

The Lee Valley velopark: now that's what I call a bike hub

With extensive experience of implementing transport infrastructure and with many years' experience as a cyclist, Peter Treadgold was looking forward to being able to revisit the site of the old Eastway circuit and find out whether facilities had been improved since he was last on site. It seems that they have.

Walking up from Stratford Station was a different 'arrival experience' from when I last travelled to the East London cycling circuit. Back then it was called Eastway and in the late 1970s we would cycle in along Ruckholt Road. I'm not sure I would do that now but there are some great efforts being made by the London boroughs of Waltham Forest and Hackney to open up the north side of the Olympic Park to walking and cycling arrivals.

Funded by the Olympic Delivery Authority, the enhancements provided eight routes into the Olympic venues, routes that include coming down the Lee Valley by the canal, across from Leyton and from Hackney in the west. These arrival routes may not be perfect but Shaun Dawson, chief executive of the Lee Valley velopark, is rightly proud of what has been achieved. He speaks of how the 12-year-long process is just coming to fruition and of how the "happy coincidence of the legacy of the old Eastway", where Bradley Wiggins cut his teeth and grazed his knees, has come together with the Lee Valley Park, the Olympics and Hopkins Architects "to build a world-class cycling centre that will inspire a generation".

We are itching to speak to Dawson and check whether he truly believes. In conversation after the opening event we find that he is without doubt brimming with confidence, knowing that the legacy of these games will be something far better than the sum of the parts. The velopark assembles the velodrome, BMX, road circuit and mountain bike trails in one place, providing great facilities, bikes and supervisors. The bikes are by Condor, one of the oldest and most revered names in London's cycling circles, and are a treat to ride. Having sampled the road circuit and the 'drome, I can report that both are smooth and sleek. It is immediately obvious that there is no 'municipal baths' feel to this place.

The road circuit has options and variety, no mean achievement for a strip of asphalt shoehorned between the motorway and the emerging Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. But variety there is. With all the fantastical adventure of a model railway, the circuit takes you over a bridge, round bends and into the unknown (at least for first couple of laps anyway); there are views (but not sound) of the urban traffic, the adjacent BMX track and the Olympic rings. There really is plenty to see but don't daydream as there are people faster and slower for you to cooperate with in the common purpose of fun, exercise and emulation of our cycling heroes.

Then to the velodrome. The changing rooms are carefully worked out. The stairs down and under the track into the modern-day Colosseum are for private thoughts and fears. It is truly back-of-the-neck hair-raising to walk into the centre of the velodrome and know that you are venturing where angels fear to pedal. The track itself is no walkover and for people who have never done it I have one piece of advice: when the

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instructor says push into the bend do just that; and when she says look behind, do just that. Not only because being bellowed at across the void by people who know what they are doing when you don't can embarrass, but also because dropping down the banking not on your bike is bound to hurt.

But don't worry. A couple of laps and you'll have the same confidence that you find on the second verse at the karaoke. And in the same way, you'll soon be gasping. For me, I got off the bike thinking, "Not too bad", only to find that the next day my thighs needed a rub down with a copy of Cycling Weekly.

When I last visited Eastway, which, as I mentioned, was back in the seventies, it was not only the physical landscape that was bleak: the long view of cycling was equally grim. But what a turnaround. Since I started working on cycling programmes at about the turn of the century, there has been a remarkable transformation and the velopark is now centre stage. We should offer our congratulations to the Olympic Delivery Authority, Transport for London, the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority (LVRPA), Sport England and to British Cycling. There are more organisations involved and there are many individuals who have invested personally to see all this come together. These people have had the foresight to see the direction of travel of cycling in London and the UK. That 1970s bleakness, the feeling of cycling into oblivion, has been replaced by optimism and commitment. Now there is the prospect of us all being able to relive the Olympic successes on the very same velodrome where British riders won 12 gold medals; or out on the streets and in the parks, a nation on bikes getting fit and getting healthy.

And just as the nation needs a big nudge to change its ways, so we discover that there is work to do to make the velopark a centre both for cycling in and for cycling to. In conversation with Dawson, he is quick and open in his acknowledgement that there is still more investment needed to make the centre accessible from all points on the compass. Arrive any way other than via Stratford and it is probably a bit of a challenge but Dawson reassures us that is set to change. The Olympic park cycling routes are good, although daylight is probably to be preferred, and with more use and some careful maintenance and signage it is easy to see that getting there will be easy once you know how. And that is the key. It's about more than the one-off taster or bucket-list visit. This is a place to come back to, somewhere the young and aspiring, and old and retiring, can all find something for them.

With so much going on in the Lee Valley, this may soon cease to be our best-kept secret. With the white-water centre up the valley a few miles to the north and pool, stables and stadiums all nearby, this is an unlikely holiday destination waiting to happen. For anyone coming on holiday to central London, the velopark is certainly an easy journey out and all that you need is provided: gloves, helmets and shoes are all there. Forget the pomp and ceremony of Windsor Castle: come downriver for some pump and pedal. And for local people this is their facility and big efforts are being made to encourage schools and local groups in. As Dawson emphasises, "All those organisations that invested, all believed in the legacy. Now we have to make sure that people know about this place." You can see all the prices and offers on-line at visitleevalley.org.uk and LVRPA is trying hard to make sure that it is accessible and affordable for schools, groups and the ordinary east London punter. The message is that all are welcome and it's on the doorstep.

I certainly came away knowing that I had been privileged to ride on the same boards as the stars. Even as recently as a couple of years back I did not believe that the velopark would be anywhere near as accessible and friendly for the public, and I would not have dreamt that I would have been able to arrive and be invited to 'just have a go'. Recommended? It's brilliant!

Peter Treadgold is a transport consultant specialising in sustainable modes. He worked with the ODA delivering sustainable transport to all 2012 venues and recently completed a period as road danger reduction programme manager at the City of London Corporation. He also serves as the active transport correspondent for the Leisure Review.

All details of the Lee Valley velopark are available online at www.visitleevalley.org.uk

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