

A RIDE ON THE REASIDE

If like me you had cycled or driven down the Pershore Road to the city centre every working day for over twenty years, you would no doubt welcome a change of route. I was, therefore, very pleased to hear from the oracle, Oscar, that the City Council had invested some of our poll tax money in developing the River Rea cycle path.

With an eye on my watch, I turned off down Dogpool Lane and spent some time exploring a sports field before I found that the new sign to Cecil Road had been turned round. Once on the path, it was great. Workmen were installing little weirs and "babbles" and the Rea chuntered along beside me; a fine alternative to artics, buses and commuter cars. There was green grass, bushes and daffodils and you could hear the birdsong.

The idyll was soon disrupted by finding the path narrowing down to about three feet before having to cross a bridge designed to stop cycles, especially ones with loaded panniers. This part needs more work on it as does the signing; I also ended up in a garage cul-de-sac on the way home. I now know the route and usually cross at the first bridge and follow the gravel path for a while on the east bank of the river but that tends to be narrow and muddy after rain.

Off across Cannon Hill Park, avoiding suicidal squirrels, dogs and dog walkers. You can move quite quickly here and people are not yet used to silent bikes coming through. A good old fashioned bell might be worth trying as a more suitable alternative to the expletives which are the only non-violent way to make motorists understand their two-wheeled fellow road users. Cannon Hill is like a good suburban garden on a

mega scale and it looks very good in the spring from a bike, with the flower and heather beds blooming.

The route guides you through the back roads of Balsall Heath with a helpful little slip path at the end of Cheddar Road and permission to cross the inner ring road with the buses. Thereafter signs take you to Digbeth and I have experimented with various routes between the warehouses and fork lift trucks to get up to the A34 which takes me to Perry Barr - back into the flyovers and underpasses for some excitement!

The return route is much the same except that you find yourself at one point in Birmingham's "red light" district. Prostitutes sit in front windows, Amsterdam style, cheek by veil with local Muslim families living to their own strict tradition. You can be sure that some motorists will not have their eyes or their minds on the road - so take

care. For lone female cyclists, this environment may also raise issues of security and possible harassment. In fact the rest of the route can be very quiet and it is unlit. Presumably the actual park gates will be closed after dusk in winter, forcing cyclists back onto the main roads?

The pathway is for me a great success. It provides about 3 miles of pleasant cycling and relief from traffic fumes. I think it adds about a mile to my daily journey and so takes longer but so far I have found it worth it, even when pressed for time. The City are to be congratulated and encouraged to make a few improvements - especially to the bridge and signs. Commuter cyclists are keen to move at a reasonable lick and get to work on time; they do not appreciate artificial obstacles or deviations anymore than motorists would. The route could usefully be extended southwards towards Lifford so

that the narrow stretch at Stirchley could be avoided as well.

Council workers are making a good job of clearing up litter and replacing life belts and we need to show that we care about the city's environment. These pretty and vital open spaces can so easily degenerate because of a few vandals and thoughtless idiots disposing of their rubbish.

Finally, do try the route, it turns commuting into a leisure ride. More people need to use the path so that the investment is justified and so that it becomes a popular area where people, whether strollers, runners, cyclists or dog walkers, can feel relaxed and escape from the stresses of city life. Oscar tells me that there is also some good "off-road" riding in the Rea Valley - but that's another story.

David Cox

OUR OWN MANDARIN

Polytechnics and universities are to be "adopted" by senior Whitehall mandarins in a move to end the Oxbridge bias among Civil Service high-fliers. The scheme, devised by Sir Robin Butler, head of the Home Civil Service, aims to broaden the background of top-flight civil servants. The mandarins will be expected to make at least one visit a year to each of the institutions they have chosen, to talk to the careers advisory service, staff and students.

Our mandarin is Sir Anthony Battishill who is Chairman of the Inland Revenue. He was educated at Taunton School and the LSE and has "adopted" Brighton Polytechnic, the LSE, Portsmouth Polytechnic and Birmingham Polytechnic. Sir Anthony is being sent a copy of our new location maps.

