



# STEP ON IT!

Pedicabs are a green way to take passengers short distances in towns and cities – when legislation and council approval allows. **Rob Ainsley** reports

PHOTOS HEREFORD PEDICABS, OXON CARTS, ROB AINSLEY

**T**alk to Will Vaughan, whose Hereford Pedicabs has ferried thousands of passengers round the town since 2007, and it's easy to understand why so many people want to

encourage them as a fun, friendly and green alternative to taxis: 'Everybody benefits,' he says cheerily, 'and we have a brilliant relationship with taxi drivers, because we mop up the short journeys they don't want – our average journey is under a kilometre.'

London cabbies, however, hate pedicabs with a vengeance. 'They're a fiasco, a farce,' says Steve Macnamara of the London Taxi Drivers' Association (LTDA), less cheerily. 'Taxi drivers detest them because they clog up the streets, and are inherently dangerous – it's only a matter of time before someone is killed.'

Steve talks darkly about unreported accidents caused by untrained, opportunist, transient riders, renting pedicabs at rip-off prices from shady operators – and then in turn ripping off tourists. Pedicabs are, he says, 'a fairground ride, only used by drunks late at night – except a fairground ride would be regulated and checked. The only possible thing is to ban them.'

## LICENSING AND LOOPHOLES

Cowboys certainly exist. Hang around Leicester Square tube any evening and you'll see pedicabs patrolling the West End streets for business. If you're not fussy about standards, online sources suggest you can rent a machine for as little as £100 per week. >

FEATURE  
Step on it!



1

## “AT TIMES, TOM FEELS THE COUNCIL HAS ‘GONE OUT OF ITS WAY TO MAKE THINGS DIFFICULT FOR US’”

➤ But London’s many reputable pedicab operators pride themselves on their commitment to standards and quality. Bugbugs, for example, train their riders to Bikeability Level 3, plus an extra pedicab module designed along with CTC, and have always held insurance cover.

And, even according to figures from pedicab-hating TfL (Transport for London), people like them. Their 2009 survey suggested the overwhelming majority of users are holidaymakers, riding for fun or curiosity. They’re no commercial challenge to taxis (a point cabbies readily acknowledge): three-quarters of journeys are under three-

quarters of a mile, costing roughly a tenner, and three-quarters say they’d use pedicabs again.

The capital has pedicab cowboys because of a historical legal quirk. Outside London, pedicabs are classed as ‘Hackney Carriages’ – i.e. taxis – and can be licensed by local authorities, though it rarely happens. Without a licence, they’re restricted to pre-booking – which usually means tours, weddings, and the odd corporate or hen do.

But in London, they’re not classed as such – which means they’re not subject to licensing restrictions, and are free to ply for hire, unregulated and uninsured. Everyone agrees this isn’t working.

### FARE’S FAIR

Chris Smallwood, of the London Pedicab Operator’s Association (and founder of Bugbugs in 1998), has been battling for regulation for over a decade in standards, training and licensing – even specific ranks – to legitimise pedicabs in London, and stop the cowboys. He rebuffs talk of accidents, saying TfL’s own figures show only a handful, most caused by vehicles, all minor.

This autumn, the Law Commission will draft a bill for parliament rationalising legislation on taxis and private hire. If MPs



2



3

### In the photos

- 1 Tom Maxwell of Oxon Carts: denied a ‘taxi’ licence
- 2 London pedicabs are unregulated at the moment
- 3 Oxon Carts are restricted to pre-booked work

take up the bill, it could clear up the whole pedicab situation nationally. Which could lead to regulated pedicabs booming in London... or their removal from the capital. Because TfL and the mayor, Boris Johnson – in thrall to the taxi lobby, Chris says – want regulation so they can ban pedicabs completely.

The bitter, long-running London pedicab versus taxi debate is one of Machiavellian politics and complex legal manoeuvring with ‘statutory instruments’ and ‘Henry VIII clauses’. ‘The taxi fraternity have thwarted our every move,’ says Chris, ‘constantly moving the goalposts, and Westminster Council and TfL have concocted elaborate shams.’

Outside London, Will Vaughan’s Hereford company is unusual in being licensed for ply-for-hire. They pay £300 a year per cab licence, the same as taxis. He says getting licensed was ‘easier than it’s sometimes made out to be! We met with the local authority and the tourism department and focused on the benefits. We understand we need to be licensed – all our employees are checked out. The council were behind us, and it benefits everyone. They get money out of us!’ They set no ‘fares’ – passengers donate what they like after a trip.

More typically, in Oxford, Tom Maxwell's Oxon Carts was denied a licence. (At times, Tom feels the council has 'gone out of its way to make things difficult for us'.) So they're restricted to pre-booked work, such as wedding-couple transport (£57-£90 per hour); they did 70 last year. The weekend work provides handy employment for students and others, but with the pedicabs idle the rest of the week, Tom wishes he could do the station-to-town run, which the taxis aren't keen on, plus personalised town tours down the unmotorable back lanes.

Owen O'Neill runs a dozen pedicabs in Edinburgh, and his Evolution Rickshaws would expand in Glasgow (where he has one licence), but is struggling with council opposition there. He described his customers as simply wanting to go from 'A to B, pub to club, club to chip shop, chip shop to taxi rank'... many of them women suffering from the pain of high heels!

#### 21ST CENTURY TRANSPORT

Pedicabs are reliable beasts. In Bristol, Sam Harris of Pedal Power Transport says maintenance 'has been very low so far. We had to buy a smaller chainset to lower the gears slightly (Bristol is hilly!) and replace one chain. Otherwise its been A-OK. Not even had any punctures yet after two years!'

The LTDA dismiss pedicabs as 'third world transport that have no place in a 21st-century metropolis'. But Chris Smallwood believes pedicabs have a great future as niche urban transport if viable regulation can be worked out. 'Every US state has pedicabs - they're banned nowhere, and flourish in unique local circumstances, such as areas restricted to vehicles,' he says. 'Germany too - they've got simple, workable rules for pedicabs, on insurance and bikes being fit for purpose.'

Chris also reckons that pedicabs have created over a thousand sustainable jobs. Enjoyable ones: in Cambridge, cargo bike firm Outspoken Delivery also do pedicab wedding runs. 'It's great fun cycling them,' asserts assistant manager Mark Nash, 'and after a week of doing it I got very fit and strong!'

Perhaps London can learn from Edinburgh. Here, b-spokes run one of the UK's biggest fleets: 42 pedicabs and over 60 trained riders. Regulations are different in Scotland - they run with one-year Street Trader Licences that allow them to ply for hire and do tours in designated city centre areas. Fares are decided by negotiation from a sample charge sheet depending on the route (and the hills).

Apart from the occasional 'aggressive minority', relations with taxi drivers are reasonably good, says b-spokes' Joe Allenza. 'Pedicab riders are generally good, balanced people who can laugh off incidents instead

### Passenger ferrying



**Cycle rickshaws - known in the UK and US as pedicabs - are pedal-powered taxis. They became popular in Singapore around 1930, and continue to supply everyday budget transport in South East Asia, India, and notably Bangladesh. A common form is a tricycle with a bench seat over the back axle, possibly with a canopy.**

Reputable UK operators use high-spec pedicabs, such as those made by Main Street in Colorado or Cycles Maximus in Bath, costing up to £4,500. Features can include suspension, disc brakes, 21-speed gears, integral lighting and seatbelts. Cycles Maximus models weigh 75kg and can take three passengers totalling 250kg.

The handling takes some getting used to thanks to the size and weight, and with a full load you appreciate low gears, but they're pretty straightforward to operate. Cheaper, simpler, and more rickety pedicabs can be found all over the world, but pedalling a 'genuine' single-speed, high-g geared Bangladeshi model is much tougher work: the life expectancy of a 'rickshaw wallah' there is said to be 45.

of looking for confrontation.'

Things are looking positive - they recently merged with a cargo bike organisation, Pronto Pedal Power - and they're expanding into England: Joe says b-spokes have pedicab plans for Cardiff, Sheffield, Newcastle and Bournemouth. They've started advertising for drivers in York, with six licences obtained and three more on the way.

Pedicabs will always be a niche, bit-of-fun transport, best suited to relaxed tourist areas. Hereford - and perhaps soon York - shows that they can work to everyone's satisfaction. Impatient, time-is-money London may yet get its own way and throw them out. But Edinburgh suggests that, with the right regulation - and cheerful, trained-up, professional riders - they can work in busy capitals too. ☺

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