

# Don't ride, won't ride?

In the UK, few people use a bike as everyday transport, because increasing car use killed our cycling culture. Can we get it back? Sociologist **Dave Horton** has some suggestions

**B**ritain once had a cycling culture. Until the Second World War bicycles vastly outnumbered cars. Cycling was normal. Since then changes in our society and our transport environment have squeezed cycling off the average person's agenda.

Yet an interest in cycling – particularly in what cycling can do for cities – is growing across the world. New York, Melbourne, Paris, even London are making efforts to embrace the bike.

The number of cyclists on London's streets has doubled in a decade. Could London be leading the way in cycling becoming an ordinary, unremarkable means of moving about again? And if not, what needs to change for Britain's cycling culture to be reborn?

## Driven off the roads

Two research projects are looking at UK cycling. Dr Griet Scheldeman is a Flemish anthropologist on the Understanding Walking and Cycling project. In the last two years she's talked to people from all parts of society about cycling – what they think about it, whether they do it or would do it, and under what conditions.

'Our research makes clear that for the majority of people cycling is an occasional practice, at best,' she says. 'For many people it barely registers as a plausible way of moving around. That's hardly surprising, given the conditions for cycling which exist across Britain.'

Dr Rachel Aldred heads up the Cycling Cultures project, which is examining cycling cultures in four

places: Bristol, Cambridge, Hackney in London, and Hull. What does her research suggest needs to change for Britain to get on its bike?

'One thing is drivers' attitudes. Many people describe frequent near-misses due to dangerous driving: tailgating, cutting-up, even deliberate harassment. This stems from an anti-cycling culture prevalent in the UK.

'Well-intentioned infrastructure,' Aldred says, 'can become useless if drivers routinely undermine it, blocking modal filters or cycle paths, driving in mandatory cycle lanes, failing to allow cyclists to cross traffic lanes, and so on.'

'Maybe we need to challenge motorists, companies, and motoring organisations to sign a "Respect Cyclists" pledge! Driving standards must be brought in line with best European practice. When I was in the Netherlands, I was amazed to see drivers waiting to pass cyclists riding two abreast, rather than honking and driving at them.'

The Understanding Walking and Cycling project has also found cars, and, more specifically, their current domination of urban space, to be the major barrier to cycling.

'What's clear,' says Griet Scheldeman, 'is that many people like the idea of cycling, but not on today's roads. Britain's transport environment has been designed around and become monopolised by the car. For those with access to them, the car has become the default option, even for very short urban journeys.'

'Most people do not even consider cycling, both because they're locked





into their cars and because – if you provoke them into contemplating cycling – they are very resistant to riding in today’s prevalent conditions. Many regard city cycling as almost “unnatural”.

**Wonderful Copenhagen**

Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, has a cycling culture. Fully 37% of commuter journeys are made by bike, and the City aims to reach 50% by 2015. Mikael Colville-Andersen is Denmark’s unofficial ambassador for cycling. His Copenhagenize and Copenhagen Cycle Chic blogs are known the world over. Why does he think Copenhagen’s doing so well?

‘The revival of Copenhagen’s proud cycling culture is due simply to a paradigm shift in our urban planning. In the late 1950s we shifted from thinking “bike first” to thinking “car first”. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that we reverted to placing the bicycle – and pedestrians – first in our urban planning. Planning for bicycle traffic but also planning for more liveable cities.

‘Continued innovation and investment in protected bicycle infrastructure has been the key to encouraging citizens to choose the bicycle. It’s simple. If you make the bicycle the quickest way to get around a city, even the strangest

(Left) While cycling in London has grown dramatically, commuters have to cope with pushy urban traffic. (Above) By contrast, anybody and everybody cycles in Copenhagen, and it’s a more leisurely affair

people will be seen on a bicycle.’

Copenhagen has separated cycling from motorised traffic to good effect. But how much further does Colville-Andersen think Copenhagen can go in building its cycling culture?

‘I doubt Copenhagen will return to the levels of cycling we enjoyed in the 1940s but we continue to improve conditions for cyclists. What we need to do – which we’re not – is further development of traffic-calming measures, including lower speed limits. We should really follow the example of scores of other European cities on this front.’

Our research makes it clear that, for many people, cycling barely registers as a plausible way of moving around

Copenhagen now needs to civilise the motorised traffic that tends still to dominate the city. In Britain we have so far failed to civilise the car, and we have failed effectively to separate cycling from the car. In doing neither, we have failed to produce a cycling culture. According to Colville-Andersen, ‘Britain could learn volumes from the Danish and Dutch experiences. [Your] reluctance

Left: jason@cycling-images.co.uk



Far left: Dave Horton. Above left: Matt Hodges

to advocate protected infrastructure is the broomstick in the spokes.

'In Britain, it seems to be small groups of [different] "cyclists" advocating for no one but themselves instead of promoting a return to a Britain where the bicycle was, if not king, then crown prince. This sub-cultural focus on cycling is the greatest hindrance to Britain's re-emergence as a cycling nation.'

### **Copenhagenizing the UK**

David Hembrow is an Englishman living in Assen, just south of Groningen, the Netherlands. His 'A view from the cycle path' blog explores Dutch cycling culture – how it's been built and how it's maintained. Around 26% of all journeys across the Netherlands are made by bike. In Groningen, a city of 180,000 people, around half of all journeys are cycled, making it the best cycling city in the world.

The English city of Leicester is in some respects similar to Groningen. Both medium-sized cities, both relatively dry and flat. But when it comes to cycling, they're poles apart. The majority of people in the Dutch city cycle daily. Leicester is doing better than most English cities, but cycling still only accounts for around 4% of journeys.

Andy Salkeld is Leicester City Council's Cycling Officer. His mission is to build vibrant cycling cultures that connect with the city's multicultural population. 'Leicester is a diverse place, so there's massive cultural variation in attitudes to

(Clockwise from above) Cycle parking in Leicester – if you build it, will they come? Some UK cycle paths are clearly not designed by cyclists. In Copenhagen, cyclists are not directed to the gutter by the road layout

and use of bikes. Our challenge is to make cycling meaningful, if in different ways, to everyone.'

The number of people getting on their bikes is going up. 'Our monitoring,' says Salkeld, 'shows 81% growth between 2004 and 2009.'

This rise is equal to London's, but there's still so far to go. Realistically, can English cities like London and Leicester aim for the levels of cycling seen in Copenhagen and across the Netherlands? Salkeld is upbeat. 'I think so. People are climbing aboard. In Leicester, fine sentiments towards cycling are coming from up high, and we've got projects and committed individuals turning those

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sentiments into action. The building blocks for a cycling culture are being put in place.'

But we're still a long way from the kinds of coherent cycle-friendly networks (whether on or off-road) seen in Copenhagen and across the Netherlands.

### **Motorist calming**

Professor Colin Pooley of Lancaster University heads the Understanding Walking and Cycling project. He believes that 'depending on

the context, we need to regulate motorised traffic more severely or separate it from cycling – sometimes both. In Copenhagen and the Netherlands, cycling is often clearly separated from the flows of motorised traffic, but even where it's not, the behaviour of motorists towards cyclists tends to be much more civil; motorists are likely to slow down and give cyclists space.'

If academic research is finding currently dominant conditions for cycling to be the biggest barrier to Britain building a cycling culture, as a local authority practitioner with an eye to issues of social justice, Andy Salkeld is also concerned that such a cycling culture be inclusive.

'We need to cater for everyone,' he says. 'In Leicester we've grassroots projects striving to make cycling affordable and accessible. Everyone should be able to give cycling a go.' Salkeld notes how 'three social enterprise bike re-cycling projects have between them put several thousand bikes back onto Leicester's streets over the last five years.'

### **Rebuilding bike culture**

As well as making 'ordinary' bikes affordable, Leicester has projects that make special bikes available, for riders with disabilities. Salkeld believes such projects are essential to building an inclusive cycling culture. At the same time he recognises that we need radically to improve the conditions in which those bikes can be ridden. Only then will cycling reach beyond the hardcore.



(Left) For a cycling culture to develop, cycling needs to be made accessible to all members of society. A Cycle Champions project in Leicester is encouraging Asian women and girls to cycle. (Above) Finding cycle parking in Copenhagen is a bit like finding a car parking space in London

Improving conditions will take time and sweat-equity. It took a century for Britain to build its car culture, and it will take a while to replace it with a cycling one.

This might seem a big task. But David Hembrow claims the Dutch built their current cycling culture in 15 years. If we got on with it, we could do the same. It's like that old saying, 'the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, the next best time is now'. And if we do, maybe – like the Dutch and the Danes – our children and grandchildren will cycle almost without realising that they cycle; it'll be something that they simply do.

So what can we do to bring it about? Colin Pooley sees the need to work on different fronts at once. 'A mass cycling culture depends on achieving the normalisation of cycling as an everyday activity for commonplace journeys. When it comes to integrating cycling into

British cities, we need to move from the current vicious circle to a virtuous one, so that legislative changes influence individual behaviour which in turn generates a climate where political change is possible.'

Government has enormous responsibility, but the task cannot be left to government alone. The large-scale public funding and legislative changes required to develop a cycling culture will only be won through popular support. Which is where, as cyclists, we come in.

We can't all do everything, but we can all probably do something. Whether we guide a friend through buying a bike or teach them how to fix a puncture, show a colleague a good route to work, join with others to campaign for improved facilities, or write a letter in support of cycling, we're part of it. As part of CTC, we're part of it too.

## Pedalling ideas

You've read the article, now visit the conference! Building Cycling Cultures takes place on 4-5 June at Phoenix Square Digital Media Centre in Leicester. It will include:

- An exploration and celebration of cycling, for everyone interested in the future of cycling
- The chance to learn more about latest research into cycling, hear from leading North American bike advocates, and take part in bike project workshops
- Talks, workshops, debates, networking, bike-art, films, music, rides, e-media

All welcome. For more details and to register, go online to [cyclingcultures.org.uk](http://cyclingcultures.org.uk)

### Further reading

Understanding Walking and Cycling:

[www.lec.lancs.ac.uk/research/society\\_and\\_environment/walking\\_and\\_cycling.php](http://www.lec.lancs.ac.uk/research/society_and_environment/walking_and_cycling.php)

Cycling Cultures:

[www.cyclingcultures.org.uk](http://www.cyclingcultures.org.uk)

Copenhagenize:

[www.copenhagenize.com](http://www.copenhagenize.com)

Copenhagenize Consulting:

[www.copenhagenize.eu](http://www.copenhagenize.eu)

A view from the cycle path:

[hembrow.blogspot.com](http://hembrow.blogspot.com)