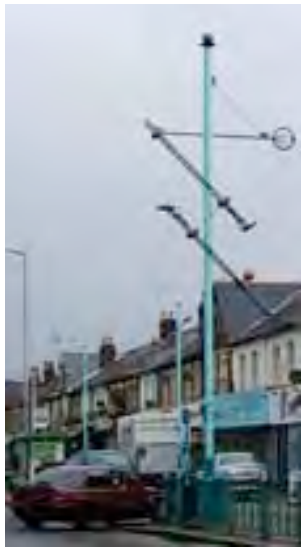
Oxford Rd Area Study – March 2008

The Reading Cycle Campaign welcomes the Oxford Road area transport study as a key opportunity to make real improvements to this strategic corridor. Our initial thoughts on improvements for cycle users are set out hereunder. We would of course be happy to meet the Council's officers and transport advisors to discuss these or other ideas further.

Background

Oxford Rd is the main transport corridor for cycle users in the western area of Reading, however, casual observation of cyclist behaviour east of Norcot roundabout reveals a very high level (up to half?) of cyclists illegally using the footpath, much to the consternation of pedestrians.

In 1999/2000 a significant amount of money (Single Regeneration Budget) was spent making environmental 'improvements' to Oxford Rd, particularly in the area around the main run of shops in the vicinity of the former Battle Hospital. These improvements were 'landscape-led' rather than 'transport-led', including architectural lighting and footpath upgrades in terms of surfacing and width.



One of the outcomes of the SRB funded improvements was to create a narrower carriageway with pinch points, build outs and central islands. Part of the reason for this was to create off-carriageway parking bays, which has had the effect of reducing parking on the carriageway proper to occasional loading vehicles. However, this has also led to a carriageway that discourages cycle use.

Cycling - the Problem and the Solution

Many people will not cycle on the Oxford Rd carriageway because it is perceived to be unsafe. This leads to many people cycling on the footpath and undoubtedly many more choosing not to cycle at all. If cycling is to be encouraged on Oxford Rd then the overarching objective must be to create space for cyclists that is not only safe and direct, but is also perceived to be so.

We believe that the only way to do this is to create continuous on-carriageway advisory cycle lanes along the length of Oxford Rd between Bedford Rd and the Norcot roundabout, and that these should be introduced at the earliest opportunity. The SRB funded works have in some ways made the introduction of on-carriageway cycle lanes more feasible by taking parking off the carriageway.

Cow Lane Bridges and Oxford Rd Relief Road

The Reading Cycle Campaign has previously made its views known on the requirement for a cycle / pedestrian crossing of the realigned railway at Cow Lane and these are not repeated here. The effect of the new road north of the railway is likely to increase traffic on the western portion of Oxford Road and reduce traffic on the eastern portion. Since a viable alternative to Oxford Rd east would be available to motor traffic this will allow a fresh look at the management of motor vehicles on Oxford Road east.

However, the area study should identify actions to be undertaken in the short term, as well as further complementary actions that would be appropriate once the alternative route is in place.

Key Principles for Cycle Friendly Road Design

Over the last several decades transport planning and highway engineering have concentrated on making urban roads achieve the movement of motor vehicles as rapidly and efficiently as possible with scant regard for cyclists or pedestrians. A readjustment of this attitude is now central to government transport policy for urban streets, as illustrated by the recently published DfT 'Manual for Streets' which recommends that consideration of pedestrians and cyclists should be made before consideration of motorised transport, both public and private. Further specific advice with regard to design for cyclists can be found in Section 6.4 of the Manual for Streets.

In more recent years interventions along Oxford Road have been undertaken with the aim of increasing the safety of car drivers and pedestrians by means of traffic islands, centre hatching and turn restrictions. These measures have not considered use of the road by cyclists and have inadvertently made conditions worse and more dangerous for cycle users.

Key points to consider for the Oxford Rd are:

1. Shared use cycle lanes are not popular with cyclists or pedestrians. These facilities have generally been used as a sticking plaster for poor road design and should be abandoned where possible rather than extended.
2. Extensive use of hatching has been made along the centre of the carriageway, space that could be reallocated to cycle use. In many cases long lengths of central hatching are used in order to create right turning lanes for side roads. Whilst there may be instances where right turning lanes are required, this policy should be critically reappraised.
3. Advisory cycle lanes will not reduce the actual amount of carriageway available to motor vehicles, however they will critically alter the perception of the carriageway. Motor vehicles are likely to slow down due to a perceived narrowing of the carriageway (this might be combined with a 20mph zone) and cyclists will perceive that they have a safe space on the road in which to cycle.
4. On-carriageway cycle lanes will allow cyclist to make progress when traffic is slow moving or stationary (a common occurrence on Oxford Road). This will encourage cyclists off the footpath.
5. Advisory Cycle Lanes do not require any statutory procedures for implementation.

Tilehurst Station to Norcot Rd

This section of Oxford Rd has a shared use cycle path / footway on the northern side and extensive central hatching. On carriageway cycle lanes may be installed here as an alternative to the shared use facility. Consideration needs to be given as to how the current shared use facility will interact with the planned new junction at Scours Lane.

Extensive hatching in the centre of the road should be reallocated as cycle lanes

Unfortunately the worst quality road surface is that close to the kerb.

Why do cyclists not like shared use paths?

What will happen to the shared use footpath when Scours Lane becomes a major junction?

Cyclists want clear and direct routes without intermittent commands to dismount. At Wigmore Lane this shared use path deposits cyclists onto a zebra crossing in order to continue down Oxford Rd, with no information as to whether to continue on the footpath or the road.

Norcot Roundabout

The westward approach to Norcot roundabout would be easier for cyclists if the left lane were not a dedicated left turn. This recent traffic measure has made the roundabout more treacherous for cyclists.

Norcot Road to Bedford Road

From Brock Barracks to Reading West Station Oxford Rd is characterized by road narrowings, build outs and islands. Whilst a number of the build outs are necessary to create the parking bays they are generally 0.5m or so wider then necessary. Often these build outs are coincident with central islands that exacerbate the difficulty for cyclists, bringing them into a conflict of space with cars and lorries.

Previous works to Oxford Road have had the effect of making it less attractive to cyclists.

This chicane may be good for a go-cart track but does little to help cyclists on a busy road. Does the build out serve any useful purpose?

Central Islands

The use of central islands should be reviewed. Whilst many of these are of benefit in aiding pedestrian crossing movements, some are badly sited close to build-outs thus creating hazards for cyclists. Other central islands are used solely to block right turning traffic but still have the adverse effect of narrowing the carriageway.

This juxtaposition of this central island and oversize build-out produce a space conflict that makes a mockery of the preceding short length of cycle lane.

Locating this crossing island next to the build out at the bus stop creates a pinch point.

These islands ensure no traffic can turn right but narrow the carriageway for cyclists, which is more important?

Right Turn Lanes

As well as the lead in hatching for central islands a significant loss of carriageway width is due to extensive hatching to create right turn lanes at side roads. The requirement for these right turn lanes, as well as the extent of the central hatching, should be reviewed with the aim of freeing up carriageway width for cycle lanes.

Beresford Road is a busy junction but this will change when Cow Lane is closed, will the right turn lane still be needed then?

Does Brock Gardens need a right turn lane combined with an island and central hatching?

Bedford Road Junction Approach

The eastward approach to Bedford Road is particularly difficult for cyclists. This was noted in RBC's 2001 Cycling Strategy but no action has been taken to date.

To cycle towards the town centre involves crossing two lanes of traffic to enter the cycle/bus lane at the junction with Bedford Road. The benefit of having two lanes at this junction approach should be set against the hazard this creates for cyclists. We propose that the second traffic lane be converted to a bus/cycle lane, becoming a second general traffic lane only where the current bus lane diverges to a third lane. This would have the beneficial effect that a cyclist would only need to cross one lane of traffic to continue along Oxford Road. In addition cyclists would have a significant stretch of dedicated road-space to aim for when crossing the traffic lane, at present cyclists face the intimidating situation of having to cycle on the right hand side of the speeding traffic.

Better use of the westbound carriageway could be made by reducing the width of the central hatching / traffic island at the junction.

Reduction of central hatching width would increase the westbound carriageway space by Bedford Road.

The speed cushions by Oxford Rd School create a hazard for cyclists. Whilst the cushions laid in pairs are not a problem, where they have been laid in sets of three they encourage cars to veer towards the kerb causing a hazard for cyclists. The speed cushions should be reconfigured so that they do not bring cars into conflict with cyclists.

Badly designed speed cushions – a safety measure that endangers cyclists

The westward approach to Bedford Road junction would benefit by extending the current cycle lane in front of Russell St to join with a new advanced stop line at the traffic lights.

Bedford Road to West St

Due to the reduced traffic flow this stretch of Oxford Rd is significantly more cycle friendly. However, continuing straight on to the town centre past Cheapside can be hazardous due to cars cutting across to the left turning lane. This layout should be reviewed.

Additionally a dropped kerb should be installed adjacent to Queens Walk along with signage that alerts cyclists to this route.

Access To Portman Road

The importance of Portman Road as a cycle route will depend upon whether Cow Lane remains a through route for cyclists. Currently access to Portman Road from Oxford Road is poor, though this may improve once the Battle hospital development is completed. The route to Portman Rd via Alma St / Gordon Place should be signed for cyclists. From this route access to the cycle path on the north side of Portman Road end should be improved by creating a crossing (zebra or just a central refuge) on Portman Road close to Littlejohns Lane.

Summary

More people will be encouraged to cycle on Oxford Road if there are on-carriageway advisory cycle lanes. To assist the creation of such cycle lanes the current layout of the road should be appraised with a view to reducing or removing:

- central hatching
- pinch points created by build outs and islands.

At the approach to Bedford Road junction the speed cushions should be removed or reconfigured and the second traffic lane should be changed to a bus/cycle lane.

Prepared by Keith Elliott on behalf of Reading Cycle Campaign, March 2008.