



(Left and below) Christian Wolmar does most of his urban cycling on an old Claud Butler hybrid. He's pictured here outside St Pancras station (he's a noted railway commentator) but says that his favourite journey is from Islington to White City and back on side-streets to watch Queen's Park Rangers play football



CHRISTIAN WOLMAR

TRANSPORT COMMENTATOR CHRISTIAN WOLMAR RECENTLY ACCEPTED THE ROLE OF CTC AMBASSADOR. HE'S ALSO A CANDIDATE FOR MAYOR OF LONDON. HE SPOKE TO DAN JOYCE

Christian Wolmar was on the board of Cycling England, which did pioneering work in promoting cycling in towns and cities. He's been writing about transport for over 20 years and has been cycling around London for 50. Yet the reason he cycles, he says, isn't primarily political or environmental.

'If I'm honest, it's mostly for personal reasons. I love it. It's the fastest way of getting around. And it makes you feel good, even when you cycle back from the cinema late at night. I see the political and environmental advantages, but it's not those that spur me on. I think that's important in terms of how we learn to persuade people to cycle. We have to persuade them on the grounds of health and cheapness and convenience.'

It's message that seems to be getting through – at least in London, where cycle use has doubled in a decade. In the capital, cycling has started to become a normal activity. 'I remember going to business meetings by bicycle in the '70s and being slightly embarrassed and shoving my cycle helmet (not that I wear one any more) under the desk,' says Wolmar. 'Now it's completely accepted. Once, if you saw another cyclist at the traffic lights you would have a chat with them because it was so rare. Now you get

eight or ten cyclists stopping at the lights. There's so many cyclists in central London that the speed of vehicles can be dictated by the mass of cyclists. And that's as it should be. It becomes safer.'

To better protect cyclists in traffic, Wolmar advocates intensive training and publicity campaigns aimed at lorry drivers in general – and drivers of skip lorries and concrete lorries in particular – backed up by better policing. He also wants to see cycling fatalities properly examined, so that we can see exactly what has happened in each case,

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and why. 'You will see patterns and then you will get change,' he says.

Wolmar doesn't think London's growth in cycling can be attributed to just one cause. 'There's a lot of little factors rather than one big factor. Undoubtedly, the release of road space by the Congestion Charge made central London less congested for a while. The bombs in 2005 made people look at alternatives to public transport. There's the high price of fares. And there's an awful

lot of bright young graduates who come to London for work from university and bring their cycles with them. Some councils, like Hackney, have done a lot for cycling. And there's the fact that once more people cycle, more people cycle.'

It may be difficult to draw a single lesson from London for the rest of the country when it comes to boosting cycling, but Wolmar is in no doubt about how to increase cycling levels further – both in the capital and urban areas across the UK. 'We need a systematic policy of giving cyclists priority on roads, and a vision (that hopefully as mayor I will be able to bring in) of creating permeable cycling networks in every major town and city, like in Holland.'

'That requires removing car parking in places to make space for cycling, but it's doable. Cycling in Holland didn't grow because it's all flat and they have a gentle pace of life. It happened because of political decisions. In the '60s and '70s, they were building motorways everywhere, and then they made a decision to be different. We can do that. It would require five or ten per cent of the transport budget to be allocated to cycling for 20 or 30 years, and it would be transformational. ☺

Christian Wolmar's websites are: christianwolmar.co.uk and wolmarforlondon.co.uk