



Cycling in Auld Reekie (Part 2)

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Subjectively Edinburgh appears to have far more cyclists than Birmingham, and they're not all MAMILs. Indeed I spotted a very smart, streamlined, white bakfiets with two children in the front and an elegantly dressed owner, but getting a photo wasn't an option for reasons I'll come to shortly.

I have real concerns that British councils would rather copy each other than best practice, which in the case of cycle-friendly infrastructure means copying the Dutch. There are those who think we have nothing to [learn from the Dutch](#) and that we should implement a "British solution" (which of course doesn't yet exist). Given the numbers of people cycling in Edinburgh, doesn't that mean we should learn from Edinburgh? In a word, no. Edinburgh has a unique network of old railway lines that have been converted into walking and cycling routes. It is creditable that the City of Edinburgh council have done this as it will certainly encourage cycling, just as the Rea Valley route does in Birmingham. However, infrastructure such as this is designed to get bikes out of the way of cars (unlike Dutch infrastructure which is designed to keep cars out of the way of bikes), and thus it is only useful if it coincides with the journey a cyclist is trying to make. Beyond this network, like every other British council, Edinburgh prioritises motorised transport, and cyclists are given at best the usual array of painted non-mandatory lanes, ASLs, abysmal signage, and worse. There is more of it than one will find in Birmingham, but that doesn't make it any better. The typical Edinburgh street scene shown right will do nothing to encourage non-cyclists to get on a bike. I had to walk along this road to get to the shop where I hired a bike, and it was not remotely exceptional. I didn't wait around to get the shot, the road isn't a primary route, and the photo was taken on a Sunday morning.



Many of the city centre roads are wide. Four lanes is quite common, and sometimes an extra lane is provided at junctions. In [Chambers Street](#) the road is so wide that in addition to four lanes of traffic (two of which tend to be used for parking), crossways car parking is allowed down the centre. Despite this, no dedicated space has been made available to the many cyclists that use this street, cyclists who pedal like demons to try to keep up with the fast-moving cars, trucks, and buses. The city council has made almost no attempt whatsoever to keep motorised traffic out of the city centre. Cars are even allowed to use most of the [Royal Mile](#), the world-famous cobbled road that runs between the castle and Holyrood. On the two occasions I walked down towards Holyrood, behind me I heard someone flooring the accelerator of a powerful car as the traffic lights changed, only to shoot past me at tremendous speed. For pedestrians, which means most tourists, the Edinburgh experience is absolutely awful. The pavements are narrow and crowded (that's why I couldn't get a photo of the bakfiets), and at each multi-lane junction there will be a long wait for the brief pedestrian phase. It's very clear that pedestrians are sick to the back teeth with it. They routinely ignore the "red man" and stride across en-masse, led by the first person who decided to go for it. Very often a car will scream up to the junction and the driver will start blasting his or her horn, only

to be ignored or given a one-fingered salute. To step off the pavement whilst walking along a street courts instant death. Incidentally, I saw not one cyclist jump a red light. I discussed this with the owner of [Leith Cycles](#) where I hired a bike, and we agreed that the ubiquitous jumping of red lights appears to be a London thing.

The photo above was taken on [a B-road](#) just north of the city centre in Canonmills. Not far from here as I waited to cross the road I was nearly crushed by a truck turning into [Warriston Road](#); the truck was too big for the turn, so the driver chose to drive over the pavement. Clearly this happens often, because the paving slabs are cracked and sunken. Warriston Road doesn't really go anywhere, but like nearly every other road in Edinburgh it is open to all through-traffic.

One of the excuses I quite often hear for not building Dutch-style infrastructure is that Dutch towns are built on a grid pattern and British towns are not. This is of course nonsense. Edinburgh has a strong grid pattern and wide roads, yet it has the same dreadful, outdated infrastructure you'll find in every other British city. Birmingham is relatively advanced, in that the council has at least been working to remove the traffic from the city centre.

Another excuse for not providing for cyclists is "lack of money". Yet Edinburgh has spent one *billion* pounds on a tram line from the city centre to the airport. The route is already served by a cheap express bus, and there is an existing rail line along the eastern edge of the airport that goes right into Waverley Station in the city centre (there's just no link to the rail line or station to serve the airport). Does this sound like a familiar story? Worse still, the resulting combined tram, bus, taxi, and bike lane in Haymarket (a fundamentally flawed concept even if it had been built correctly) is resulting in cyclists being seriously injured as they attempt to make the necessary switch from one side of the tram lines to the other. There is [an existing solution](#) to the problem of ensuring cyclists can safely cross tram rails at an oblique angle, but of course the designers of Edinburgh's infrastructure didn't bother to learn from other countries.



What we can learn from Edinburgh is that cycling is not something that the British simply will not do, unless of course one believes that the Scots are, uniquely within the United Kingdom, "natural cyclists". We can also learn that the belief that mass cycling requires flat terrain is utter nonsense. Edinburgh is considerably more hilly than Birmingham, yet that didn't deter the bakfiets rider I spotted, or any of the other cyclists I saw pedalling up the hills. And we can blow away the belief that cycling requires special cycle-friendly weather, because Edinburgh is noted for being unpleasantly windy.