

PART 1

Review of existing network and development

Terms of reference

Essex County Council's cycling development officer has asked Witham Cycle Campaign to comment on the progress of the Witham Cycle Network as approved by the Witham Area Environment and planning committee on 13th May 1997 after public consultation.

Braintree District Council are also required to review plans/progress in their area and as no other resources are available to do this are keen that WCC should report with the benefit of local knowledge.

The extent of the '97 plan is shown in figure 1. Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be any supporting documentation which details the reasons and proposals.

However there is a very lucid discussion document produced by BDC dated March 1992 which we have looked at courtesy of Town Councillor Mr. Barry Fleet. As well as a clear statement of the benefits of cycling it suggests a number of routes from a practical planner's perspective.

Constructed cycle ways

Nature

All designated routes are shared with pedestrians. There are no on-road cycle lanes. There are some routes of ambiguous status which are heavily cycled or appear to be constructed for joint pedestrian/cyclist use but are not signposted or marked as such.

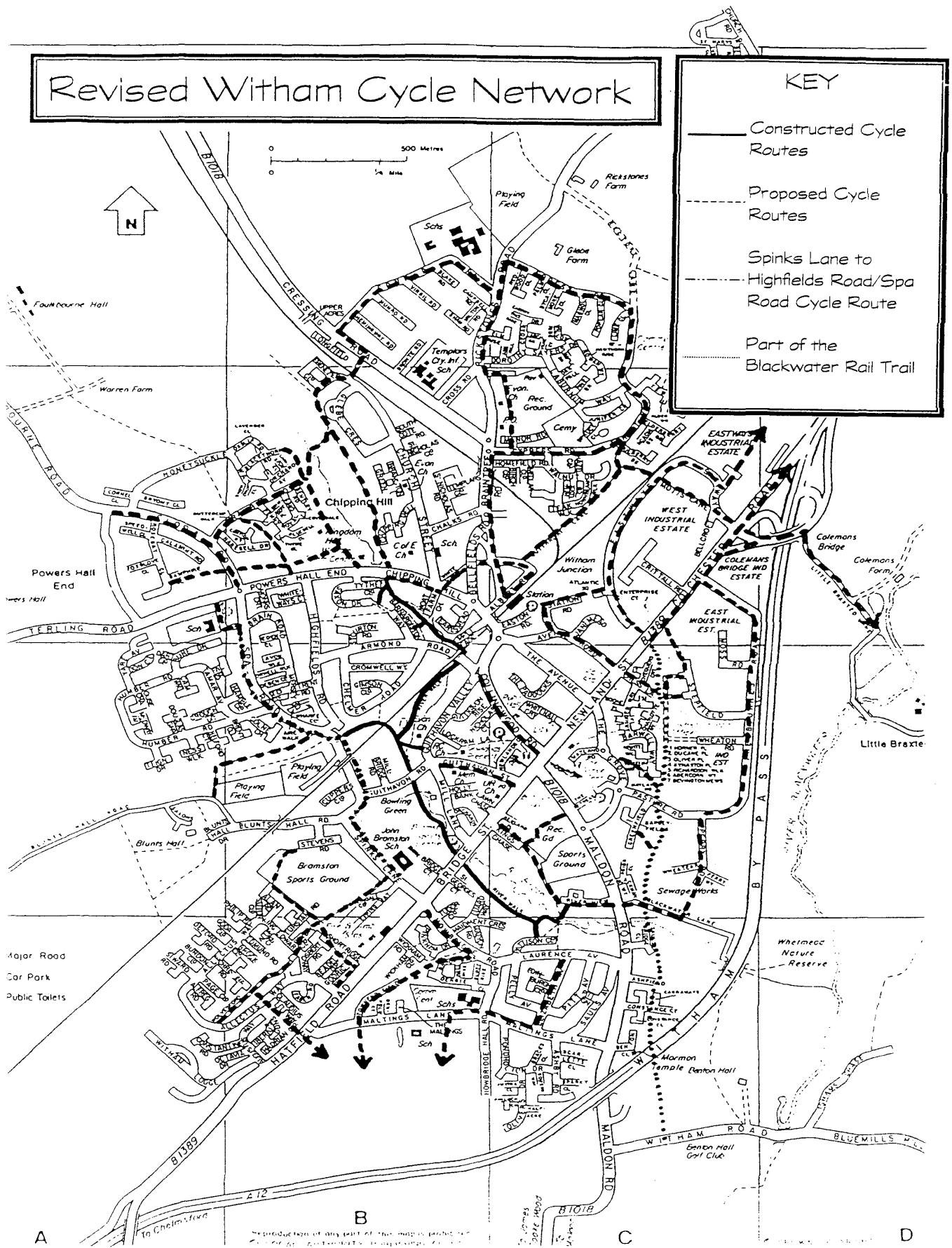
Maintenance

The designated routes (ie the river walk) have been well maintained. There have been minor cases of excessive vegetation but it is pleasing to note that when thorny trees have been pruned that the clippings have been properly swept up by the maintenance gang to prevent punctures. (These details are important.)

Shared use

There seems to be no particular difficulty caused by sharing with pedestrians. It is never going to be an ideal solution but the red side marked with a bike gives the right degree of indication of who belongs where; whereas a solid white line might be heavy-handed as sticking to one side whether you're on foot or bike is neither enforceable or desirable.

Figure 1 - 1997 plan



Alignment blocks

We note that some of the alignment blocks (Ridged tiles set into the ends of paths with ridges across on the pedestrian side and ridges along on the bike side) are rocking so may not be maintenance-free.

Direction signs

It is difficult to know how detailed signing needs to be. Almost every user will know the route or be fairly familiar with the district. With the current limited set of paths (ie River Walk) there doesn't really seem to be much wrong with direction signing.

Junctions

Road junctions such as the crossing of Armond Road have a 'bike in a triangle' warning sign. We question the effectiveness of these signs and wonder if a green rumble surface at the crossing itself would not be a worthwhile reinforcement.

An example of failing to connect-up is provided where the spur south from Moat Farm Chase to Armond Road stops 15 feet short of the road. Are cyclists really expected to get off and on for this distance!

In the '97 plan junctions, which are the most dangerous place for cyclists, were pretty well totally ignored. This deficiency needs looking at.

River walk - Guithavon Valley junction

The segment of cycle path from the Crown PH to the junction and the segment from the junction to the main path are a planner's folly. This has been over-engineered. We would suggest that these paths be made pedestrian only (still with dropped kerbs for the convenience of other users, particularly those with electric scooters) and cyclists be encouraged to use the roundabouts like other traffic.

- When going up the hill the cycle path ends on the wrong side of the road on a hill. This means that somebody has to push their bike into the road on the wrong side then try to get up speed against the hill which with shopping or a kiddy carrier is a very awkward manoeuvre.

River walk - Bridge Street Crossing

This lights-controlled crossing has special no-left and no-right turn symbols for cyclists which has the effect of prohibiting turns towards the town. Needless to say the cyclists of Witham have more sense than to take these as anything more than advisory. This is a traffic engineer's folly based on the false assumption that pedestrians and cyclists need strict corralling even if this means that the result is to defeat the object of the function of the cycle route. These restrictions should be blanked off because:-

- They were designed by somebody who only thought in inappropriate motorised terms
- They defeat the usefulness of the route
- They are ignored anyway ...
- ...and as a result bring all traffic signs into further disrepute.

River walk - Bridge between Pattison Close and River View

This bridge over the river is pretty but, narrow and humpbacked. In fine weather it is an awkward bottleneck and in winter slippery. It should be replaced with a wider bridge on the level. This is particularly important if the park route is to be developed. [The bridge could very usefully be reused in a pedestrian only setting a couple of hundred metres away to provide the missing east side footway at Saul's bridge.]

Construction has come to a halt.

All the above routes had been constructed at the time of the '97 plan and no further construction has taken place, unless one counts the realigning the footpath between the Co-op and Spa Road (Map ref: 8135 1470) the status of which is ambiguous, unsigned and unmarked.

During this financial year there will be no new cycle facilities built in Witham. There will be signage work at Spa road, remedial signage work on the riverwalk and a survey of the route from Spinks Lane to Allectus way estate. The five-year picture as described in the District Transport Strategy also looks bleak.

We suggest that there should be a schedule of route proposals which detail the purpose, details of the route and implementation and a cost estimate. This schedule would then be maintained annually so that annual progress is easily monitored.

Other cycle routes in use

Chess Lane

The cycling restriction on this have recently been lifted. This is an excellent cut-through to the Freebornes Industrial Estate.

Moat Farm Chase

This is an essential cycling route. It will be desirable if the no-cycling restrictions were to be removed from here as soon as possible. This is an important route to the Railway station from estates to the west and from Church Street area to the 6th form and sports centres.

Guithavon Street

Despite being marked one-way for many months after the cause for the temporary restriction was removed cyclists continue to use it in both directions. Yet another example of the foolishness of trying to block cyclists who ignore unnecessary and excessive restriction being inflicted on them by thoughtless planners. Whoever constructed the County Council proposals to make this one way permanently obviously failed to look at the Official Cycle network plan.

Proposed routes (1997 plan)

All roads and many paths are used for cycling. In part 2 we will discuss new proposals. Here we only intend to discuss the '97 scheme plan. In all cases there is a lack of definite detail. This detail is necessary if the plans are to become reality. At the moment the impression given is of routes being determined by felt-tip-pen rather than surveys. A more professional approach is required in the future.

Estate roads

It is now generally recognised that estate roads should be made safe for everyone. If special facilities have to be provided for cyclists there should be a good reason such as to avoid known hazards like difficult junctions.

The following routes marked on figure 1 should be removed from special cycling treatment for routes. (There may still be a case for special facilities at junctions.)

- Conrad Road, Rickstones Road, Forest Road, Cypress Road.
- Flora Road, Bramble Road.
- Avenue Road
- Howbridge Road, Maltings Lane, Elizabeth Avenue.
- Guithavon St. (While two-way)
- White Horse Lane, Albert Road

And possibly

- Eastways and Freebornes Road

Braintree Road/Bellfields/Collingwood Road

This route contains five roundabouts and a bottleneck at the railway bridge and is for many people the only reasonable route into the town centre and railway station. Therefore this is an important segment which needs careful treatment. The '97 plan shows

- a section of contraflow in Braintree Road to the railway station which should probably be re-thought,
- a segment of route along White Horse Lane which needs engineering work if it is to be a reasonable junction,
- vagueness at the top of Collingwood road where there is a tricky junction with Guithavon Valley
- a West-side lane on the remainder of Collingwood Road to the traffic lights which is not particularly hazardous. This segment needs a complete re-think to put the right facilities where they are most needed.

Flowers estate

The general principle of adding paths through the middle of the estate to make it more permeable is welcome. There is potential to upgrade existing paths quite easily and it is disappointing that the current plans for the northern extension to the river walk are on the East side of the river for beauty rather than the West side for usefulness.

The '97 plan show a break just where it would be expected to join up with the existing north end of the river walk. Careful thought needs to go into designing the crossing over Powers Hall End Road including the possibility of routing straight across the bottom of Powers Hall End at Spring lodge into Tythe Close thence onto the River Walk route.

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The plan shows a route running East from the Flora Road underpass. If this was shared use then we can expect problems with cyclists travelling too fast down the hill.

“Spinks Lane to Highfields Road/Spa Road road cycle route”

It is not clear from the plan what was intended here. There are obvious trouble spots for cyclists along this route.

- RH turn at junction with Blunts Hall Road (Should the junction priority be changed?)
- RH turn into Guithavon Road. Particularly as this is just after a bend.
- The wide bell mouth of Humber road.
- The wide bell mouth of the entrance to the Infants School and shops which is as often as not used for car parking.

The plan shows a route along the east side just south of the railway bridge. This short section may not be justified.

Allectus Way estate

The NE-SW route from Spinks Lane is good for day-time use (eg Going to school) but is not really suitable for use at night as it is enclosed and not overlooked by houses.

Upgrading the footpath from Alan Road north to Stevens Road is an excellent idea. However the continuation to the South East along the SW edge of the sports ground is probably not justified as the alternative road route would be pretty much as convenient and safe (and much safer at night.)

The ‘no-through estate’ based on Epping Way is a prime example of what happens if cut-throughs are not provided for estates. Instead of what should be a safe route in full public view (as recommended by the Essex Planners design guide) cyclists are being offered a back alley of dubious safety at night. A recent planning application for Maltings lane showed similar features - so we all need to be on the lookout for duff plans.

Howbridge Road/ Maltings Lane/Through-the-park

As discussed above, there should not be a need for a Howbridge road cycle lane as marked on the plan.

This area will be the subject of much further detailed discussion in Part 2 due to the imminent developments in Maltings lane.

Blackwater rail trail

The lack of a bridge over the River Brain is rather unfortunate. This could become an important route with trunk, local commuter and recreational functions being ideally suited for the industrial estates, the more natural sections of Witham, Maldon Road houses and connecting with Colchester Road at the north and River walk/Hatfield trunk to the south. This should be high on the priority list as it serves many purposes and begins to make the cycle provision in Witham look a bit more like a real network.

It shouldn't be very difficult or expensive to upgrade the northern end of this route (Chess Lane to Eastways under the Catholic bridge) from the

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currently passable in most weather to a useful commuter and pleasant leisure route serving East and West industrial estates.

Station road/Eastways

A connection through here, particularly if it was integrated with a route through the station car park, would be very useful. Casual inspection suggests this route is now blocked by development or industry. The plan needs to specify what is intended more clearly so that the practicality can be ascertained.

Colchester Road/Colemans bridge

This is a busy road with heavy lorries (Lorries account for 7% of all road traffic but are involved in 26% of cyclists' fatalities.) and a hump back bridge. The standard of road maintenance near the BP garage and the greasiness of the mini-roundabout are hazards that ought to be addressed for the benefit of all road users.

The marked (and well used) shared footpath along the A12 slip road simply expires! Neither direction nor warning signs are provided!

While the '97 plans may have been over enthusiastic in the use of the felt-tip-pen to draw routes, there is a definite need to clarify for cyclists where they can expect to be safe and legal, particularly at the junction of the slip roads and Eastways.

The '97 plan shows a cycle route on the east side from the mini-roundabout to the old bridge. In theory this would be an excellent place to have a dedicated lane as cyclists are going much slower than the rest of the traffic at this point. However unless it is full width or located properly on the verge it will not be very safe. Therefore this section should be properly surveyed to examine the practicalities.

Motts Lane and Cutthroat Lane

Direct, level and already open to cyclists as 'highways without cars'. The trouble is they look like footpaths so deter law-abiding cyclists and are not signposted. A small expenditure here ought to result in many more users.

Conclusion

Implementation

Nothing much has happened in the last three years. This could have easily been predicted because the '97 plans were vague and not thought through.

Future plans will need to be

- a much more rigorous
- b surveyed rather than drawn with a pen
- c costed/accepted/rejected and prioritised
- d incorporated into the locally determined works programme
- e given an estimated completion date

However, apart from a couple of minor points, the River Walk is well implemented and serves a useful purpose.

Changes in thinking

The idea that you have to allocate residential and mixed use road space to cyclists has become obsolete with the realisation that these roads should be made safe for all vulnerable road users. Hence the proposed axing of many estate road routes. This will be discussed further in Part 2.

However it is also now quite clearly recognised that cyclists face some hazards peculiar to them such as right hand turns on busy roads, overtaking queues and mixing with heavy vehicles. The '97 plan ducked the issue of what should be done at junctions. This needs to be rectified. Some suggestions will be made in Part 2

Because of it's nature the '97 plan didn't explain the reasoning behind the various schemes. This makes it difficult to comment on some of them and makes it difficult to see the '97 plan as trying to achieve any objectives other than to 'have a plan'. There are plenty of opportunities some of which appear easy to implement so a re-think of how to get the best value is indicated.

The admirable '92 discussion document stated objectives in outline and the opportunities and constraints of the various routes are discussed. In part 2 we hope to bring this up to date and clearly state the policy objectives relating to the specifics of Witham.

In January 1992 BDC adopted a policy BDP78A which is still worthy of reference although very patchily implemented.

Another result of the tenuous nature of the plans is that Essex County Council have ignored them and not felt sufficiently pressurised by Council policy to properly address cycling issues when implementing road schemes.

Speed of implementation

The annual expenditure proposed of about £30,000 a year is completely inadequate.

The determination to implement plans has been lacking since 1992 when extensive proposals were investigated in detail. When BDC officers refuse to contribute one afternoon's effort to part 2 of this review then it shows how little is going to be achieved if things are left as they are.