

What you can do



From reluctant bike commuter to advocate: Richard's story



Richard cycles a nine-mile round trip from Prestwich to Manchester city centre (image credit Livia Lazar)

Richard Bond started cycling to work in middle-age and was pleasantly surprised at how quickly his nine-mile round trip got easier, faster and more enjoyable.

While fully expecting his physical health and fitness to gradually improve, he didn't anticipate the beneficial impact cycling would also have on his mental health and wellbeing.

Here he shares his personal experience of getting back in the saddle and what he would like to see happen to enable more people to reap the same benefits.

Cycling probably means more to me now than it ever did in the past. I'd always cycled when I was younger, and when I was 16 I had a life-changing experience cycling through France. But like a lot of people, as I got older I found the idea of getting on a bike less appealing, and thought my time in the saddle was probably over for ever.

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However, around eight years ago a friend of mine called Steve, who regularly cycled to work himself, suggested I get a cheap second-hand bike and give it whirl. He was so evangelical I ended up reluctantly following his advice, thinking I would pack it in after a week or so.

With my commute being a nine-mile round trip from Prestwich to Manchester city centre I also knew it would be hard to begin with, but I was surprised how quickly it got easier, faster and actually became enjoyable. And while I thought there would be obvious physical benefits, I hadn't expected the beneficial impact it would make on my mental health and general wellbeing.

The sense of freedom, independence and autonomy, combined with improved fitness and weight loss, all added up to be a far less stressful and far more positive experience than I could ever get sat in a car in a queue of traffic.

Cycling infrastructure has improved, and I can appreciate that it's very hard to retrofit spacious cycle lanes onto roads with public transport. The changes I've seen in the centre of Manchester are to be welcomed, but I don't tend to use them as they're not on my commute.

In my view, narrow cycle lanes don't necessarily increase safety as the behaviour of drivers, and sometimes other cyclists, still creates hazards. What I'd really like to see is wider, traffic-free routes which come right into the heart of Manchester, making commuting by bike from the suburbs and outlying boroughs in Greater Manchester a realistic option for those who work in or around the city centre.

In the meantime, more needs to be done on attitudinal and behaviour change amongst both drivers and cyclists, along with better maintenance of existing road surfaces which on my route are shocking.

We also need a culture change. It sounds ridiculous, but I know some of the reasons people are put off cycling to work is a worry that colleagues will question their personal hygiene or that wearing a helmet might mess up their hair. These things shouldn't matter, as the bigger picture benefits for everyone completely outweigh such narrow-minded objections.

Rediscovering cycling in middle-age has undoubtedly changed my life for the better, and anybody who gets on a bike should be applauded, regardless of their motivation or circumstances. You've very little to lose, and an awful lot to gain, so why not give it a try?

Richard Bond is a director of SKV Communications agency in Manchester and was interviewed as part of research for our next **Bike Life Greater Manchester report** 2017.

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