

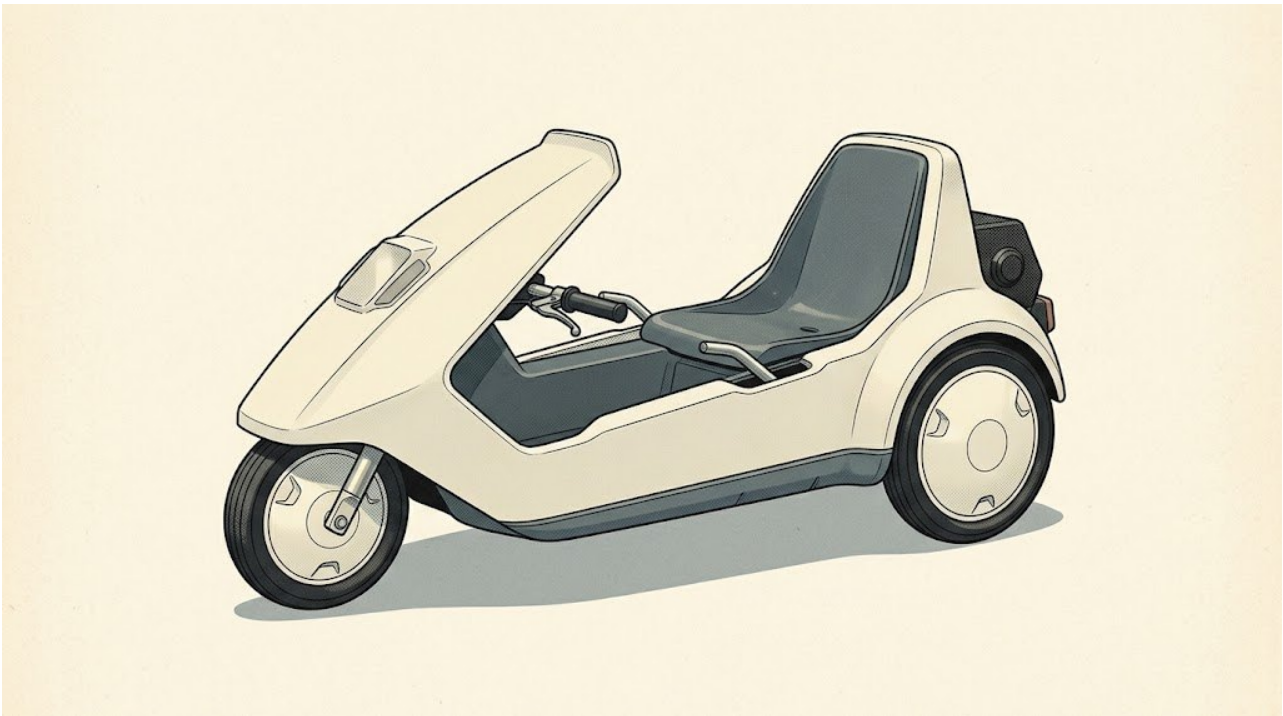
The Machine Nobody Wanted

It was laughed off the road in 1985. Forty years later, the roads are full of its descendants.

6 min read

Before you read

- **prototype** — an early version built to test an idea
- **launch** — the public release of a new product
- **ridicule** — mockery; being laughed at
- **viable** — able to work successfully in practice
- **infrastructure** — the basic systems and structures that something depends on
- **vindicate** — to be shown, later, to have been right



The Sinclair C5: a low, single-seat electric tricycle with a white body and handlebars under the knees

¹ In January 1985, in a hall in London, Sir Clive Sinclair unveiled a vehicle he believed would change how people travelled. It was called the C5. It was electric, it seated one person, it cost £399, and it was built at a Hoover factory in Merthyr Tydfil, in Wales.

² Sinclair was not a man who was easy to dismiss. He had built one of the cheapest home computers in the world and put computing into British homes years before most people expected it. If anyone had earned the right to be taken seriously about the future, it was him.

³ The C5 was taken seriously for approximately one day.

⁴ The problems were visible from the first photographs. The driver sat very low, roughly at the height of a car's wheels, which made the vehicle hard to see and deeply unnerving to use in traffic. There was no roof, in a country where it rains. The battery, like all batteries, lost range in cold weather — and the launch took place in January.

⁵ The press was merciless. Reviewers described it as a toy, a hazard, an embarrassment. The ridicule did more damage than any single fault, because it settled the question of what the C5 was before most people had seen one.

⁶ Sales collapsed. Production stopped within months, and Sinclair Vehicles went into receivership before the year was out. Of the tens of thousands built, only a fraction sold. For a long time afterwards the C5 was shorthand in Britain for a confident idea that nobody wanted.

⁷ It is worth asking what actually went wrong, because the obvious answer is not quite the right one.

⁸ The engineering was not the failure. A light, cheap, battery-powered vehicle for short journeys in a city is an idea that has since been proved many times over — by electric bikes, by scooters, by the small electric vehicles now common in European cities. The demand Sinclair believed in was real. It simply was not there yet, and what was missing was mostly outside the vehicle.

⁹ Consider what a modern electric bike relies on: battery chemistry that did not exist in 1985, cycle lanes that mostly did not exist either, charging habits people had not formed, and a public conversation about fuel and climate that had barely begun. None of that is engineering. All of it is infrastructure, in the widest sense — the conditions a product needs in order to make sense.

¹⁰ This is a common shape of failure, and it is worth recognising. A product can be well made, correctly aimed and genuinely useful, and still fail because the world it needs has not arrived. Being early is not the same as being right, and from the inside the two feel identical.

¹¹ Sinclair himself did not spend the rest of his life being vindicated. He continued inventing, and he never fully escaped the C5 — it followed him through every interview until his death in 2021. Surviving C5s, meanwhile, now sell to collectors for several times what they originally cost, which is the kind of ending that is satisfying without proving anything.

¹² The useful question is not whether the C5 was a good machine. It is how you would tell, at the moment of launch, the difference between an idea that is wrong and an idea that is merely early. Nobody has a reliable answer. That is why the C5 is still worth studying.



A C5 in traffic, the driver's head level with a lorry's wheel arch

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What was Sir Clive Sinclair already known for before the C5?

- ☐ (A) Designing cycle lanes
- ☐ (B) Building very cheap home computers
- ☐ (C) Running the Hoover factory
- ☐ (D) Writing about the climate

2. Which of these was a genuine design problem with the C5?

- ☐ (A) It was too expensive for most buyers
- ☐ (B) The driver sat very low in traffic
- ☐ (C) It could not be charged at home
- ☐ (D) It was too heavy to steer

3. According to the passage, what did the most damage to the C5?

- ☐ (A) The cost of the battery
- ☐ (B) The Welsh factory closing
- ☐ (C) The ridicule, which settled opinion early
- ☐ (D) A shortage of parts

4. What does the writer say was mainly missing in 1985?

- ☐ (A) Good engineering
- ☐ (B) Public interest in new technology
- ☐ (C) The surrounding conditions the vehicle needed
- ☐ (D) A low enough price

5. In paragraph 10, 'Being early is not the same as being right' means that:

- ☐ (A) Early products are always better made
- ☐ (B) An idea can be correct and still fail at that moment
- ☐ (C) Inventors should wait before launching
- ☐ (D) The first product in a market always wins

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. Explain why the writer says the obvious answer to 'what went wrong' is 'not quite the right one'.

7. Give two examples from the passage of infrastructure that a modern electric bike depends on, and explain why they are not engineering problems.

8. Why does the writer mention that the launch took place in January?

9. The writer calls the rising value of surviving C5s 'satisfying without proving anything'. Explain what is meant.

Part C**Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. The passage asks how you could tell, at launch, whether an idea is wrong or merely early. Suggest one test that might help, and explain its limits.

11. Sinclair was ridiculed rather than argued with. Does mockery do more damage to a new idea than criticism does? Give your reasoning.

12. Think of a technology you use every day. What conditions had to exist before it could work, and what might have happened if it had been released twenty years earlier?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — Building very cheap home computers | 2. B — The driver sat very low in traffic | 3. C — The ridicule, which settled opinion early | 4. C — The surrounding conditions the vehicle needed | 5. B — An idea can be correct and still fail at that moment

Part B

6. The obvious answer is that the vehicle was badly designed; the writer argues the design problems were real but secondary, and that the deeper cause was the absence of the conditions the vehicle needed. Accept answers distinguishing the product from its context.

7. Any two of: modern battery chemistry, cycle lanes, charging habits, public concern about fuel and climate. They are not engineering because they sit outside the machine — no change to the vehicle itself could have supplied them.

8. Because cold weather reduces battery range and the vehicle had no roof, so the launch showed the C5 at its worst. Accept answers noting the timing worsened first impressions.

9. Collectors paying a high price shows the C5 became interesting and rare, not that it would have worked as transport. It is an enjoyable detail, not evidence. Accept answers separating value from vindication.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. Strong answers propose something concrete — testing whether the supporting conditions exist, small trials in one city, asking what else must change — and then name a real limit, such as the fact that conditions can appear quickly or that tests only measure today. Weaker answers propose a test with no limit attached.

11. Either position is acceptable. Look for an argument about what each one does: criticism can be answered with evidence, while mockery closes the question before evidence arrives; against that, mockery may fade while a well-aimed criticism sticks.

12. Accept any technology with a sensible list of prerequisites (electricity, networks, cheap components, shared habits, rules). A strong answer explains the consequence of arriving early rather than just listing conditions. Prompt with: what would have been missing?

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