

A tale of two Sky Rides

Sunday 31 July saw the first ever **Hillingdon Sky Ride**, and about 50 riders gathered at Harrow on the Hill station that morning for the Harrow Cyclists ride to Barra Hall Park, Hayes, where the traffic-free circuit started. The group included quite a few young children on their own bikes, and some of these enthusiastic youngsters, who had clearly never ridden so far before, not only completed the 7 mile ride there, and went round the 4 mile circuit, but cycled all the way back as well.

Thanks to Tony Levene's excellent route planning, and the work of the marshals, the group was kept safely together even through the Target Roundabout on the A40, and most of the rest of the ride was on very quiet roads. One utterly mad motorist was encountered in the South Ruislip area, who couldn't stand to be delayed by a few seconds on a Sunday morning by families with young children out for a ride. It is sad that we have to contend with this kind of behaviour when we run these events.

The weather was excellent, but the circuit itself was not crowded: far less so than that of the Ealing Sky Ride of last year. In fact, after about 3pm, there were few cyclists still going round, and the staff whose responsibility it was to keep the roads closed were losing interest. Clearly an event in Hillingdon, on the edge of the Greater London area, has far less a catchment area of possible cyclists than does one in Ealing or central London. The circuit was well-planned, taking in many open spaces that most of us had never visited before, and it was fun to ride on the excellent (permanent) Hillingdon cycling circuit.



Kids and adults cycle across one of the open spaces on the Hillingdon Sky Ride circuit

The Mayor of London's Sky Ride on Sunday 4 September followed the usual pattern, though in fact the circuit in central London was shorter than last year. Brent Cyclists ran a marshalled ride from Kingsbury, which then met up with more cyclists at Gladstone Park. There the riders were reorganised into two groups, a faster and a slower one, of about 30 riders each. This seemed to be an efficient method of getting these people down to St James's Park, given a rather inadequate supply of marshals. This year we opted not to ride down Park Lane, but used the cycle path in Hyde Park instead. Harrow Cyclists ran a totally separate ride this year, starting from Harrow on the Hill. This allowed them to take a route with a better crossing of the North Circular and which did not cross Marylebone Road, also avoiding the hilly parts of Brent.

Numbers were significantly down on last year, due no doubt to poor weather. The total number of people who rode the circuit was said to be down to 50,000, from 80,000 previously. Perhaps, however, the Sky/Murdoch political connection was not helping the event. Maybe also, some of us speculated, Londoners, and particularly those interested in everyday cycling, are losing interest in the Sky Ride events, with their mass of tabards (what is the point of these other than to advertise Sky?), officious organisation, and emphasis on sports cycling (through the involvement of British Cycling). Boris Johnson has said he thinks the Sky Rides are a "key part" of his "cycling revolution", but where is the evidence that they get a significant number of new people cycling regularly? Surely only improvements in conditions on the roads across London on the other 364 days in the year can achieve that, improvements that Johnson has singularly failed to deliver.

Jenny Jones cycles in Brent

Green London Assembly member, and candidate to be Mayor, Jenny Jones was shown some of the cycling problems in Brent by a group from Brent Cyclists on 19 August. Meeting at Wembley Park Station, we cycled through the Chalkhill Estate (taking in some eco allotments), down Blackbird Hill, under the North Circular, and up to Gladstone Park. The need for safe routes for cyclists around Neasden, and decent, practical methods of crossing the North Circular were, of course, what was being emphasised on this brief morning tour, which could only take in a tiny fraction of the environment that needs attention from politicians who say they want to increase cycling here.

In order to try to not depress Ms Jones too much with the environment, we took her to Gladstone Park. Here, too, however, it was apparent that making cycling normal in Brent would not be easy, as she had her “ear bent” by a pedestrian who wished to complain about inconsiderate fast cycling on the steep paths. Cyclists tend to face the problem in Brent, to appropriate a phrase from a completely different context, of being told, “Don’t be here, and don’t be there. Just don’t be.” Jenny Jones was left in no doubt that creating a real Biking Borough here would be no easy task, but she promised to do what she can to influence TfL and Boris Johnson.



Ian Saville and David Arditti of Brent Cyclists pore over maps with Jenny Jones and Shahrar Ali of the Green Party

Going Dutch, literally

With LCC members having voted to for a campaign theme for the 2012 mayoral election of *Going Dutch: clear space for cycling on main roads in every borough*, it seemed appropriate that your Editor should go on a 3 day study tour in the Netherlands in September with a number of other UK cycle campaigners (and one from New Zealand) in order to discover exactly how this small nation has achieved the highest rate of cycling in the world. The tour was led by David Hembrow, an Englishman who did a lot of work with Cambridge Cycling Campaign before emigrating to Assen, in the northern Dutch province of Drenthe. He subsequently started writing a blog, *A view from the cycle path* (www.hembrow.blogspot.com), which has become highly influential, explaining Dutch cycling to an English-speaking audience, and leading these tours for cycle campaigners, officials and traffic engineers from other countries.

Cycling round the Netherlands in Hembrow’s company is a total revelation, and I recommend it as a “must-do” to anyone who is interested in the question of how to raise cycling levels in the UK. The tour busts a great many myths about Dutch cycling, such as, “the Dutch cycle because it is flat”, “the Dutch cycle because they always have”, “Dutch cycling is slow”, “the Dutch cycle because motorists are well-behaved there”, and, “the Dutch cycle because they are better protected by the law”. In fact the Dutch cycle because

a vast and impressive network of cycle paths, tracks and lanes has been constructed that give Dutch cycling a level of safety and convenience unrivaled anywhere else in the world. It would of course be a very long-term project for the UK to try to emulate this system, but the vote by LCC members would seem to indicate that most of them believe we should make a start, and learn the lessons from a nation where 27% of all journeys are made by bike.



This scene from Assen shows, most probably, how the North Circular Road would be treated if it was in the Netherlands

Forthcoming events

Tuesday 4 October: Brent Cyclists social 7.00pm Lounge Bar of The Crown, 142–152 Cricklewood Broadway NW2

Sunday 9 October: Ordnance ride Meet 11am Wembley Park Station for an easy ride taking in the views from Horsenden Hill. About 15 miles round, suitable for all.

Wednesday 12 October: LCC protest ride on Blackfriars Bridge, 5:30pm. See www.lcc.org.uk for details.

Wednesday 12 October: Harrow Cyclists meeting 7.30pm at the Village Inn, Rayners Lane, followed by a social at 9:00 in the same place.

Wednesday 2 November: Brent Cyclists meeting 7.00pm Samaritans Centre, 1 Leopold Road NW10 9LN

Wednesday 9 November: Harrow Cyclists meeting As 10 August

Saturday 12 November: Cycle infrastructure safari Meet 11:45am Gladstone Park railway bridge (foot of Parkside) for a ride into central London and back, taking in as many cycle facilities as possible, with a view to studying their effectiveness or otherwise. About 20 miles round.

Brent and Harrow Cyclists Contacts

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