



UNI CYCLING

FOR STUDENTS STARTING UNIVERSITY THIS AUTUMN, IT'S EASIER, CHEAPER, AND TRENDIER THAN EVER TO GET AROUND BY BIKE. JOURNALIST **ROB AINSLEY** TAKES A TOUR OF THE CAMPUSES



● (In the photo) Students in Cambridge. A strong cycling culture and traffic restrictions mean bikes everywhere





● York University's Market Square: student Andy Bewley (left) doesn't use his best bike for cycling around the city

Previous page: Alamy.com. Others by Rob Ainsley

Picture 'a student' and you probably think of them on a bike. Well, there's good news for the 650,000 or so starting a university course or similar this autumn: it's easier than ever to cycle through a degree. Students can enjoy free training, cheap bike hire and purchase, free workshop access, subsidised accessories – and steadily, though often slowly, improving cycle routes and facilities.

Such schemes are welcome. Only 3% of pupils get to their secondary school by bike, according to Bikeability stats. But going to university clearly encourages people back into the saddle. Edinburgh Uni's website reckons 12% of their students cycle, a figure that seems fairly typical around Britain.

Some places boast much higher levels. At York University it's 20%. Oxford and Cambridge are probably tops, thanks to short town centre distances, narrow streets, a ban on student car use, and sheer self-perpetuating two-wheel culture. Precise numbers are a matter of guesswork, but Cambridge Cycling Campaign suggests student figures are probably over 50%.

And everywhere, it seems, more students are cycling. 'Levels have noticeably increased over the last three years – there's a real movement and sense of community,' says Francis Collett-White, who graduated this year from Manchester University. 'There are queues of cyclists at the lights and a new bike shed is already overflowing. Even when it

rains, which is quite often in Manchester!'

No wonder: the eternal truths still hold. Pedalling around the campus or town is quicker, cheaper, more fun – and nowadays more fashionable – than any other mode of transport. Which makes cycling more useful than ever for students, in an era where higher education life is challenged economically (graduate debts of £20,000-plus are common thanks to tuition fee hikes) and logistically (with distant accommodation, faculties and part-time jobs).

Making choices

Choosing a university isn't solely about the course. Cycling factors may well be on the tick list. Somewhere handy for the Yorkshire Dales could clinch a choice for roadies or tourers, while Welsh or Scottish universities' off-road potential might tip the balance for mountain bikers.

Geography doesn't change, but sporting reputations can. Keen racers can look at the British Universities and Colleges Sport website's cycling section (bucs.org.uk) to see which institutions feature consistently (Loughborough, for example).

Those who simply like getting around on two wheels may find that some campuses, such as East Anglia or Nottingham, are more bike-friendly than others, or that certain places – such as Bristol – are attractive for their strong and vibrant urban cycle culture.

To find out how good a university is for

the everyday cyclist, its website may help. Some have prominent sections on cycling, with details of facilities and routes. Others put the information under headings such as 'Sustainable Transport' or 'Active Travel'. Mention of a BUG (Bicycle User Group) suggests an active cycling culture.

There'll be an email or phone contact in these sections for an 'officer' or 'co-ordinator', who will be delighted to supply information both general ('are there nice leisure routes nearby?') and specific ('where can I store my recumbent?'), and give reliable judgements ('how safe is that main road into town?').

Student bodies have a fast turnover, so such contacts will most likely be staff members. Often they're graduates, and enthusiastic cyclists of course, now working at the university in academic or admin posts. Many university employees enjoy bike travel expenses (typically 20p per mile), cheap hire, and all that campus infrastructure, storage and parking.

Storage and parking

Most first year students get a room on campus, but they won't be able to keep their bikes there. (Folding bikes are no problem, although to protect long-suffering furnishings, bags are usually required indoors.) So if they want to bring a valuable bicycle, storage and security will be issues.

Usually universities have secure, lockable units near their accommodation, and a good

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Student membership of CTC is just £16. See p78

range of bike racks round the campus and at the faculties. York, one of the best, boasts 4,700 bike spaces for the 6,000 students on campus (of a total of 16,000).

In privately-rented accommodation, often the default for second- or third-years, storage is a lottery; railings outside (some pavements in Cambridge's studenty backstreets are almost impassable); hallways (a shin-barking assault course of pedals); or a garden shed (a target for thieves – locking to something fixed is a must). Insurance small-print is worth checking. For a cycling-specific policy, see CTC's Cyclecover: cyclecover.org.uk.

A good option is to buy a cheap bike purely for town and campus. That's what Andy Bewley, a second-year English and Philosophy student at York, did, reserving his Ridgeback tourer for special trips, such as his Vienna jaunt last year. 'It's tempting to use it at uni as well,' he says, 'but you always have the worry of theft, and a good bike stands out like a sore saddle in a crowd of second-hand models.'

Getting a cheap bike is easy. Many universities subsidise schemes that provide students with reconditioned models. Robin Lovelace, a cycling academic and researcher at Leeds University, points to Sheffield: 'They employ a company called Recycle who sell bikes to students for £30, subsidised by £40,' he says.

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▶ **CTC ON CAMPUS**

Getting students cycling

PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY
 Plymouth's CTC Cycling Development Officer Brett Nicolle led over 50 students on guided tours of the city during freshers' week, enabling them to see a lot more of what Plymouth has to offer. CTC has also worked with Bikespace, a social enterprise that helps youngsters who struggle at school, to sell recycled bikes to students. Over 50 bikes were sold over the two sale days.

READING UNIVERSITY
 CTC Cycling Development Officer Javed Saddique has worked with the student union to deliver regular bike maintenance sessions and training. This has developed to include bike maintenance courses, 'confident cycling' courses, a cycle-buddy scheme and a bike recycling scheme.

That cuts out bureaucracy and gives a sense of ownership. The students look after them better than hire bikes.' Maintenance is assisted too: 'Recycle come round two or three days a week charging reasonable prices for repairs.'

Free 'Dr Bike' sessions (troubleshooting and minor repairs by a trained mechanic) are common across universities, and some places, such as Manchester, even offer free maintenance classes.

Another option is to hire. Manchester offers bikes for as little as £1 a week. Velocampus, an initiative for students at Leeds University, Leeds Beckett, and other institutions, rents out sturdy town bikes (with mudguards and rack) for £50 a year. It also provides a free workshop space for students to learn basic bike maintenance. (Similar facilities are commonly available in other universities too.)

Funding permitting, Velocampus co-ordinator Conor Walsh hopes to offer tailored workshops in future. Such as ones for women, who (it is estimated) make up 30-40 per cent of cyclists at university – and the proportion is increasing.

'We actually have more step-through frames than crossbars in our 200 hire bikes,' Connor says, 'and we need to order more small step-throughs because of the rise in students from Asia.'

Educating cyclists

Many first-year students are first-time, or returning, cyclists. Bike training sessions with qualified instructors, provided through the university, are common – and usually free.

Freshers can be naive about security. Carole Sparke, of Birmingham University's active BUG, points out that their campus

has a full-time on-site police officer, who demonstrates the inadequacies of cheap locks to first-years. 'The officer snipping through cables with pocket wire-cutters gets the message across very effectively!' she says.

Such education, plus the promotion of subsidised gold-standard D-locks (£40 models for £15), is reducing theft. Most other universities have similar schemes and

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offers. At York, for instance, insecurely locked bikes are tagged with a voucher for £5 valid against a lock at the campus shop.

Illumination is an issue too. York's Travel Plan Co-ordinator Fiona Macey marvels that some freshers don't even know lights are compulsory at night. 'At our two-day October roadshows we hand out 200 free lights,' she says. 'They cost us £5, but it's worth it for raising awareness.'

The lights have to be fitted there and then by one of their Dr Bike people, lest the student be tempted to sell them on eBay.

What puts cyclists off

Safety on the roads, away from the tranquillity of the campus, looms large. The biggest barrier to cycling take-up, says Francis Collett-White, is 'poor cycle infrastructure and the perceived danger. A few months ago a student was killed in a collision with a cement mixer outside student halls. These incidents are not only tragic for the families but change

the way students feel about cycling.'

But talk to most student cyclists and you'll get very positive feedback. Nathalie Richards, a fourth-year at Nottingham, says having a bike 'just makes me freer, without relying on public transport and gives me the option to get to lectures quicker if I am running late. Living out this year it's become more useful, especially for cycling to campus.'

Nathalie prefers roads to the cycle paths, which are frequently interrupted by lights and junctions. But the paths find favour with returning cyclists: two of her housemates were encouraged to get back on their bikes for the first time in years.

Her sister Jenny, a final-year student at St John's, Oxford, is equally enthusiastic. She cruises round on a second-hand Raleigh three-speed. Jenny cycled before, but in rural Cambridgeshire, 'so it was a bit of shock cycling in Oxford at first. But I couldn't have got by without my bike, without its speed and ease of getting places.'

Moving on

After finals, things come down to earth as rapidly as those mortar boards thrown aloft for the graduation pic. The big challenge for today's graduates is simply finding a job.

But nowadays, students who carry on cycling post-study are surely at an advantage when they get on their bikes and look for work. Because bikes are trendier than ever, and the phrase 'keen cyclist' does no harm on a CV. Chances are, some of the interviewers are too.

'I'd like to continue cycling after uni,' enthuses Jenny. 'I don't think it's just a student thing. However, if it's hilly, I'd invest in more than three gears!' ●