

The tale of more than two cities: learning Europe's transport lessons



TRANSPORT is part of the identity of every country, town and city. How people travel tells you much about who they are, just as their buildings, their history and their politics do.

And, like all of these things, transport generates stories, which people tell to explain why things are as they are, or why they are not as people would like them to be. Some stories are told among transport specialists and others are told more widely, in the media, in politics and by ordinary people. Some stories contain important elements of the truth, while yet others are more like urban myths, spread because they suit a prejudice, a legitimate desire or a vested interest.

Several years of listening to these myths persuaded me to write my book *Urban Transport Without The Hot Air*. It begins with 10 questions designed to explore how these myths may have influenced the reader. To take just two examples:

- What happened to the duty on petrol between 2000 and 2012? (It went down by 16 per cent, after inflation)
- What percentage of Manchester's commuters travel by tram? (1.4 per cent)



Dr Steve Melia lectures in transport and planning at the University of the West of England, Bristol. His interest in sustainable transport began as a teenager when he drove through a red light into the side of a van from the police accident prevention unit: he lost his licence and bought a bicycle. Studying transport and climate change led him to stop flying in 2005, followed by a move to a flat in a city, where he now lives without a car.

If those answers surprised you, you are not alone. The first part of the book is all about myth-busting and the second part is about solutions. One conclusion I have come to is that urban congestion will always be with us. It could be solved in theory; we already have all the technology we need. The problem is political. For as long as people want to own and drive vehicles, making their own decisions about journeys, cities will be congested at peak times.

Since the 1950s, governments and transport planners have directed most of their efforts towards a problem that cannot be solved; imagine what could be achieved if all that energy and money was directed at solvable problems. If we set congestion to one side, the list of those other problems is long and some of them – like climate change, community severance and early deaths due to air pollution – are more important.

Over three summers, while I was doing my PhD, I cycled over 5,000 miles across seven European countries, visiting cities that had been successful in reducing motor traffic and improving the quality of their urban environment. They still get congested at peak times, but they are much better places to live and work today than they used to be. Three of these cities – Freiburg, Groningen and Lyon – provide case studies for the book, as do London, Brighton and Cambridge.

All of those cities have reduced car driving in a context of rising population and constraints on road space. Some, like London and Lyon, have focused more on public transport; others, like Groningen and Cambridge, on cycling – but all have made controversial changes, including road closures and parking restraint.

Looking to Europe for good practice can be a two-edged sword. In many accounts you can

read online, the sun always shines, plans are smoothly implemented and nothing ever seems to go wrong. This has fostered another myth, that they can do all those things on “the continent” whereas we could never do them over here. In reality, these cities suffered many of the same battles and barriers that we have in Britain.

The transformation of Groningen, for example, began with a traffic scheme in 1977, which unleashed years of bitter conflict between the city council and the chamber of commerce, who believed that removing traffic from the city centre would kill businesses. The initial plan divided the centre into four segments. People could drive in and out but any through-traffic had to go round. So if you were moving around the city centre it became much quicker to cycle or walk. Over the years the principle has been extended. Some streets have been entirely pedestrianised and the principle of filtered permeability – giving a short-cut to cyclists and pedestrians and a detour to general traffic – has been applied across the whole city. Today Groningen has one of the lowest levels of urban car driving in the Western world, and its chamber of commerce has become a strong supporter of traffic-free city centres.



City limits

Successful transport reforms in cities, such as encouraging cycling in Groningen (left) and revamping Lyon's riverside car park into a linear public space (below left and above) have served as models for equivalents in UK cities such as Cambridge (below). But such expansive civic projects need to come with a beneficial "wow factor" if they are to be backed by the public, says Dr Steve Melia.



Visits to the Netherlands have produced some Damascene conversions of British transport planners and local politicians. A visit to Groningen played a key part in the Cambridge Core Traffic Scheme, which applied the same principle of filtered permeability with a series of road closures in the 1990s and early 2000s. The bus gate on Bridge Street was one of the first and most important stages. The approach was more gradual than in Groningen but the outcomes were similar; it is now much easier and quicker to cross Cambridge city centre by bike than it is to drive.

Car ownership has been falling in British cities (but rising in small towns and rural areas) for many years now. Cambridge is an interesting example of a city with a rapidly expanding economy, rapidly rising incomes and rapidly falling car ownership – as well as traffic volumes in the inner areas. There are many reasons for that, but without the Core Traffic Scheme, things could have been very different.

Investment in public transport has driven the transformation of transport in London in a context of rising population and constraints on road capacity. Hundreds of minor changes to roads and footpaths have progressively reduced

road capacity in the central areas. Traffic volumes would have declined even without the Congestion Charge. And car ownership will continue to decline for there is no space to match a rising population with more cars on London's roads.

A key conclusion of my book is that positive changes, like improvements to public transport, make surprisingly little difference unless they are accompanied by traffic restraint of some kind. But as restraint is always unpopular it needs to come with big visible improvements – the "wow factor" that makes people think, I'd never go back to how it was. In that respect, the leaders of European cities have done much better than their UK counterparts, who are more likely to avoid or water down radical plans in the face of opposition.

The mayor of Lyon staked his political future on plans to transform the banks of the river Rhône from a linear car park into a linear park, with a cycle track, promenade and tiered seating. Public outcry beforehand turned to appreciation afterwards. Posters reminding voters how it used to look helped secure his re-election with a landslide majority. It is a lesson that many of our leaders could learn from.

