



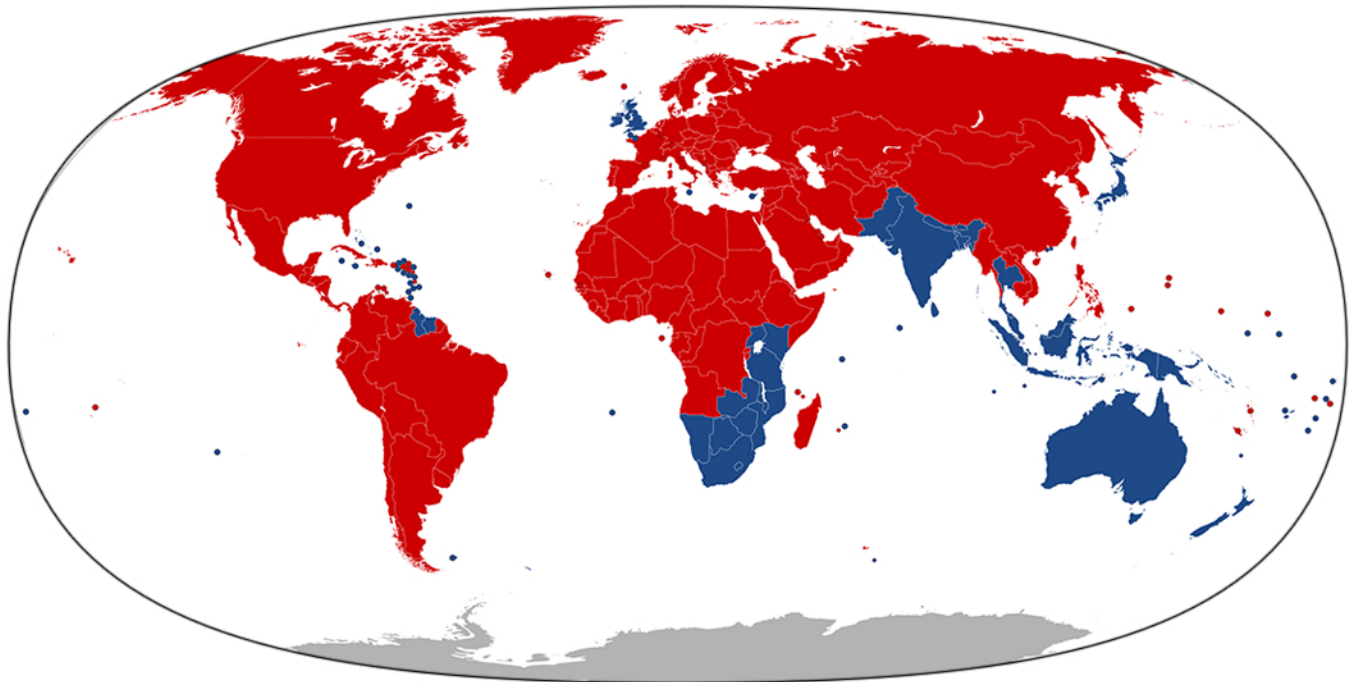
A HISTORY OF BRITISH CARS DRIVING ON THE LEFT

by John Rabon

In America (and most of the world), right-hand drive seems a perfectly natural thing to do. This is how many of us learned to drive and still do today. However, a few places on the globe are just a bit different-and the United Kingdom is one of them. Left-hand drive is the norm for Britain, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, India, and about a dozen or so other nations throughout the world. The question to be explored today is how this came to be and how it plays out still, especially in situations where you leave the confines of the UK and its left-hand drive for the Continent, which is exclusively right-hand.

The history of left-hand driving goes back well before there were cars - hundreds of years, in fact. During the time of the Middle Ages, traveling the roads on horseback could be a dangerous proposition. Who knows what stranger passing you on the other side might be a robber ready to pounce and ride away with your valuables? Since most people are right-handed, traveling on the left side of the road left their sword hand free to defend them should they be beset by my ruffians. The United Kingdom wasn't the only place where this was the standard practice. and most of Western civilization followed the rule.

The first steps towards turning a custom into policy came courtesy of the Vatican. Pope Boniface VIII issued a decree for "rules of the road" that recommended pilgrims traveling to Rome for the Jubilee should do so on the left side. This was a form of early traffic calming meant to help control the flow of people into the city. Britain would turn the practice into law in 1773 when Parliament introduced the General Highways Act, which encouraged riders and farmers taking their produce to market to ride on the left-hand side of the road. The Highway Act of 1835 further solidified the policy along with other safety measures against obstructing the road, negligence towards other travelers, and even playing football in the roadway. *(cont'd)*



■ LEFT-HAND DRIVE ■ RIGHT-HAND DRIVE

Things changed on the Continent thanks to Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon preferred riding on the right-hand side of the road, and everywhere he conquered, that became the rule. In 1792 he ordered that all traffic keep to the "common" right and enforced this rule for all French territories. Over a century later, Hitler would force the same rule on countries he conquered, including Austria and Czechoslovakia. Of course, Britain having held him off, never needed to worry about making a change as neither despot made it across the Channel.

At the same time, Napoleon was forcing right-hand drive on much of Europe; Americans were adopting it of their own free will. The Federal Highway Administration conducted a study in which it stated the reason for this was both a rejection of British customs after the American Revolution, as well as making it easier to control a wagon.

As cars were developed, the nations that made them cemented where they preferred the steering wheel to be. For Henry Ford and other American manufacturers, it was situated on the left. For British car makers, it was placed on the right. This has remained the case for most former British territories even today, and while Britain has considered switching as Sweden did in 1967, it has remained steadfast in its dedication to left-hand drive. In situations like the Chunnel, British drivers exit on the left from the Eurotunnel train as they would in Britain, but a series of gates helps get them on the right side of the road before they hit the French streets.

Britain has been driving on the left side of the road for so long that they are unlikely ever to change. As some might be inclined to say, if driving on the left-hand land is wrong, Britain doesn't want to be right.