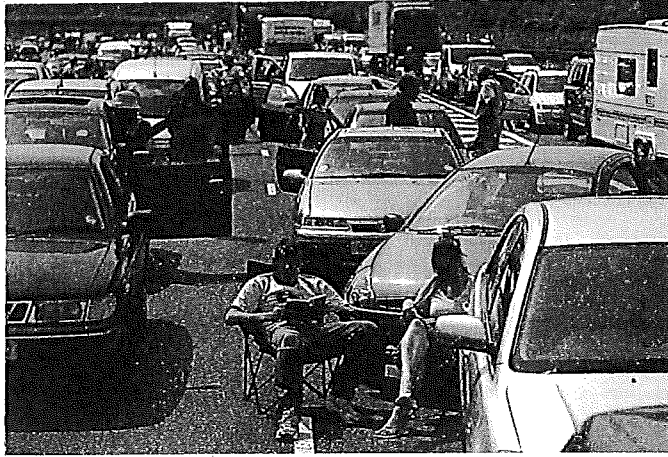
paint the streets with hieroglyphs and to treat pedestrians as bit part players in a vast electronic game. They are too stupid to save themselves, so we have to save them with systems of lights and crossings controlled by smart people in underground bunkers. Vanderbilt visits the bunker from which the hell of Los Angeles traffic is, up to a point, controlled. They have, it turns out, a special "Oscar Night" system that ensures the 800 cars and limos get to the ceremony on time. Only in LA.

But things that seem logical seldom are. This book is, primarily, a demonstration, with dozens of examples, of the counter-intuitive truth about traffic. New cars, for example, crash more than old ones. Nobody knows why, but it may simply be that people drive them more than their old ones. The

making the space uniform and coextensive with the motorway system. The village, as a system of ancient customs, personal intercourse and unique geography, is destroyed. It is, to the driver, a mere obstruction, to be handled with all the aggression with which he would hustle for position in a jam on the M25. The usual, wrong solution is traffic calming — speed bumps and the like. This is expensive and does not change the state of mind of the driver. Monderman went much further. In the village of Oudehaske, he removed all signs and deliberately muddled the road space so that cars, bikes and pedestrians were, in effect, equal users. They each had to negotiate their way through. Speeds plummeted. Drivers, in short, became humans again on entering the village.

Conceptually, Monderman had overcome what is generally known as "the tragedy of the commons". Any resource held in common is vulnerable to any individual who simply decides to exploit it for his own benefit. The roads are commons and, in a village as in many other traffic situations, drivers, isolated in their cars, are the exploiters. By muddling the road, Monderman shamed the exploiters by exposing them to the spatial demands of others.

It is not clear how far this innovation can be taken. Apart from the question of its effectiveness in anything other than a village or limited city area — such as Ken High Street — there is a psychological/political issue. The varia-



NICK RAY

Gridlocked: motorists trapped on the M25 after an accident closed off the motorway

average round-trip commute time is consistent throughout the world — 1.1 hours. The stop-sign system in America is more dangerous than no system at all and, compared to British roundabouts, is lethal. Road deaths are related to poverty — as people get richer they have more time to devote to not dying. But Belgium, mysteriously, has a much worse traffic-death rate than equally rich and apparently similar Holland. It is thought that this is because Belgium is more corrupt and corruption reduces respect for the law so driving behaviour deteriorates. Older drivers are less likely to crash if they have passengers in the car, but teens are more likely — they get drunk and dance to the music like the hairy guys rocking to Queen in Wayne's World.

But the central, counter-intuitive truth is that apparently safer is more dangerous. The hero of this revolutionary insight is the Dutch traffic engineer, Hans Monderman, who died in January. He started from the position that there were two kinds of space — traffic world and social world. Traffic world is exemplified by the motorway, and social world by the village. They don't mix. Yet mixing them is precisely what traffic engineers have always done. They enforce standardised signs and markings on village streets,

ble speed limits on the M25 are examples of the new traffic thinking. But people don't understand them — why should I slow down now for a jam I haven't yet reached? The answer is that the evidence is overwhelming — slower speeds before the jam actually help it unwind and journey times are reduced. But the exploiter will reject this as he might not benefit. The problem for these subtle new theories of traffic control is that your average driver is too thick and too selfish to understand.

This is, you will gather, an important book. It is, however, hard work — flabbily written and meandering. For page after page, Vanderbilt simply summarises the work of one academic after another. Yet, if you can make it through, you can stupefy your co-drivers with questions such as what objects are most commonly dropped on the freeways of Los Angeles? Ladders. And what, in the new traffic thinking, would be the most effective safety device inside a car? A dagger pointing at the driver from the centre of the steering wheel. More dangerous is more safe.

www.bryanappleyard.com. Traffic is available at the BooksFirst price of £18 (including p&p) on 0870 165 8585

*Motorways
Ethos
don't work
in towns*