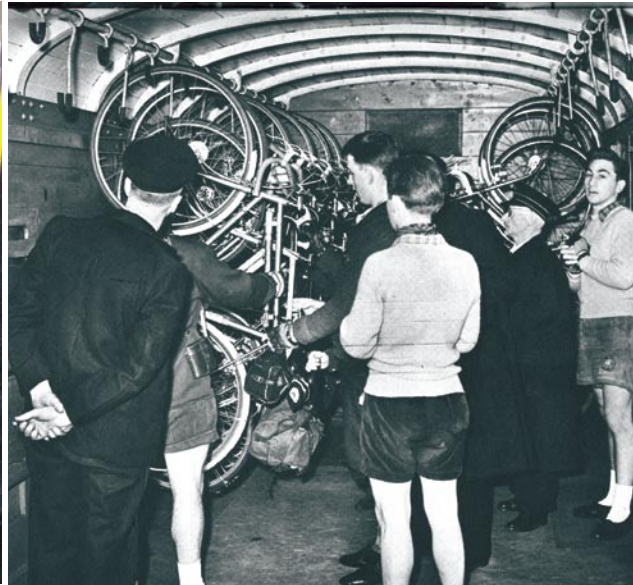


Ride the rails

With new rolling stock pending, now is the time to secure better bike carriage on trains. **Chris Peck** outlines the problems and solutions





(Centre) 'Flexible space' – usable for bikes, luggage or pushchairs – is a good solution on small trains (Near left) The days of 'cyclists' specials' are gone, although some operators do help with bike events

It seems obvious: if you allow more people to take their cycles on trains you'll attract more passengers and generate more profit. But as those who've tried to board a UK train with a bike will know, it's not that simple. Train companies can and will turn down custom from cyclists.

Cycle carriage on trains is an area of huge concern for CTC members. Campaigning on this subject scored highest on the list of CTC's priorities in the latest membership survey, and CTC staff have dealt with hundreds of enquiries on rail issues in the last few years. When I asked members for their experiences of cycle-rail travel I was deluged with stories of abandonment on platforms, of trips ruined, of lost revenue to rail companies and of threatening, abusive staff.

Whereas over 80% of passengers are generally satisfied with their rail journeys, only 40% are happy with the space for cycles on train. There is huge variability between the domestic rail operators. Passenger satisfaction with Merseyrail's cycle carriage is six times higher than that with First Capital Connect. This is understandable: the former actively encourage cyclists to use their trains while the latter bans cycles during the peak hours from its miserably equipped cross-London trains. The long distance operators score particularly badly: only a quarter to a third of passengers are satisfied with cycle provision.

Britain versus Europe

Surprisingly, however, carriage of bicycles on long-distance trains in Britain is easier than equivalent trains elsewhere in Europe. In a study of European rail operators in 2006, four of the top five operators were from the UK. Only the Swiss operator is rated as highly.

While French and German operators offer excellent

cycle carriage facilities on their local and regional trains, their high-speed operators aren't so cycle-friendly. Some TGVs offer cycle carriage but the Inter-City Express trains in Germany operate a complete ban on cycles. Where cycles can be booked on to trains the fares can be steep. For the sleeper from Copenhagen to Amsterdam this summer I paid just 49 Euros for the berth and an eye-watering 20 Euros for my bike. The booking of the bike took several hours and phone calls – and the bike carriage ended up over-subscribed...

Britain's railways, meanwhile, have had a long and uneasy relationship with cyclists. Railway companies have at regular intervals neglected to cater to cyclists and occasionally deliberately excluded them from their facilities. This neglect has arguably accelerated in recent years, in part because passenger demand for rail travel has swollen and priority has shifted from getting more passengers to ensuring that more seats are available for the existing demand. The demand for seats has often been met at the cost of flexible space for luggage and cycles.

Space for wheelchair users – a statutory requirement – has often been provided without making the sensible provision to allow cyclists to use it when vacant. Nor have the railway companies acknowledged that in many cases cycles are used as mobility aids by people with disabilities but who are not wheelchair users. One CTC member threatened action against the train company under the Disability

Discrimination Act to secure access for her and her trike to use the train!

Bike-rail travellers

Cycle-rail travel divides up into groups, closely aligned to the existing rail travel market: regular commuters; long distance travellers who choose railways over the car; and tourists. The first of those markets – commuters – isn't generally an area where the railway companies are seeking to increase passenger numbers: many commuter trains are already packed.

In recent years many train companies have dealt with the massive increase in passenger numbers on commuter routes by banning cycles entirely from the peak hour times. However, folding bikes are still allowed on board, and consequently their numbers have vastly increased, with the iconic Brompton still the market leader. Another solution for commuters is the approach taken by rail companies in the Netherlands, where covered, secure cycle parking is ubiquitous. Even medium size Dutch towns often have space for thousands of bikes at the station.

The greatest opportunity to increase cycle-rail passenger numbers is on long distance and tourist trains, which are often under used. Commuters travel alone, whereas the tourist market involves groups of friends or family travelling together, often changing trains. This means that where space is provided, it needs to be for more than just a couple of cycles. Many members have complained that Arriva Trains Wales only allow one or two bikes on

“Whereas 80% of rail passengers are satisfied, only 40% are happy with the space for cycles”



Multiple connections can make life difficult for touring cyclists

FEATURE BIKES ON TRAINS

WHO'S GETTING THERE?

Rankings in order of greatest satisfaction for cycle carriage on UK trains – from Autumn 2008 Passenger Focus survey. Note that First Hull Trains, Grand Central and Wrexham & Shropshire weren't listed.

MERSEYRAIL	No restrictions on carriage since 1996	1
C2C (London to Southend)	Peak hour bans, but welcomes bikes otherwise	2
FIRST SCOTRAIL	Reservable space on long distance routes (inc sleepers). No restrictions but a self regulating peak hour avoidance is used	3
SOUTH WEST TRAINS	Peak hour restrictions with flow into London. Reservable space on diesels to Exeter. Otherwise decent spaces	4
HEATHROW CONNECT	Peak hour bans with flow in/out of London. No reservations	5
HEATHROW EXPRESS	Permitted, up to 3 per train, but you'll probably need to have a bike-box or bag anyway for the flight	6
ARRIVA TRAINS WALES	Only 2 spaces, reservations required. Welsh speaking call centre has better info	7
NORTHERN RAIL	No restrictions but only guarantee 2 spaces per train. Staff often use discretion	8
EAST MIDLANDS TRAINS	Only 2 spaces on all except HSTs. Reservations required on distance services, bookable using form online	9
FIRST TRANSPENNINE EXPRESS	Only 2 spaces available, one of which is reservable. But staff are helpful and a tandem will fit	10
NATIONAL EXPRESS EAST COAST	Reservations required, for up to 5 bikes, also tandems. Uniquely, website allows bike bookings for all other services too	11
CROSSCOUNTRY	Real problems – new train design cut cycle carriage. Only 2 spaces can be reserved, but some trains are double units	12
LONDON OVERGROUND	Peak hour bans for 4 hours per day. No reservations	13
SOUTHERN	6 hours per day of peak hour ban both ways on London-Brighton. A history of cycle-unfriendly policies. No reservations	14
CHILTERN RAILWAYS	Peak hour bans into Birmingham & London. Not all trains have bike spaces	15
FIRST GREAT WESTERN	Long distance services carry bikes to/ from London, inc. tandems on HSTs, with reservable spaces. Peak hour flow bans from Thames Valley to London local trains	16
VIRGIN WEST COAST	Reservations required. Main fleet of Pendolinos require staff to unlock the door. Tandems carried. Staff improving	17
LONDON MIDLAND	Peak hour bans. Main electric fleet has no dedicated bike spaces. No reservations	18
SOUTHEASTERN	Peak hour bans for 6 hours per day in London area. No restrictions outside this	19
NATIONAL EXPRESS EAST ANGLIA	Reservations advised for some routes, very poor carriage on local trains, peak hour bans on inner-London section except for Norwich Express (6 bikes)	20
FIRST CAPITAL CONNECT	Peak hour bans, very poor cycle carriage. Worst overcrowding	21

Left: Clive Andrews

most of their trains. This creates a serious problem for families or groups travelling to mid-Wales or attempting to catch a ferry from Pembrokeshire to Ireland.

Thousands of cyclists ride from Land's End to John O'Groats each year. Getting to and from the extremities of Britain should be easy, with railway stations less than 15 miles from each 'end'. Until recently, such was the extent of the cycle-rail market, the rail operator in Scotland provided a van to carry cycles (for free!) from Thurso station to Inverness to avoid a squash on the train. New rolling stock carrying four cycles has since been introduced and the van service was withdrawn.

For some people, the multiple trains and bookings required to get to Cornwall and back from Scotland seems to work. When I did the ride four years ago it was relatively painless, despite setting off for Penzance from London at the start of the August bank holiday. Another CTC member managed to make the journey from Surrey, travelling with four others, although they had to put up with 50 boxes of fish in the bike carriage on the sleeper south from Inverness!

For other groups, however, attempts to negotiate passage with the UK's rail operators to enable them to complete the End to End got nowhere. One group were forced to hire a car in Newcastle, putting their four bikes on a bike rack, returning the car at Penzance and posting the bike rack home. The rail network lost several hundred pounds worth of custom in that case, because the operator couldn't offer booked space for four bikes.

Full steam ahead

Can it get better? Certainly. CTC has been campaigning to improve the conditions on the railway for decades. Last year CTC members wrote to Cross Country to try to make improvements to cycle carriage on the long distance franchise that is critical to many touring and holiday destinations.

As a result of lobbying by CTC at the time of the last major cycle-rail campaign in 2007, the Government agreed to set up a working group to promote better cycle-rail integration. Thanks partly to this, the new Secretary of State has devoted several million pounds to



(Clockwise from left) Get to the station early. A compact folder will get on any train. Don't leave bikes unattended at stations

NETWORK FAIL

Here are just two examples of the problems that CTC members have faced on bike-rail journeys.

Macclesfield to Swindon

CTC member Simon Roberts travelled with his family from Macclesfield to Swindon, requiring two changes and three different rail companies. Even though he only took one bike, he was required to book the tickets in person – a 20-mile ride to the station.

On the middle section of his journey, no reservations were possible but he chanced it and was forced to hold onto his bike in the vestibule for 20 minutes. It was on the return to Macclesfield, however, that things got really tricky. With no platform staff to open the cycle-space for him he tried to enter the passenger doors, only to be thrown out by train staff. That left his family on the train without tickets, and him on the next train.

With three different operators, each with different policies and different means of carrying bikes, this route would have been worse (i.e. impossible) if Simon's family had wished to carry their own bikes as well.

Eastbourne to Ireland

Kris Fowler and friends travelled with four loaded touring bikes to catch the ferry to Ireland from Pembroke. Here again they faced three different train companies with different policies. They only just made it as far as Swansea where they were told that they wouldn't be allowed on the final leg without reservations (two cycle spaces were booked). However, they were, in the end, squeezed on to a busy train that other cycle tourists were also using.

On trains where reservations are either impossible to obtain or in pitifully small quantities, travelling as a large group to a distant destination becomes very difficult. Groups are entirely dependent on the goodwill (or otherwise) of train staff.



Photos by Chris Williamson and Jason@Cycling-images.co.uk

support two cycle-rail 'demonstration' train companies and to improve 10 stations. CTC will be working with the winners of this fund to ensure that schemes really make a difference to cyclists.

This year we have a huge opportunity to try to ensure that the new trains that will replace the aging 'High Speed Train' (HST) fleet have adequate space for bikes. The new trains, currently dubbed 'Super Expresses', will run on most of the main lines in Britain in various guises and will begin service in 2013.

The more people who write in the more likely we are to see improvement in the design. We need to ensure that rolling stock has dedicated (and some flexible) space for cycles. If this space isn't designed into the train layout *now* it never will be. Without decent spaces cyclists' contribution as customers of the train companies won't be recognised and using the railways will remain a struggle.

Visit www.ctc.org.uk/cyclerrail or contact the Campaigns team at National Office to find out more.

Bike-rail travel tips

- Don't expect to be able to turn up and get on board on busy trains. Book ahead or take a folding bike.
- You can make a bike reservation online (for any service) at the same time as buying your ticket

with National Express's train booking service. See www.nationalexpress.co.uk.

- Among call centres, the best for cyclists is First – tel: 08457 550033.
- If a local train has no reservable spaces you may need to split the booking into stages.
- Get to the station early – even if you have reservations – and take an earlier train if you have connections you must make.
- Be ready to board and get off quickly when the train arrives. Staff will be more helpful if you help them. Get someone ready to unlock the door too if required.
- Remove items like computer and detachable lights when you store your bike, and keep an eye out at stations that your bike is not taken off the train.

For details on all rail operators' policies and their attitudes to non-diamond frame cycles, see http://www.atob.org.uk/Bike_Rail.html