

OPINION

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COMMENT

Turning a blind eye

BRITAIN has its faults but one of its great virtues is that it is a tolerant country. Indeed, many would argue that there are times when it is too tolerant.

The long and arduous road to justice for Abu Hamza is a case in point.

Why did it take so long to stop him exploiting our legal and welfare systems at a cost of millions to taxpayers?

It took ten years to remove the hatred-preaching cleric from the UK so that he could stand trial in New York, where he was this week found guilty of 11 charges relating to terrorist activities.

Ordinary law-abiding British citizens found it hard to understand why someone, who described the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, as a "towering day in history", and who spouted evil on the streets of Britain, should be allowed to dodge justice again and again.

The perception, both here and in America, was that the British authorities didn't have the stomach to tackle an undoubtedly difficult issue.

Now that Hamza has finally been brought to justice, and faces spending the rest of his life in a high-security prison, it is right that Britain reflects on why the case dragged on for so long.

Why did our authorities spend years doing nothing before suddenly deciding that he should be prosecuted after all?

There is, of course, a balance to be struck. Britain must somehow find a way of speeding up the extradition process without losing its reputation for tolerance and protecting human rights.

That is far from easy but there cannot be a repeat of a situation in which Britain turned a blind eye for so long to a poisonous figure who promoted terrorism on our streets in full view of the authorities.

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QUALITY

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A safe ride



It's that time of year again when hordes of bikers descend on the region's roads to get their two-wheeled thrills.

Sadly, the next four months are also statistically likely to see soaring numbers of bikers killed or seriously injured in our region. **Alexa Copeland** went to meet one advanced rider passionate about doing what he can to help bikers stay safe

NICK WALKER isn't your average advanced motorcycle training instructor. Rolling up on a high-powered Honda Fireblade, he doesn't fit the stereotypical image of a teacher, advanced or otherwise.

There is no "sensible" BMW motorbike with panniers and there isn't a high-visibility waistcoat in sight. Instead, Nick is what you would call a "biker's biker", complete with well-worn leather trousers and a genuine enthusiasm for motorcycling that stretches beyond his day job as a riding instructor.

And after working as both a motorcycle sergeant and road death inquiry manager for Cleveland Police, Nick is under no illusions about the dangers his beloved hobby poses to bikers - and the danger bikers can pose to themselves.

Between 2009 and 2013 there were 2,631 bikers injured in the North-East alone. Of these casualties, 821 were seriously hurt and 57 were killed.

The Department for Transport estimates that bikers account for about one per cent of the miles travelled on the region's road network, yet one in five people who were killed or seriously injured on North-East roads in the past five years was a biker.

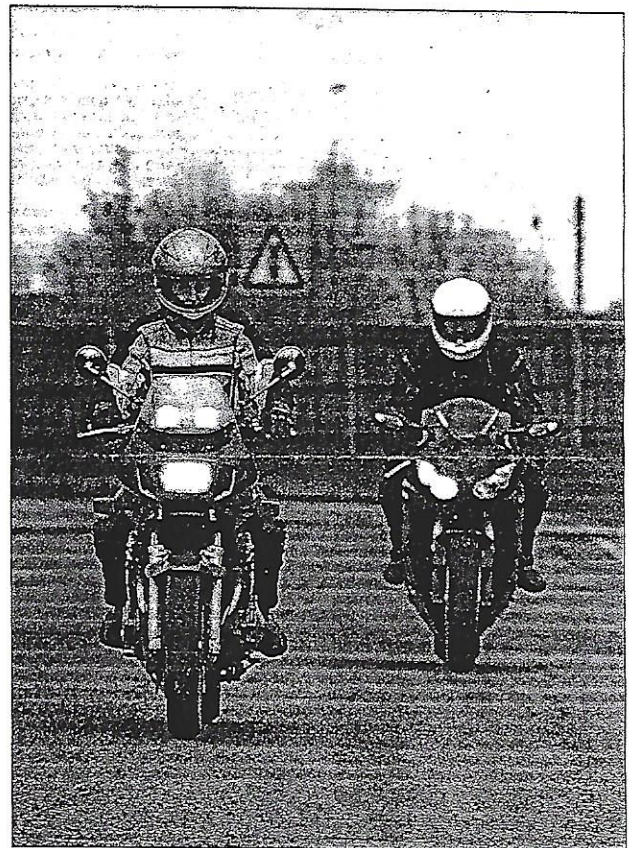
The statistics paint a pretty grim picture, but if knowledge is power, then perhaps it is up to the bikers themselves to learn as much as they can about how to avoid joining those statistics.

And this is where Nick comes in. He channels his experience into the Ridewell Tees Valley programme - a rider training scheme believed to be the only one in the county run by a local authority. It emerged from the Cleveland Motorcycle Training Scheme which won an international road safety award in 2006 for its Handle it or Lose it scheme.

As programme manager, Nick is keen to put his advanced knowledge into helping bikers help themselves. He says: "Motorcycling can be seen as a dangerous thing to do, but learning the police advanced system we use can help you to be better prepared. It is all about knowing and identifying all the risks so that you have to react to less."

As well as concentrating on road positioning and hazard awareness, the Ridewell post-test course even delves into the biology of motorcycling. So if you didn't think that whether you needed to go to the toilet or not affected your ability to ride, then think again.

I joined Nick on my Suzuki Bandit for a one-day taster session of the post-test course. There was no classroom or tedious theory test to wade through, instead there



ADVANCED LESSONS: Northern Echo reporter Alexa Copeland doing an advanced motorcycle riding day with Nick Walker from Ridewell Tees Valley **Picture:** TOM BANKS

was a discussion about the advanced riding system used by Ridewell trainers before we hit the road.

ALTHOUGH I'd never claim to be womankind's answer to Carl Fogarty, after 14 years of riding motorbikes I was fairly confident in my abilities and intrigued to see how much I could learn from Nick. To say that I learnt a lot would be a gross understatement.

Part of the course involves Nick giving a commentary over the in-helmet headset and the number of hazards or potential hazards he pointed out as we weaved from Sleights to Helmsley was, quite simply, staggering. From brown road signs signalling there may be uncertain tourists on the roads, to walkers with a dog off its lead in a nearby field - and yes, he also identified the breed - the sheer number of potential threats to a motorcyclist's safety made me wonder how any of us ever make it home in one piece. But rather than spoiling the enjoyment and freedom of motorcycling, becoming more

aware of the dangers and how to react to them actually enhances the experience because it breeds confidence. Of course, no one can account for a surprise deer or some such animal sticking its neck out into your path, but there are many hazards out there that you can spot a mile off - literally.

And if you adhere to the "know more, react to less" philosophy then there should be very few things that catch you by surprise and force you into dangerous situations whilst you're out enjoying a ride.

"We get people from all walks of life who take the course; whether they've had a licence for two months or 20 years," says Nick. "It is quite a bold statement to say 'nobody can teach me anything' and I'd say don't knock it because it might help you become a better rider."

He adds: "I am a big believer in that you don't get anything in life if you don't go the extra mile. I have retained the passion for saving lives from my days with the police and we will do all we can do to make biking safer for everyone."

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Nick Walker