

A report from CTC's Steve Kinsella on a Netherlands study tour

(from CTC RTR Forum 26 May 2008)

These are my brief notes after the week's study tour based in Assen run by David Hembrow

On the two days before and after the tour I visited rural areas and Rotterdam. In the 3 days we cycled in and around Assen, and Groningen. I had previously spent a day in and near Amsterdam.

The tour was very well worthwhile to get an understanding of the Netherlands cycle transport. I will try to persuade cycling officers and highway engineers to go on it.

The other people on the tour were John Meudell who knew the Netherlands well already, people from Cambridge Cycle Campaign, and two others. There is a second tour running this week, and David expects to be continuing with them.

Why and how cycling is main stream transport in the Netherlands:

- 1 There is a simple system of priorities, indicated by dragon's teeth painted on the surfaces of roads and cycleways at junctions: if the dragon's teeth point towards you, the other traffic stream has priority. If the teeth point away from you, you have priority. This is simple and consistent to follow for both drivers and cyclists. Generally all junctions including roundabouts are so marked, but if they are not, the rule is give priority to the right.
- 2 There are always continuous cycleways or cycle lanes. Cycle traffic usually has priority over turning traffic at junctions and roundabouts. Motorists watch for cyclists to their right and stop for cyclists if they are coming from either direction. Cycle lanes are either one way or two way, usually obvious from the width and centre line.
- 3 Cycleways and cycle lanes are always in red tarmac.
- 4 Footways are white (e.g paving slabs) and are raised by a kerb. Cycleways are level with the road.
- 5 Kerbs are bevelled for ease of cycling on to the pavement for parking, shops, etc.
- 6 If there is no pavement people can walk on the cycleway. If there is no cycleway people can cycle in the road. Where there is a cycleway one is not permitted to cycle on the road - nor any necessity to. Usually the cycleway has a smoother surface than the road.
- 7 At traffic lights there is a cyclists' phase when all motor traffic is stopped and cyclists can go in any direction (anticlockwise at major junctions).
- 8 One-way cyclist contraflows are universal.
- 9 Cycle parking is well provided (though not always enough and not always the best type). (The cycle park at Groningen station cost 10M Euro.)
- 10 Drivers do not block cycle lanes even if "advisory" type.
- 11 Direction/distance signs are consistent in pattern with red lettering to distinguish them from adjacent motorists' signs.
- 12 Cycle lanes and cycle ways are adequate widths.
- 13 There is always a 30kph limit in towns and villages.
- 14 Surfaces are good and well maintained. I saw no potholes, patchings, dropped drains etc. We were told that highway budgets allow for surfaces to be renewed every 15 years.
- 15 Children take a traffic exam and a practical. In the practical they are watched by a hidden examiner. I think these are part of the normal school curriculum.
- 17 There are no negative messages about danger.
- 18 Cycleways are swept all year and gritted in winter. I saw no debris, broken glass, etc.
- 19 Bicycles are suitable for purpose - upright types, fully equipped with lights and carriers, fully enclosed chains, skirt guards, hub brakes, hub gears. Cost 900-1800 Eu. Children's bikes are fully equipped like the adults'. There are ample breakdown services.

20 Cycling is integrated with other modes. Bike hire, mass parking, repair, at train stations. Bus stops all have cycle parking, often covered.

21 People are permitted to and do ride with 1, 2 or even 3 children, a passenger on the carrier, holding a dog on a lead, using a mobile phone, holding an umbrella. (Underpasses are made high enough for the umbrella.) People wear their normal clothes. In cold or wet weather a smart long coat like a mac is worn quite often. We were told that planners expect people to cycle up to 7km for the one way trip. Virtually all children cycle to school, typically 5km, and some up to 20-25 km.

22 As here, there are sports cyclists in lycra on racing bikes, and there are road clubs, we were told. They use the cycleways. It is quite possible to go fast, overtaking the others.

All these things result in cycling being the main mode for short journeys, taking 40% of trips. People can drive in towns and villages but do so slowly. One doesn't see people walking very much. Teenagers congregate like anywhere, but always on bikes. Cycling feels safer and according to the statistics is safer than here. Trains are over-full and intercity trains are surprisingly not cycle-friendly. I gathered that buses are not much used. The week changed my mind about a few things:

A. I had thought that replicating Dutch infrastructure would be impossible here in UK. Now I think it could be done. The key would be to create cycleways in place of little-used pedestrian space as well as from road space. Where that can't be done, the road has to be split into advisory cycle lanes and a space in the middle of one car's width. Once one rearranges the space, all the other things are possible. Our shared pavements could become cycleways. To minimise the changes needed, the system could possibly work with the cycleways raised above road level, creating tables at road crossings.

B. Previously I have disliked the linking of cycling and walking (as in "walking and cycling officer"), because I have treated cycling as being an alternative to driving, not to walking. Now I can see an advantage in the linking, because cycling can replace walking. Then, once the bike becomes a habit people will use it for longer than walking journeys. They will welcome the convenience of being able to carry more and the flexibility. So the bike would come to replace car journeys too. Having made the investment, the bike would be used.

C Though I see the replication in practical terms as a possibility in UK, achieving the social, cultural and political change is as difficult to envisage as ever. But to get to the level of cycling needed to tackle climate change, and health, Britain should import the Dutch model, now.

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