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What if we all walked to work?



It's Walk to Work Day, but what would Britain be like if we all passed up road and rail for the humble pavement? Steve Tomkins ponders the potential consequences of letting our legs do all the work.

Planes, trains and automobiles. Most people's commute to work features at least one of these forms of transport - possibly all three for some. But it doesn't have to be this way, according to the pedestrian campaign group Living Streets - organisers of Walk to Work Day.

Our belief in motorised transport is somewhat dented when you consider that, in central London, for example, there are 109 journeys between Tube stations that are quicker to walk (taking into account time spent waiting for trains).

Campaigners say if you'd walked to work today it would have helped improve congestion, parking, air quality, health, noise and the local economy - apparently pedestrians are "more likely to shop locally".

You might think you live too far away but you could be wrong, says Lucy Abell, from Living Streets (who gets a bus and then walks to the office).

"A lot of journeys are quicker to walk and people often underestimate length of rail journeys," she says. "They don't include all the time spent walking to and from stations, queuing for tickets, delays."

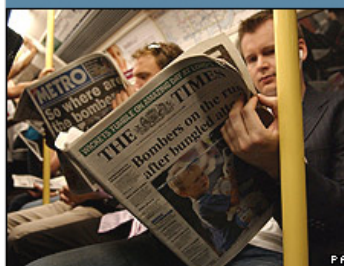
So there's plenty to be said for taking to the pavement, but what would life be like if we all walked to work?

Depression

There are advantages and disadvantages to a commuting society, says Professor Glen Lyons from the Centre for Transport & Society in Bristol (drives 65 miles to work, but works two days a week from home).

His research shows that one in 10 workers spends at least two hours a day commuting, risking health problems from cardio-vascular disease

WHAT YOU DO WHILE COMMUTING



- ♦ Read 80%
- ♦ Work 28%
- ♦ Sleep 20%
- ♦ Talk 11%

Source: Centre for Transport and Society and Glasgow University

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to depression.

"So if we all lived close enough to walk to work, it would be good for our health," he says. "On the other hand, being able to commute long distances makes for more mobility in the employment market. We can change jobs more easily and make more flexible working arrangements."

Living closer to where we work would also mean compromises in other areas of our lives, he points out.

"It's a trade off. We have to balance the journey to work against house prices, the quality of the neighbourhood, being near family and friends. Moving to be near to the workplace might disrupt the family network."



Would you miss this?

If we all walked to work, we'd potentially be a bit richer since UK families spend an average of 17% of their budget on transport, according to the UK Statistics Authority.

But we'd probably be less well informed: 80% of commuters read a newspaper according to research the Centre for Transport and Society - or to be precise have a newspaper, though presumably most of them get read.

Additionally, 28% work while going to and from the office, 11% talk to other passengers and 20% sleep. More surprisingly - and alarmingly - a study by Eric Laurier of Glasgow University found that car drivers often use part of their journey "to check up on paperwork".

Suburbs

These are all things rather harder to do on foot. But that's the point, according to Ken, a social worker in London who has a 15-minute walk to work.

"It's the only time in the day I do nothing at all. Just walk and think. It's an oasis. I don't know what I'd do without it."

What else would be different? Walking to work could present quite serious logistical problems for builders, for example. Away matches would be trickier for footballers. Waterproofs would presumably sell better.

Other differences go rather deeper. Would public transport exist at all if no one used it for work?

Take away the billions of pounds that commuters spend on public transport each year - and the subsidies the government offers to make sure people can get to work - and what would be left for those of us who want to meet up with friends, see the sights or go shopping?



Walking is 'better for local economy'

And would we have suburbs if everybody walked to work? We might not think we'd miss them, suburbia doesn't have great PR and most of us who live there would probably like to be in a more close-knit community.

But if we go back to the time before cars and trains allowed people to live in one place and work in another, what do we see? The 19th Century city, where urban workers were crammed into city dwellings in unenviable conditions. Or the medieval village where life was a bit quiet and basic for most of our tastes; a little too closely knit.

Still, the organisers of Walk to Work say many more of us than now do, could manage to commute on foot, without bringing civilisation to its knees. If you're reading this at work, though, and it's the first you've heard of it, I'm sure you could adapt the event to Walk Back from Work Day.

Here is a selection of your comments.

I have just moved from London to Cyprus and the one thing I don't miss is the daily commute! People scrambling around on tubes, scrambling around like rats in a maze and more often than not just to go a few stops. Since moving here, I HAVE to walk everywhere and in the four weeks I have been here have dropped a dress size and feel much better for it. I know people will argue we don't have the weather in the UK, but that is just being short sighted. The UK and London in particular need to get off their backsides and start walking. The pros outweigh the cons everytime and best of all, you don't have to listen to some fifteen year old playing "music" on their mobile phone!

Allie Brown, Polis, Cyprus

Walking is fine unless you have to carry anything or have to dress for the office. Arriving at work warm and glowing is ok if you have showers and somewhere to change - some applies to going by bike

Jan Peddie


Hmmm, I live 11 miles from my place of work. If I was to walk, not only would it take me nearly 3 hours, but I'd have to pass through some pretty rough districts. No thanks, I'll stick to the train.

K Brown, Bristol, England

This is one of those unrealistic green ideologies isn't it. Anyone working in London would need to be paid a fortune to afford to live within walking distance of their job. The skills some people have don't suit jobs where they live but why should you move from where you grew up just because there isn't a career for you there? I do walk to work and I love it but you won't catch me giving up my car - public transport doesn't get me to the places I need to take my car at the times I need to get there and I don't even use the car for supermarket shopping either. These green ideologists need to get realistic. We move forward in time not backward. There is no point dwelling on what we did before cars because we will never get there again. We can progress to be more ecological with what we have and perhaps they ought to focus on that instead.






Jenny, Stevenage

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