



Going Dutch

Can we, should we, learn from the Netherlands' cycling success story?
Steve Melia spoke to Dutch cyclists and transport officials for their opinions

The bicycle is as much a part of Dutch culture as windmills, tulips and the boy with his finger in a dike. A flat terrain helps, but their climate does not: Amsterdam in winter is colder than Edinburgh and considerably wetter. With nearly a third of all journeys made by bike, surely they must be doing something right – something from which we could learn?

Though the signs of a cycling culture appear as soon as you disembark at the Hook of Holland, the reasons for it are not always so clear, and the lessons for Britain, where cycling accounts for one trip in 50, are surrounded by controversy.

FIETS FIRST

Dutch transport researcher Sindy Farag moved last year from Utrecht to Bristol. She left her traditional Dutch bike at home and

bought a mountain bike.

'It took a while getting used to leaning forward on the mountain bike but I thought it was better for riding up and down pavements. It may be illegal but I feel a lot safer. It takes you a while to get used to riding here. I scared some of the cars at first because I was cycling as if I had rights!'

Under Dutch law, when a car hits a bike the driver is always liable, regardless of the circumstances. When the British media got it into their collective head (completely incorrectly, as it turned out) that the EU was proposing to apply this principle throughout Europe, the very suggestion provoked an orgy of cycle-bashing. This, Sindy believes, explains much of the difference in drivers' behaviour towards cyclists.

'I had less of a problem adapting because I had a lot of cycling experience. I think it must

be difficult learning to ride here.'

Many Dutch children are introduced to cycling before they can walk. Babies on crossbar seats and small children on trailers or rear seats are a common sight across the Netherlands. For those with more money, the 'bakfiets', a kind of cycling wheelbarrow for kids or shopping, has become something of a lifestyle statement in parts of Amsterdam. Schools also play a part, with cycle outings often led by teachers.

'My mother was more like a British mum,' says Sendy. 'She drove me to school, because she thought it was too dangerous – until I rebelled at the age of 13 and started cycling in with my friends. We often used to ride on the back of each other's bikes – totally illegal, but everyone does it.'

THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

So are there any problems I should watch out for, I ask Sendy, just before going to the Netherlands? She warns me about the traffic police, confessing to three €65 fines for jumping red lights (I am starting to notice a pattern here), then asks: 'Have you got a good lock? Better take two. Dutch people usually have two bikes – one good one, and one they wouldn't mind losing. Sometimes we spend more on a lock than a bike.'

It was a story I would hear many times. One elderly lady in a quiet suburb of The Hague had lost six bikes to thieves; only one was ever recovered. In a country with so many bicycles, bike thieves and canals, inevitably many of the former end up in the latter – the bikes more than the thieves, unfortunately. Some local councils employ teams who dredge the canals to retrieve the remains.

Wietske Rietsma Boermer, aged 78, still rides her two bikes around Leeuwarden in Friesland. Pillion riding began during the war, she explains, when there weren't enough bikes to go round. Her family were involved in the Resistance, who also used bikes, the only transport available, to carry messages under the noses of the Germans.

Dutch attachment to the bike goes back further, to the nineteenth century, when small farmers who could not afford a horse found this new machine could carry pails of milk or straw bales. Since then Dutch ingenuity has adapted the bike to everything from street cleaning to towing canoes.

SHARED SPACE

Though the bicycle is a long-standing feature of Dutch life, there is another side to this story. Across Europe, including the Netherlands, rates of cycling were falling sharply until the 1970s. In most countries, including Britain and France, the decline continued. In a few, such as the Netherlands and Germany, a recovery began. Why was this?

Some analysts point to a change in Government policy following the oil price rises of 1973-4. Traffic restraint,

pedestrianisation and the construction of cycle routes all became official objectives.

Hans Monderman, traffic engineer in the northern town of Drachten, is sceptical of this explanation: 'We don't care what governments say. They can't force people to cycle. The best they can do is to facilitate.'

From some accounts, it seems the rise in cycling took many in government by surprise, at first. Dutch traffic planners have been getting it wrong like everywhere else, according to Monderman: 'We learned from [U.S. new-town] Radburn and [British transport planner] Buchanan – cars and people can't mix. But by separating them we removed the opportunities for human interaction.'

His solution, known as 'shared space' has influenced thinking across the world, including Britain, bringing a stream of foreign visitors to this medium-sized provincial town to see how it is done. Owen Patterson MP, who was Tory transport spokesman until recently, came with interest and went home convinced.

The aim of 'shared space' is to remove signals and priorities, to make all road users think and react to others. The main changes in Drachten have applied to junctions: traffic lights replaced by raised cobbled crossroads or, in the town centre, a square with a roundabout, nicknamed 'the squareabout'. By making the environment feel less regulated, they have succeeded in reducing accident rates and congestion.

But Drachten also has a network of separate cycle tracks, including some spectacular bridges, which would put any British town to shame. Even the 'squareabout' has a form of cycle priority – which is not always respected; I witnessed a near miss followed by a stream of abuse hurled at the truck driver who failed to give way.

Monderman is ambivalent when pressed on this point. On the one hand, he says 'segregation erodes human contact, even when you segregate for bicycles' but he also acknowledges the need for a 'cycling network' to facilitate more rapid travel.

BUILDING A NETWORK

Over the past 30 years that network has spread across the Netherlands to such an extent that most journeys, urban and rural, can now be made almost entirely on separate paths, lanes or roads kept more or less free from through traffic. The process is continuing, with on-road cycle lanes progressively being replaced by separated paths.

Groningen, a city of 180,000 people 20 miles from Drachten, holds the record in the Netherlands and possibly the western world: 60% of all trips made by bike. Transport official Cor van der Klaauw offers several reasons for this: the mayor, councillors and traffic engineers are all regular cyclists, so decisions are made by people who understand. A decision was made in 1977

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Photos by Steve Meila



Bicycle occupancy levels are often greater than one in Holland. Pillion riding began in WWII

– controversial at the time – to ban cars from most of the city centre. New developments since then have limited access points for motor vehicles, while a growing network of paths, bridges and other shortcuts gives a deliberate advantage to the bike.

Some junctions, mainly on quieter roads, have been designed along shared space principles, but separation is also necessary, van der Klaauw believes. Martijn Sargentini, his opposite number in the City Region of Amsterdam agrees. 'I'd never heard of Hans Monderman or "shared space" until all these foreign visitors came here and kept telling me about them. Here in Amsterdam we are very clear – for safety, for speed, to give an advantage to the bike, we aim to separate wherever possible. On some routes we now need broader paths to reduce cycling congestion.'

FACILITIES VS FARCILITIES

This issue goes to the heart of the controversy, when comparisons are made with the UK. The evidence on the safety and effectiveness of cycle routes is less clear on this side of the North Sea. The Department for Transport has a hierarchy of cycling solutions with 'off-road provision' a last resort, after measures such as traffic reduction and traffic calming. CTC supports this hierarchy.

CTC's lack of enthusiasm for 'off-road provision' is reflected by the 11,000 who objected to the very suggestion put forward in last year's draft revision of the Highway

Code, which proposed telling cyclists to 'use cycle facilities... where provided'. Part of the objection is that cycle facilities (especially off-carriageway cycle tracks) in Britain are so often appallingly badly designed, even downright dangerous (see photos p42). However, this is not the only factor – differences in Dutch law regarding driver liability and Dutch driver behaviour as a whole are also important.

One crucial difference is that in the Netherlands cycle routes have priority; in Britain, it's the side roads the cycle routes intersect that have priority, so cyclists have to keep stopping (and perhaps even dismounting). British cycle paths are often shared with pedestrians, too.

There is no blanket compulsion to use cycle paths in the Netherlands but cyclists are banned from many busier roads, where cycle paths or parallel quiet roads always provide an alternative. CTC member Anthony Cummings, who has lived near The Hague since 1991, sees no problem with this.

'It's normal when they build a road here to put a decent cycle path – usually two metres wide – alongside it. You don't hear people objecting to pavements on the grounds that pedestrians should be free to walk down the road. Everyone uses the cycle routes here, even the racing groups – although they don't always look where they're going!'

But he can appreciate the concerns of cyclists in Britain: 'Those pathetic paths that go for a few hundred yards and throw you

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back onto the same carriageway – I can understand why people object to using them.'

TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS?

Sendy Farag was shocked by the poor quality of the cycle tracks when she arrived in Bristol, particularly the shared pavements/cycle paths and the lack of separation at dangerous junctions. But she believes that even the narrow cycle lanes along the main Gloucester Road in the city are better than nothing: 'In a car dominated society like Britain I think you have to start by separating – even if it's just lines painted on the road.'

Anthony Cummings points out that even well-designed cycle infrastructure is relatively inexpensive. 'Building cycle facilities and encouraging people to switch from cars is cheaper than building more roads!'

Cor van der Klaauw would agree. His staff spend about half their time on cycling issues, but the cycle network that carries 60% of Groningen's traffic consumes just 10% of its transport budget. By way of comparison, he recalls a cycle tour he made of East Anglia a few years ago.

'There was no continuity; the infrastructure was too small. It seemed like: "Here's some space left over, let's give it to the cyclists." There was no attempt to create a whole new situation, which is what you need to do.'

Further reading: www.ecomm2006.nl (Transport Conference in Groningen), www.shared-space.org (Shared Space project and philosophy) and www.swov.nl (Dutch Road Safety Institute).

For a discussion of CTC's policy stance on these issues, and to read CTC's consultation response to the Government's latest draft 'Cycle Infrastructure Design' guidelines, visit www.ctc.org.uk/campaigns.

