

Why are early Ferrari (& Bugatti) cars right hand drive?

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Pope Boniface VIII, around 1300AD, told all his followers to keep to the left. Up to the late 1700's, everybody travelled on the left side of the road because it's the sensible option for feudal, violent societies of mostly right-handed people. Jousting knights with their lances under their right arm naturally passed on each other's right, and if you passed a stranger on the road you walked on the left to ensure that your protective sword arm was between yourself and him.

Revolutionary France, however, overturned this practice. A change was carried out all over continental Europe by Napoleon. The reason it changed under Napoleon was because he was left handed his armies had to march on the right so he could keep his sword arm between him and any opponent. From then on, any part of the world which was at some time part of the British Empire was thus left hand and any part colonized by the French was right hand.

In 1773 when an increase in horse traffic forced the UK Government to introduce the General Highways Act of 1773 it contained a keep left recommendation. This became a law as part of the Highways Bill in 1835. The French, being Catholics, followed Pope Boniface's edict but in the build up to the French Revolution in 1790 the French Aristocracy drove their carriages at great speed on the left hand side of the road, forcing the peasantry over to the right side for their own safety. Come the Revolution, instincts of self preservation resulted in the remains of the Aristocracy joining the peasants on the right hand side of the road. The first official record of this was a keep right rule introduced in Paris in 1794.

Britain's imperial expansion spread the keep left rule. France also had quite an empire after the revolutionary wars and the keep right rule spread through much of modern day Europe and to colonies. The connection with the USA is thought to be General Lafayette who recommended a keep right rule as part of the help that he gave the Americans in the build up to the war of Independence. The first reference to keep right in USA law is in a rule covering the Lancaster to Philadelphia turnpike in 1792.

In America, the French colonized the southern states (eg: Louisiana) and the Canadian east coast (Quebec). The Dutch colonized New York (or New Amsterdam). The Spanish and Portuguese colonized the southern Americas. So The British were a minority in shaping the 'traffic'. The drive-on-the-right policy was adopted by the USA, which was anxious to cast off all remaining links with its British colonial past.

Very early motorcars followed the principle of a horse driven carriage and the chauffeur was seated in the middle. The side of the steering wheel followed the tradition in the country so that the first cars (Benz in Germany) were left hand drive as they drive on the right. **The major exception to this was that racing cars were almost always right hand drive because it was better suited to circuit racing. This is because the weight of the driver on the right, the power to the right rear wheel (without LS) and the direction of the majority of track events added this format configuration to most of the competing cars of the racing eras.**

The racing history of 1920s automobile manufactures, mainly on the continent almost always built their cars with right hand drive, and those racing cars promoted status and prestige that many top-end manufactures associated into the production of their marques such as Alfa Romeo, Hispano Suiza, Talbot Lago, Delahaye, Bugatti and other marques that had racing ties. Remember that motor racing was as popular then as football is now. If you had a right drive car, it was considered not pedestrian, so manufacturers followed this lineage of the great marques using right drive as a luxury ID for decades and clients factored it into the quality of their purchases.

For Ferrari, it was all about racing, so all of his cars were right drive in consideration of track use up front - track direction, driver weight, traction geometry all added in. Of course the prestige of the right hand drive car continued as it did for several years after the war. That changed when Enzo targeted the US market where left drive was just plain required kit for any type of sports car for new target Yank clients.

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