

FIXED CAPITAL

Everywhere you look in London there are cyclists on fixed-wheel bicycles. **Chris Peck** and **Debra Rolfe** examine the fixie's recent renaissance

Stand by London Bridge on a weekday morning watching the hordes of cyclists weaving through traffic jams into the City and you might well wonder, 'Who stole all the gears?'

More and more young people in London and other cities are taking to fixed-wheels and it's not just messengers riding these single-g geared, sometimes brakeless machines. Bike shop owners report soaring sales. A common story is the hybrid-riding office worker admitting to the shop assistant, 'I want a fixed-wheel, but I'm not quite sure why.' They tend to wheel out the door one of an increasing number of lightweight fixed-wheel bikes like the Specialized Langster or Bianchi Pista.

Cycle reviewed a 'fixie' back in 2005 (On One's Il Pompino) but since then a culture of fixed-wheel riding has blossomed, garnering the attention of national media. Both the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Observer* carried big splashes on fixed riding this year. For much of the media cycling has only just become an acceptable activity – now it has its own attractive, quirky sub-culture. So here's a spotter's guide to the most fashionable thing to hit cycling since 20-inch wheels.

Fixed-wheel tribes

London's fixed riders can be roughly segmented into a few groups – messengers, fakengers, hipsters and those equipped with mudguards and racks: fraudax riders.

Fixed culture undoubtedly started with the messengers. 'Buffalo Bill' Chidley obtained his first fixed-wheel 20 years ago while working as a courier delivering packages around central London. Back then there were just a handful of fellow

fixie-riders. By 2003, he relates, 'nearly half to three-quarters of all London messengers were riding fixed. At this point, people in the cycling community in London started to notice fixies. But it really seems to have taken off in the last year. Where I live, in Shoreditch/Bethnal Green, it seems that everyone is riding a fixie.'

Yifan Zhang, a new fixed-wheel convert, works in financial services in the City. He had drooled over fixies for a year or so before buying one through the Cycle to Work scheme in February. It was all about fashion: 'A friend goes on about it all the time and at the same time concedes he's not cool enough for it. I thought, well I bloody am!' For Yifan, fixed-wheel riding gives greater control than on a geared bike and has added aesthetic benefits: 'I like the look of clean lines, and it goes together with my Apple and all my Muji products.'

Charlotte Barnes, CTC Councillor and self-confessed 'fixie chick' first tried it five years ago at Critical Mass, the monthly demonstration of cyclists that creeps around British cities. Within a month she had built up her own fixie; now she's got four. The change in those years has been dramatic: 'When I started riding fixed you couldn't buy one off the peg; now you've got a choice of about a dozen.' She identifies the fashion for fixie-riding as an import from the US. 'We're probably about a decade behind them.'

Messengers and urban commuters are one side of the story. Another is the 'hipsters'. A growing bike polo scene has been one of offshoots of the fixie craze. Every Sunday dozens of hipsters and messengers converge on a basketball court on Brick Lane in East London to play polo and

(Right) Co-optee to CTC Council Charlotte Barnes now has four fixed-wheel bikes

(Far right) Yifan Zhang bought a fixie earlier this year. 'It goes with my Apple and Muji products,' he says

perform tricks. Brooks saddles, which have seen a revival based mainly on their retro-styling, offered a free saddle to all entrants to the latest major polo competition. The Bicycle Film Festival, coming to London in October, is a window into fixie culture: films about polo, messengers, tricks and track racing.

Fixed fashions

Another brand name cashing in on the fashion for fixed-wheels is Rapha, which started as an outfitter to European-sportive-riding racers. For the last 18 months an increasing portion of their range has been devoted to clothing for 'fixed' riders. Luscious catalogue photos depicting thunder-washed Pyrenean climbs have been replaced by surly looking fellows sipping espresso on cobbled streets, their fixies languidly leaning against the café windows.

Like previous cycling subcultures such as BMX and mountain biking, fixed-wheel riding has evolved from an underground youth movement. But unlike its predecessors fixies aren't a technical innovation or a new type of riding. Blogging, web forums and video sites have made it possible to communicate not just the fashion, but also the social scenes associated with these bikes.

Fixie culture has appeared at the same time that cycling as transport has taken off in London – a 91% increase since the turn of the millennium. Riding fixies is ultra-fashionable and fun, but are vibrant cycling subcultures really beneficial to cycling as a mainstream transport mode? That much of the current fixed-wheel culture was imported from the US – where cycling is even more of a minority activity than it is here – suggests otherwise. To make cycling a ubiquitous transport solution for everyone, it can't be

Right: by Graham Irving. Far right: by Chris Peck



KNOW YOUR FIXIE RIDER

Messengers

Messengers shepherded the tradition of fixed-wheel riding to the present day. They can be identified as the people riding dirty, gaffer-taped frames, loitering outside office blocks with an air of cultivated scruffiness, smoking roll-ups. Bill Chidley's website is www.movingtargetzine.com

Riding: working, late night roller racing

Where to get the kit: Brixton Cycles

Fakengers

Fakengers are normally desk-bound commuter cyclists aping the anarchic fashion of messengers. They own the same bags as messengers, wear similar clothes and ride similar bikes, but all of these accoutrements seem to be new. **Riding:** commuting from South London to the City

Where to get the kit: Evans Cycles

Hipsters

Many hipsters are students or in creative jobs like graphic design. They are to be found predominantly in the uber-fashionable Shoreditch area of East London, dressed in skinny jeans, with cut-down handlebars to match and a pair of candy-coloured deep-profile Velocity rims, mounted on fancy hubs. They even have their own fixed-wheel cycling forum: www.londonfgss.com

Riding: bicycle polo, tricks competitions

Where to get the kit: Brick Lane Bikes

Fraudax

Having mudguards and a rack would be looked on with horror by any of the other three groups. Not so for this select group. They hark back to the days when the fixed-wheel was just a basic low-maintenance bike to use for winter riding. **Online hangout:** yacf.co.uk/forum

Riding: Dunwich Dynamo, long distance commutes
Where to get the kit: www.hubjub.co.uk

exclusive. The young fixie-riders of London may enjoy the thrill of nipping through traffic and sparring with taxi-drivers, but if the woman with a 3-speed and child-seat is put off by these antics it probably isn't doing any long-term good to the cause of cycling.

The current 'fixation' will likely pass in London, but even after most of those young people have moved on to the next fashion – Segways? unicycles? – there will always be those who ride fixed-wheel bikes in cities, velodromes or time trials. In the mean time, if you haven't got a fixie in your stable, now is the time to hop on the bandwagon. Just don't stop pedalling!

