

CHASING RAINBOWS? Progress on the cycling revolution!

“Those were the days my friend” was a popular song in my youth – is timeless in its application, and in my opinion never more so than in the recent development of cycling provision!

True there was never more money being spent on it but things are not going so smoothly in my opinion.

Ian Drake (CEO British Cycling) gave, a decade ago, amid the justifiable back-slapping – a veiled warning – “Medals and role models alone cannot transform Britain into a nation of people on bikes,” he said. “Fundamental to our approach is a mixed economy of funding and support from across the spectrum of private, public and voluntary sectors.”

He was doubtless referring in the main to competitive cycling, Lycra and speed, but from my experience, despite the huge increase in funds being allocated to cycling in the UK, the predictions of increased everyday cycle trips are not being realised. It remains much the same as before, generally around 1-2% of trips, with a few notable exceptions.

In the late 80’s, following inter urban route development on former railways, like the Bristol to Bath by Sustrans in Bristol (as a Job Creation initiative), there developed a wish in most local authorities to increase cycle use to counter the inexorable increase in car ownership (and the problems resulting), and the fact that the majority of car trips were under five miles and many less than three miles, ideal for cycle use.

County Councils appointed full or part time cycling officers in their departments and embarked on cycling policies to adopt and implement them. There was a Local Authority Cycle Liaison Group that met around the country twice a year keeping up to speed with developments. Targets were set by many with ten year horizons to raise everyday cycle use from its very low base to a heady 10% or thereabouts.

Sustrans imaginative bid for a National Cycle Network in 1995 to the National Lottery won £42.5m. towards an estimated total cost of around £220m. It proposed linking the major centres of the UK. This huge change enabled Sustrans to expand, sit at the table with Councils with finance and employ consultants to work on standards, design and, importantly, advise on the way forward.

They were heady days and the planned network moved from 2,000 miles to 5,000 miles in five years and then 10,000 miles in ten years. The routes were inter-urban in the main, and of course their success depended on the feeder routes connecting with them. Funding still was an issue and various packages were worked up from the limited available resources wherever it could be found.

Here in South West Wales I was fortunate in being involved in cycle planning liaison with County Councils (not my job ...) and afterwards as a consultant working with them and Sustrans on the studies and subsequently construction of the many routes being developed at that time, again mostly on disused railways. For my part it involved planning, design, land acquisition and construction, mostly by New Deal Training Schemes in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire, but also some other schemes in partnership and with the huge support of the County Councils. It was always on a wing and a prayer: getting approval and sections of land, funding and building bit by bit.

This was not the quickest way, but the work was extremely rewarding and hugely appreciated by the public who saw a derelict former railway strewn with rubbish transformed into a scenic, local facility that also provided good access between communities and beyond.

ACTIVE TRAVEL ACT (Wales) 2013.

The Senedd introduced this act as an initiative to transform urban travel by encouraging more cycle and walking and provide a significant increase in trips for school, work and shopping effecting a modal change from car use; but it excludes recreation and tourism trip purposes; a mistake in my view albeit for their urban modal change priority.

My view has always been that cycle use is a wide spectrum and we need to encourage all cycling to become the norm in family travel and develop the tradition from an early age. Sport and Lycra

has its place, but is not the be all and end all. 'Everyday cycling' is my preferred description as it provides the best chance of significant change.

So what is going wrong in Wales? The Active Travel requirements for projects have resulted in a process of approval that defies common sense, is hugely bureaucratic and as a consequence hugely expensive. It requires a Janet and John approach borne of lack of professional experience, a consultation process that makes it time wasting and ineffective, (particularly zoom meetings) with little prior information put out.

The design guidance is not a requirement, only advice, and in my recent experience is frequently ignored in the design process. It is proving an uphill task trying to make progress even on long standing projects in development over 20 years and more. Most schemes require land acquisition, and this is another issue where negotiations can be sticky. Landowners are not usually cycle enthusiasts and so those negotiating with them need a particular skill to get agreement. The threat of Compulsory Purchase is not something to raise in the early stages but can be effective when inordinate delay has occurred or excessive demands cannot be met.

There has been the occasional success and the Gowerton to Pontarddlais route can be claimed as a Council job well done despite, I understand, a long delay in land negotiation following a belated exchange of common land from around 1990, due to the Llanelli Link highway improvement.

I can quote a few examples from my experience. From around 1997 to 2010, in Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Swansea, I was engaged by Sustrans mostly developing projects on former railway lines jointly with the County Councils. We carried out negotiations for the land bit by bit as we could, the details were processed and the necessary procedures carried out and grants sought; not easy in those difficult times, but the projects were so worthwhile and cheap. We used New Deal Training with support from volunteer work camps, hired plant and bought all materials with consequent low overheads and no profit margins. Not the quickest way to build but very effective and won a lot of support.

Schemes included the Swiss Valley and Amman Valley schemes in Carmarthenshire and the Brunel and Wiseman's Bridge, Stepside schemes in Pembrokeshire plus many smaller but very useful sections in those Counties and in Swansea.

So what am I complaining about? Take the development of a few on going schemes hereabouts.

MAYALS ROAD B4436

This was sprung upon us by the Council who had included it in their Active Travel Map several years ago when the implications were not fully realised by most. There has been a long standing need for a safe route across Clyne Common on the B4436 between Bishopston and Swansea. I can recall seeking it over 30 years ago and more recently a group, the Gower Access Path (GAP), have been campaigning for it with huge local support.

We were told it couldn't be included until a link to it from the Foreshore along Mayals Road was built. Many (myself included) wanted the route on adjacent Fairwood Road but we were told that was not an option, and we have ended up with a very unsatisfactory (dangerous?) provision that does not accord with the design guidelines and one that many less confident and would-be cyclists will not deign to use.

How does that unsatisfactory provision figure in the need to get more people cycling?

GOWER ACCESS PATH

A competent design that meets users' requirements and the guidelines, which was apparently agreed by the affected commoner, has been rejected by a planning inspector in the most outrageous manner listing every possible objection and giving scant recognition of the overwhelming benefits and wishes of the community. The inspector's report can be seen on our website (in the "GAP rejection" section which follows this one). The result is further delay while the County is redesigning the scheme that from third hand comments will be far less satisfactory to walkers and cyclists and result in many cyclists staying on the carriageway (and some walkers not walking!) More details will be made available as they become known.

NORTH GOWER ACCESS PATH (NGAP) THE MISSING LINK

It gets worse. Planning approval for this section was given in 2006. It would follow on from sections built by the New Deal construction team along the former railway that ran between Gowerton and Llanmorlais, and a continuation of the path built earlier by Swansea Council from the east side of Penclawdd.

It would complete the Gowerton to Penclawdd connection, a most important link in the network for all trip purposes, especially school and work, which links with the main line station at Gowerton. The County Council took on board the design of this section and met with the landowners resulting in some design changes but could not get agreement resulting in no progress for the last ten years or so.

A campaign group, NGAP, has raised its profile over the last year or so raising over 1500 signatures in support of the project. The County Council has appointed consultants at a cost of £60,000 to carry out an initial appraisal. They came up with four alternatives. They suggested route options either side of the carriageway when a major part had already been built on the former railway route on the north side. Following a largely time wasting TEAMS meeting this was rapidly changed to the obvious earlier route on the north side, with a few comments for further action in another TEAMS meeting in order to proceed to the next stage for approval to survey and design, again, no doubt at extraordinary cost ... when the County Council have already designed and redesigned it following discussion all those years ago with the landowner. What a palava!

So there you have it: my dream of a return to the former ways to get the job done and enjoy the manifold benefits of a reasonable preparation time and cost for these much needed projects and get rid of this inordinate delay in processing them.

No danger of that happening unfortunately.

David Judd: Wheelrights' President.

E&OE of course.... [Your webmaster is curious knows what this stands for. Anyone?]