The Halesworth Bicycle Boom

Like Paris, London, Milton Keynes, Halesworth sold out of bicycles in Lockdown. It happened within days of March and still in July, Huggy said:

’There’s not a bike to be found in the whole country’.

Remember those early lockdown days, of cycling on empty roads, grass growing in the middle, passing families wobbling on their dusted down bicycles, travelling at such an effective speed to get somewhere yet spot early purple orchids on the uncut grass verges.

“It feels like back in the 1950” more than one said to me.

No planes in the sky, cities empty of pollution reclaimed by birds and birdsong, Venice canals running clear with fish, Himalaya’s seen from no smog Kathmandu.

While all non essential work shut down to get the R number down, Bike shops were be allowed to remain open, with people working from home, permitted to take one or two walks or cycle rides a day, so cycling was re-discovered.

Will the cycle rediscovery last, how can we capitilise on it’s good utility? I went to ask Huggy in Halesworth.

Only very reluctantly Huggy gave me his time - he was far too busy he said, indeed as as I’m there a woman turns up after oil for her bicycle. ‘Here you are, try this’, says Huggy, stepping over my dogs lain on the carpet. ‘This spray has silicone in and is more longer lasting. You know where to put it? On the brake renders, where the rivits are. You will know. ‘ She pays for it, saying keep the change. Huggy puts it in the charity box. You know here everything is in it’s proper place.

He’s been here in Halesworth centre for 24 years. Through all the changes in landlord George Quinten first, then a developer, then Tesco, and 3 years ago another developer.

‘Afor I can here I had a garage at Holton Saw Mills - Eric Hales place. ‘I started off in the end building doing up cars - the same as I did at the pits. Then the next door came up, and this became the parts room like what it is now. Then John O’Neil, who had a bicycle shop in the Thoroughfare, for donkey’s years he had it, he passed on, and the next door became free, so that’s how I came to take on bicycles.   
‘Did you know anything about bikes?’

‘Nothing!’ Huggy laughs. ‘I knew nothing, started from scratch.’

‘I used to have a rep come round, from Leiston he come, on a Friday, and the parts would come on Monday. Now I’ve got this book, and I have to look up the part number, match exactly and go on the blasted computer.’

Lockdown

I stayed open all the time in meltdown (as Huggy calls Lockdown), open 8 til 1. For years I’d done 8 to 5, six days a week. Then the meltdown came and I changed to closing around 1. I’ve not changed back,’ he laughs. ‘The town is dead in the afternoon, and people got used to the hours.’ As an afterthought he added ‘And I’ve got time now to go to the alotment, go biking myself, and exploring.’

When Lockdown started his shop was full of bikes. Within a month he was cleared out of all new and second hand. ‘Mainly adults came, many I’d never seen before. Couples would come in and say, we cannot do this or that but we can cycle and walk. And then people started bringing their bikes out from the back of their sheds. Dusty, rusty, but I do what I can. I’ve still got 4-5 to be repaired.’

But it’s been almost impossible to get hold of parts or bikes. ‘I heard from Halfords they had a waiting list of 35,000 people waiting for bikes. (Halfords shares jump 17% as government urges people to cycle when they return to work, and bike sales double normal levels.)

Who makes them now? Is Raleigh still in existence?   
Of all the bikes now, Huggy says, none are make in the UK, some say ‘designed in the UK’, but they are built in the east. Funny isn’t it. The virus came from there, and so do all the merchandise now, all these gloves, masks.

I am amazed. Here in the car parts shop I now see on the counter, alcohol spray, gloves, masks, all at low prices.

‘I just got it became someone said how difficult it was to find in Halesworth, so I spoke to my supplier and here it is. I don’t charge profit, just the cost price.

‘Don’t you ever pack up’, say Huggy’s older customers. ‘I won’t know where to go to’

Open all hours.

**Sources**

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/09/back-to-work-capacity-of-transport-network-will-be-down-by-90>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-billion-package-to-create-new-era-for-cycling-and-walking>

As the government acknowledged that the capacity of Britain’s transport network will be reduced by 90%, Grant Shapps, Transport secretary, announced £2bn package to get UK walking and cycling instead, (May 2020)

Among the measures proposed are pop-up bike lanes and wider pavements, as well as cycle and bus-only streets.

A trial of e-scooters due to take place next year will also be brought forward to next month. Initially set to take place in four local authorities, the trial will be extended to “every region in the country who wants them in a bid to get e-scooter rental schemes up and running in cities as fast as possible”.

Vouchers will be issued for cycle repairs, to encourage people to get their old bikes out of the shed, and plans are being developed for greater provision of bike fixing facilities.

**Bicycling Booms During Lockdown—But There's A Warning From History**

It’s not the first time there’s been a bicycle boom has happened before. In the 1970s’s,

Has bicycling ever been this popular? Yes. In the early 1970s. This was when much of the world, but especially America, experienced a “bike boom”

Built on baby-boomer wealth, burgeoning environmental concerns, and the same health kick that saw the rise of jogging, this bike boom lasted for the best part of four years. In the 1970s, U.S. bicycle advocates assumed America would soon become more bicycle-friendly than the Netherlands. But while the Netherlands used the oil embargo to rein back the dominance of the motorcar in its cities and expand its cycleway network, there was no lasting bicycle-shaped legacy for the U.S. The boom went bust, and now few remember how bicycle-crazy America went for a few short years.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/carltonreid/2020/05/01/bicycling-booms-during-lockdown-but-theres-a-warning-from-history/#5d59f21841cf>