

THE MAYOR'S MISSING THE POINT...



Justin isn't happy about the treatment of classics when it comes to the newly elected mayor of London's stance on toxicity charges...

Justin Lazic Contributor

In 1967, John Betjeman led a campaign to save one of the most iconic and revered buildings on London's skyline. St. Pancras Railway Station.

Constructed in the 1860s and serving as a major hub of rail-based transportation for over 100 years, it seemed destined to fall victim to a sado-capitalist philosophy which believed that the physical beauty and morale derived from the beauty of London's greatest and most outstanding public architecture was not linked to productivity, and by extension expansion.

How wrong they were. Today, the St. Pancras Railway Station and its adjoining Renaissance Hotel are Grade I listed and are an outstanding source of tourist-related revenue, both for the retail outlets that tenant the buildings but also the visitors drawn to London from Europe – it's their first impression straight off the Eurostar.

It hosts no less than six separate London Underground lines, caters for domestic main line services and of course the aforementioned European express – so it's hardly unproductive.

The very nature of London's continued presence as the world's ultimate reference point for financial trading, art, literature and sport is largely based on it being the world's most recognisable city. This is significantly reflected in its public (and private) architecture – from buildings to bridges, and even the London Eye.

How inconsistent it is with this philosophy then that the newly inaugurated mayor of London would lump pre-1976 vehicles into the same class as every other pre-2006 vehicle. Given that the United Kingdom has made a very significant contribution to motoring heritage since the late 1880s, this was a shock. It's as if the mayor doesn't understand the very city he has been elected to govern.

The entire point of the preservation movement is that it facilitated an environment for balance to exist between the competing requirements of real estate developers, occupiers and consumers. As things have turned out, London being the world's most recognisable city has enormously assisted its real estate developers, occupiers and consumers.

If it were not for the actions of activists in the preservation movement, such as John Betjeman, this would not be the case. It is highly unlikely that London the city would have increased its influence on global affairs since its significant destruction during the Second World War had it not held on to its icons.

And in road terms, those icons are best represented by the red double-decker bus and of course the Hackney Carriage. How interesting it is that during the tenure of previous mayors, when these vehicles have come to be replaced en masse due to technological upgrades fleet-wide, their

modern iterations carry very evocative styling of the models they have replaced. Same look – different engine.

Of course these are working vehicles. But consider the Aston-Martin DB5, the Jaguar E-type, the Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, the MGA. These vehicles were designed to be operational works of art – true road architecture.

But these are not just all-time great examples of road architecture: They are all-time great British examples. It's British road architecture. They are as British as the Palace of Westminster and Tower Bridge. As British as Marble Arch, Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square.

These vehicles were, and are, world leaders in automotive expression and have set the standard for generations – ever since the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost broke record after record in its London-Edinburgh run of 1911.



The Hackney Carriage has become an icon of London. Surely it requires the same protection as many of our capital's Grade I listed buildings?

That's right: London to Edinburgh. London to Brighton. London – the gateway to the world. And why? Does the economist inside Sadiq Khan not recognise the obvious benefits and prestige associated with these historic world-leading events?

No, the London mayor holds the office in perpetuity: They are a custodian of the office for as long as their electors deem fit. But some things do carry on in perpetuity – the greatness of British style and the innovations of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The first two centuries are mostly represented by heritage-listed buildings – and the 20th century is mostly represented by motor cars.

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They are just as important.

As a direct example, my question to the Mayor of London is this: Does he agree that historically and evocatively styled red London buses, which are instantly recognisable to global travellers and create an impression of seamless transition in the city from one generation to the next, not an advantage for communities and business?

It would be hard to disagree. Few other cities – perhaps Venice with its characteristic barges and pontons – are blessed with the natural advantages of instant recognition of both land and road architecture.

Assuming the mayor does agree with this endorsement of the city in which he has lived and worked for 45 years, surely he would understand that the road furniture of London, and preservation of its most significant examples, is just as much a signature of the capital as the buildings themselves.

The notion that a pre-1976 vehicle, regarded under the Treasury department as "historic" and as an extension of this exempt from road tax, does not somehow contribute to the road architecture in London is pure folly. Just like the folly that pre-empted the hair-brained scheme to knock over St. Pancras Station.

To enforce an additional surcharge within the congestion charge zone,

which is itself due to be expanded, for vehicles which are classified as "historic" by the UK Treasury is surely an act of tremendous oversight and one which is entirely inconsistent with the very fabric of the preservation movement – a movement which has ensured that the mayor himself benefits from the excellent visual building architecture available to him every day.

Whilst the mayor's proposal does not "ban" classics, I put it to the reader: Would you accept Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament are not to be bulldozed from the skyline – so long as you pay every time the bell tolls?

CCB

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