
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

On your bike



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sophie

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Sophie...

Neil

And I'm Neil. Did you watch the Tour de France cycle race this summer, Sophie?

Sophie

No, I didn't. I'm not a cycling enthusiast, Neil – unlike you!

Neil

It was pretty exciting stuff – in fact just thinking about it, makes me want to jump on my bike and ride off right now!

Sophie

Don't go just yet, because today's show is all about bicycles and I've got a question for you. Who invented the first **pneumatic** – or air-filled – cycle tyre in 1888? Was it ...

a) John Boyd Dunlop?

b) Charles Goodyear?

Or c) Harvey Samuel Firestone?

Neil

Well, I'm going to go for a) John Boyd Dunlop. Can I go now?

Sophie

No, you can't. We'll find out later on in the show if you got the tyre question right or not. But first, I'd like you to tell us a bit about the history of the bike.

Neil

If you insist. Well, before the modern bike was invented in 1885, people rode boneshakers, high wheelers, and even tricycles.

Sophie

A tricycle is a three-wheeler bike that young children ride before they learn to balance on a two-wheeler. But what's a 'boneshaker', Neil?

Neil

It was the first bike with pedals, called a 'velocipede' by its manufacturers. Others called it a 'boneshaker' because its tyres were made of iron so it was very uncomfortable to ride – especially over cobblestone streets.

Sophie

It sounds awful! Now, moving on, the bicycle started out as an expensive toy for the middle classes – but when manufacturing costs dropped, they became a vehicle for social change.

Neil

By the late nineteenth century, bikes had become affordable for a large proportion of the population – and the technology had moved on so they weren't so dangerous – or so uncomfortable to ride.

Sophie

And for the first time in history, people had the freedom to travel where they wanted when they wanted – including women! Let's hear more about women and cycling from Robert Penn, UK author, and lifelong cyclist.

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Robert Penn, author, and lifelong cyclist

In very practical terms, it had a very significant effect on what women wore in public. And when they first rode bicycles, they were expected to ride in long ankle length skirts and voluminous petticoats and of course that was entirely impractical so they adopted what was called rational dress. And rational dress was a better fitting jacket and pantaloon trousers which were cinched below the knee, which meant that nothing got caught in the chain. And at first there was massive public outrage. There were court cases about whether or not women were allowed to be served in pubs wearing this sort of dress.

Neil

So women in the nineteenth century typically wore long skirts and **voluminous** – or large – petticoats. A **petticoat** is a piece of clothing worn under a dress or skirt. But what does 'rational dress' mean exactly, Sophie?

Sophie

Rational here means logical. It wasn't logical to wear ankle length skirts with voluminous petticoats on a bike, so women started wearing pantaloon trousers.

Neil

Pantaloons trousers were baggy – though they were **cinched** – or gathered in – below the knee so they wouldn't catch in the bicycle chain.

Sophie

But pantaloons for women still caused **outrage** – or shock and anger – because although they were baggy, they were still trousers and they didn't go down to the ankle. So bikes played a part in women's struggle for **emancipation** – or freedom. But let's listen now to Robert Penn, who claims that it also played a role in our evolutionary history.

INSERT

Robert Penn, author, and lifelong cyclist

It definitely shored up the gene pool in countries like Britain because it meant that people could go further than they ever had before in order to find a partner for life and to mate. And so what started as a really faddish leisure pursuit, within a decade of 1885, the bicycle became the most popular form of transport on the planet, and it has been ever since.

Neil

What does **shore up** mean, Sophie?

Sophie

It means support. And **gene pool** here refers to the collection of genes in a particular population. So, when people travelled further to marry and have children, they were making the gene pool bigger and healthier.

Neil

And Robert Penn uses the word 'faddish' he says cycling started as a faddish thing. A **fad** – or **faddish** activity – means an enthusiasm for something that doesn't last very long.

Sophie

But your enthusiasm for cycling is not a fad.

Neil

No, it isn't. Do you think lycra wearing is a fad and we'll all go back to wearing pantaloons in the future, Sophie? No? Not a good look? OK, maybe it's time for the answer to today's quiz question.

Sophie

I asked: Who invented the first cycle tyre in 1888? Was it ... a) John Boyd Dunlop, b) Charles Goodyear or c) Harvey Samuel Firestone?

Neil

And I said John Boyd Dunlop. Tell me I'm right!

Sophie

You are... right! Well done, Neil. Scottish inventor and veterinary surgeon John Boyd Dunlop developed the pneumatic rubber tyre. Although it was invented as an improvement on the bicycle, the pneumatic tyre arrived on the scene just in time to contribute to the success of the car.

Neil

Now, here are the words we heard today. They are:

pneumatic
voluminous
petticoat
rational
pantaloon
cinched
outrage
emancipation
shore up
gene pool
fad or faddish

Sophie

Well, that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Please join us again soon!

Neil

And we are on social media too. Make sure to visit our profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

Sophie

You can get on your bike, now, Neil!

Both

Bye!

Vocabulary

pneumatic

air-filled

voluminous

large

petticoat

a piece of clothing worn under a dress or skirt

rational

logical

pantaloon

baggy trousers

cinched

gathered in

outrage

shock and anger

emancipation

freedom

shore up

support

gene pool

the collection of genes in a particular population

fad

an enthusiasm for something that doesn't last very long

faddish

(adjective) something that is fashionable but not for long