

## off the rails

**Robin Hickman** examines Utrecht and the high-quality cycle networks and facilities that are being developed there

# ride as much or as little, as long or as short as you feel – but ride



Photos: Robin Hickman

**The Utrecht Central station entrance to the west, with the steps overlooking the station square at Jaarbeursplein – underneath are three floors, 4,200 cycle parking spaces and OV-fiets cycle hire**

Apologies to Eddy Merckx – the legendary (Belgian) professional cyclist, the most successful competitive racer in history, and winner of the Tour de France on no less than five occasions – for using his words in the title. But he nicely summarises the priority for transport planning in the Netherlands – the promotion of cycling as the key means of travel within urban areas. Contrast the provision of cycling

in the Netherlands with that in the UK, and it seems very odd that it is so tortuous to build high-quality cycle networks and facilities in the UK. The argument for cycling is so strong, yet still implementation proves difficult.

The Dutch cycle more than any other nation; they cycle more often and over longer distances – with the resulting mode share at around 27% of all trips.

## off the rails

There has been much recent growth in cycling by children and young adults (10-30 years of age), the over-60s, and those living in urban areas. Nearly a quarter of the Dutch population cycle every day, and there are around 37,000 kilometres of dedicated cycling infrastructure in the country, not counting cycling on road. The average person cycles nearly 1,000 kilometres per year, with around 300 cycle trips. These are incredible figures – and a look around most cities in the Netherlands shows the quality of the cycle networks on offer.

Let's consider Utrecht, the fourth-largest city in the Netherlands, with a population of 348,000 people. 125,000 people cycle every day in the city – an average of 33,000 on one street alone (Vredenburg<sup>1</sup>). Of visitors to the city centre, 59% use a bike.<sup>2</sup>

### The largest parking facility in the world

One of the major challenges in the Netherlands is providing space for cycle parking, and particularly in town centres and at central stations. Utrecht's



Cycle parking at the Stationsplein to the east of Utrecht Centraal station – 12,500 spaces over three floors



Cycling and other active modes of travel become the easiest and most fun ways of travelling around the city



**The inner ring road is given less space and a central park is provided**

Stationsplein (station square) cycle parking facility was opened in 2019, designed by Ector Hoodstad Architects, and has space for 12,500 cycles and 1,000 *OV-fiets* (public transport hire bikes). This is a huge cycle parking space, built over three floors, under the station square linking Utrecht Centraal station to the neighbouring shopping centre and historic city centre.

It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing free parking for the first 24 hours with an electronic check in via the *OV-chipkaart* (public transport smartcard). Thereafter, it costs 1.25 euros per 24-hour period for standard bikes and 2.50 euros for irregular sized bikes. An annual subscription is 75 euros for standard bikes. The lower and upper floors (levels -1 and +1) are for cyclists leaving their bikes for up to a day, and the ground floor (level 0) is for people with parking subscriptions, which allow longer stays.<sup>3</sup> Many regular commuters leave a bike here, and use it for the 'last mile' part of their trip, either to/from home or work.

This is often how regional, inter-city journeys are made – by bike, rail, and bike, with almost seamless integration. There is a special parking area for oversized bikes, such as cargo bikes and those with baskets or child seats; and also a cycle repair workshop.

Cyclists enter the parking facility by entrance ramp and ride past the *p-route fiets* space indication system. The messages tell you where the nearest cycle parking space is, when your train is departing, or how many hire bikes are available, depending on

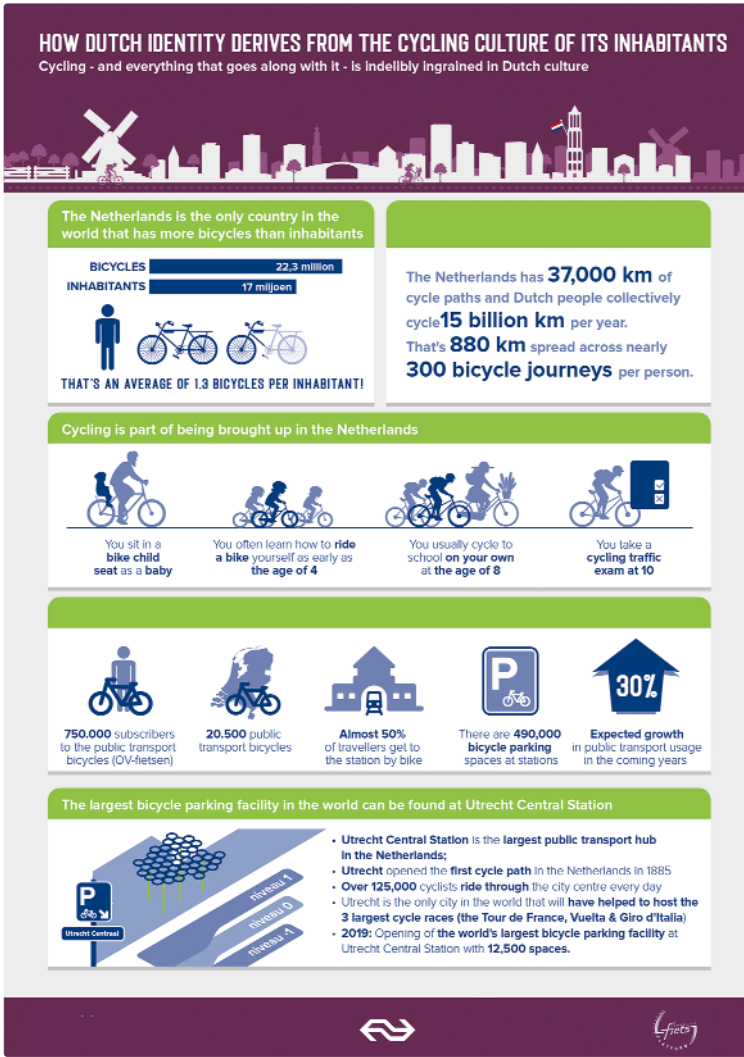
requirements. There are 161 digital signs, either at the entrances and exits or on each parking bay, and also there is an associated app which indicates free cycle parking spaces in the city.

The parking facility is supervised by around 40 service staff, who ensure that bikes are parked correctly and are not left for longer than 28 days. The design and building of the facility is a collaboration between the Municipality of Utrecht, ProRail and NS (Dutch Railways). It was built over the course of five years, and opened in stages, at a cost of 30 million euros – a large amount for cycle parking. But, on entrance, it is obvious that this is a very high-quality facility – it's not like a conventional cold, dark and damp cycle garage: it uses high-quality materials, including stone, wood, glass, and steel. It is a welcoming, well lit and very well designed facility, developed with the cyclist in mind.

Beyond the Stationsplein there are a further 20,000 cycle parking facilities in the surrounding area, associated with the station and major offices, including 5,000 spaces at Jaarbeursplein, 3,000 spaces at Knoop, and 1,240 spaces at Sijpesteijn. This is cycle parking par excellence.

### **Redesigning the inner ring road**

Often it seems difficult to remove traffic capacity from the radial routes into the urban centre, or from the inner ring roads that surround the centre. In Utrecht this is being carried out in earnest – as the benefits of high levels of cycling and an improved



**Dutch identity and cycling - infographic from the Municipality of Utrecht and partners**

public realm become very apparent to individuals, transport planners, and politicians.

The Croeselaan is an example; this was previously a dual carriageway built in the 1970s, which led to a multi-storey car park, and provided a through route around the city centre. The route has been completely redesigned so there is no through traffic beyond the Jaarbeursplein, which is now the western station square, and the car park has been placed underground. The reduced traffic flow meant that the corridor could be used differently – there is just one lane of traffic in each direction, and the remaining space is used for cyclists and pedestrians. There is a high-quality, bi-directional wide cycle lane (4.5 metres wide) and a linear art park placed in the central median. The park has art,

sculptures, mature trees, landscaping, and places to sit and relax. The street lights are solar powered, and even the street signs are made from bamboo.<sup>4</sup>

The cyclist of course sees more of the city, and from a closer perspective, than by any other means of travel – Utrecht shows us what can be done to make cycling much easier.

Cycling helps reduce the risk of some forms of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and depression, and reduces obesity. Riding a bike every day reduces the risk of premature death by 41%; it prolongs life expectancy by, on average, up to 14 months. And, of course, it is fun – two-thirds of Dutch residents aged over 18 associate cycling with joy. They are more satisfied, less stressed, more relaxed, and experience greater freedom than



**Cycle provision can be very generous when a traffic lane is removed – this type of provision allows side-by-side cycling and enables cyclists to chat while on their journey**

those who drive to work.<sup>5</sup> This is a miracle cure – if we could put this in tablet form and charge for it, we would be making or paying billions for the medicine.

The Dutch see cycling as a way of life (see the infographic on the facing page) – cycling 15 billion kilometres each year, often starting at a very young age, including cycling to school.

Let's return to Eddy Merckx for the finish. Nicknamed the Cannibal, he was famous for his relentless determination and single-mindedness in attempting to win. His racing style was to continually attack, which became known as *La Course en Tête* (to lead the field): 'The race is won by the rider who can suffer the most.'<sup>6</sup> This, perhaps, is for the cycle planners in the UK – and most places beyond the Netherlands – who are struggling to get their cycle networks and facilities built. The destination will be worth the journey, as will be the effort, in the end.

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### Notes

- 1 See *Utrecht's Vredenburg is the Busiest Cycle Path in All of The Netherlands!* Streetfilms, May 2019. [www.streetfilms.org/utrechts-vredenburg-is-the-busiest-cycle-path-in-all-of-the-netherlands/](http://www.streetfilms.org/utrechts-vredenburg-is-the-busiest-cycle-path-in-all-of-the-netherlands/)
- 2 'Dutch cycling figures'. Blog entry. Bicycle Dutch, 2 Jan. 2018. <https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2018/01/02/dutch-cycling-figures/>
- 3 'Finally fully open: Utrecht's huge bicycle parking garage'. Blog entry. Bicycle Dutch, 20 Aug. 2019. <https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2019/08/20/finally-fully-open-utrechts-huge-bicycle-parking-garage/>
- 4 'From 4-lane road to linear art park'. Blog entry. Bicycle Dutch, 17 Apr. 2019. <https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2019/04/17/croeselaan/>
- 5 L Harms and M Kansen: *Cycling Facts*. Netherlands Institute for Transport Policy Analysis. Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, Netherlands Apr. 2019. <https://english.kimnet.nl/publications/publications/2018/04/06/cycling-facts>
- 6 See Eddy Merckx, *La Course en Tête* (1974), available on YouTube, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hnLjiTzejo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hnLjiTzejo)