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Originally, there were no laws about which side of the road you should ride on, but most people drove (or rode) on the left. This was because it meant that other riders who were approaching you would pass you on your right and you could defend yourself more easily with your sword. This is an important consideration in violent feudal societies. It is also easier to mount a horse from the left with your sword worn on your left, therefore riding on the left hand side of the road makes more sense.



The practice goes back a long way. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Romans drove their carts on the left and Roman soldiers are known to have marched on the left. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII (a good looking chap, we must assume from his name) stated that pilgrims travelling to Rome should travel on the left. The photo on the left is of a statue of Boniface VIII. I'm not sure what the gesticulation is all about!

In the 18th century, a law was passed in London stating that traffic should keep to the left when crossing London Bridge. The rule was later spread through the British Empire by the Highway Act 1835.



So why do most countries drive on the right? There are many factors, but it's partly due to the French revolution. Prior to the revolution, the aristocrats would drive and ride on the left, so it would seem that the revolutionary thing to do would be to switch to the right! So France and many of their colonies drove on the right. North America switched to driving on the right due to the practicalities of driving large wagons with many horses. There were no driver seats on the wagons and the driver would sit on the rear left horse to provide best reach with the whip in his right hand. Driving on the right would give better view of oncoming traffic and so the practice was adopted.



In the interests of uniformity, many countries later switched to the right and now 65% of the world's population drive on the right. But 35% of the world's population, from 76 countries and territories, still drive on the left.

