Community bike workshops and the culture of sustainable mobility: British cases

British Academy Visiting Fellowship, end of Project report[1]

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Introduction

The aim of this British Academy Visiting Fellowship was to explore three questions:

- How do selected community bike workshops in the UK help to create *demand* for urban cycling, and support 'active' travel? Answering this question built on eight years of sporadic research on the same topic in other countries.
- What are the major motivations and governance arrangements of these community workshops? Their alliances? What practices and skills do they nurture? Do they have diverse clientele, and are they 'socially just' in what they offer to communities?
- Are community bike workshops 'prefiguring' a 'low carbon future' in a significant way by encouraging repair and re-use? Are there lessons for urban practice, community economies research, and theories of low carbon transitions?

The eventual plan is to answer these questions in a communally authored Open Access book, and to do several other outputs, listed below. This report, produced three months after the end of the Fellowship, offers a few initial findings.

Community Bike Workshops (CBWs)

A community bike workshop, *atelier vélo* or 'bike kitchen' (the term more often used in North America) is essentially a "not for-profit community-based organization formed around the restoration and maintenance of bicycles". There are three main types, although these can sometimes exist in the same workshop. All of these were found in the UK, with more activity in types B and C.

A) The classic 'bike kitchen'. The workshop is a space where a member of the public works independently or autonomously on repairing and maintaining their bicycle. Most workshops offer tools, used parts, and a space to work with bike stands. Volunteers and occasionally, paid staff, may assist. The 'outputs' from these activities are increased knowledge and a better functioning bike.

B) workshops where the prime activity is fixing bikes to give to others who are in need of them. Volunteers or staff rather than members of the public work on used and donated bikes, and there is therefore a restriction in walk-up public access. Bikes are donated to a variety of people, ranging from local residents, people seeking asylum and refugees, and even exported n containers to the Global South.

[1] AI was not used in writing the report.

C) In some workshops with a social enterprise model, donated bikes are collected, repaired, and sold. This a primary activity, along with offering bike repairs, both helping to pay some staff wages and keep the enterprise and the premises going. The difference from a commercial bike shop is the re-investment of surplus to a cause, and the use of secondhand objects. In most cases there are some paid staff as well as volunteers. Charitable aims can include helping a particular charity (eg Julian House in Bath), or assisting local people: there is variation. In all cases, members of the public don't fix their own bikes (except if allowed and limited to certain sessions).

All three models, and the people that establish and work in these three workshop types, are committed to sustainable mobility, and reducing the environmental impacts of travel, particularly in cities. Prior to this project I had visited over 50 workshops in different countries, with the majority falling into type A, particularly in French town and cities.[2] Many previous respondents expressed dissatisfaction with automobility (private cars) and supported active travel modes, especially cycling. Many loved cycling, some loved repair, but bikes were central to the organisation – an anchor.

The role of cycling in planning for sustainable mobility has been linked to vibrant economies, but also to the sort of economy we *need*, one that consumes less, in terms of material flows, with lower carbon emissions (this idea appears in reports and academic work: Tolley 2003, Buehler & Pucher 2021, and the European Declaration on Cycling, 2024). The latest EU report on cycling includes a mention of "supporting the bicycle service sector, including social economy entities and the circular use of bicycles (reuse, repair and rental)" (EU 2024), giving legitimacy to reuse and repair in this context. Europe has seen some ambitious initiatives since a strong rebound in bike use occurred during the 2020-21 Covid pandemic. Mayor Anne Hidalgo's Plan Vélo in Paris stands out and includes "bike maintenance training, establish[ing] repair workshops in each district of the city, and encourage[ing] cycling tourism".[3] This is in addition to an expected focus on further road closures and safer cycle routes (which I explored a little during the Fellowship).

The focus of my Fellowship was not on high-level commitments and policies in the UK, nor on improvements to cycling infrastructure, but on grassroots solutions to mobility issues for existing, new and potential cyclists. Interviewing across the UK in the first half of 2024 I also found a shared belief, rightly or wrongly, in bikes as one as part of the solution to mobility issues. Cyclists in Manchester for example, where efforts have been made by planning authorities to improve the cycle network on roads and along canals, feel they have a small part in an urban commons, a social field of citizens that encompasses people of different ages and backgrounds. Several community-led bike initiatives support this claim (The Manchester Bike Kitchen with premises in Sale, for example, rolling out bike repair and skills training in more than one venue[4]). Respondents in different UK cities also talked of their love for cycling, the ways in which it anchors social cohesion and their activities, but there was always dissatisfaction with levels of government investment in this form of active travel, in safety, the risk of bike theft, and the sometimes-dreadful British weather.

[2] https://bikeworkshopsresearch.wordpress.com/

[3] https://urban-mobility-observatory.transport.ec.europa.eu/resources/case-studies/best-practice-boosting-cycling-modal-share-and-creating-safe-sustainable-cities_en

[4] https://www.mcrbikekitchen.co.uk/

Methods

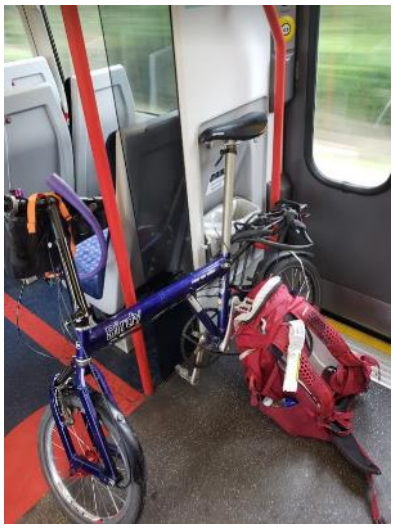

Figure 1: Mobile methods. A 24 speed Birdy dating from 2001. On a train.

Since I am an ex-pat largely based overseas since 2001, I first re-acquainted myself with the presence of bikes and transport developments in several British cities. Bike workshops to visit were selected through prior research and recommendations. I made contact with workshops, and on arrival discussed the reason for my visit and the presence of cycling in the city or locality. All agreed to talk for a shorter or longer time about their activities. Semi-structured interviews were held with key personnel, but less with workshop attendees (clients). I also volunteered and assisted in the workshop, if possible. I renewed contact with several British researchers.

I remained entirely mobile between early February and July 2024, travelling by train and folding bike and carrying a small bag across the UK and occasionally to continental Europe, visiting with and volunteering (Figure 1). My base and host for the grant was at Lancaster University, where I had existing contacts, being a former Professor from 2017-19.

This 'very' mobile methodology allowed for a 'broad not deep' comparative investigation of the three objectives above, appropriate for a stay of 5 months. I presented thoughts on these 'Very Mobile Methods' at a seminar in September 2024 (see 'Outputs' below). 'Mobile methods' pose personal challenges: largely medical and logistical in my case.[5] The questions I posed in workshops were about the history, aims, labour, premises and the impact of the workshop. These were modified for each particular case, and I also tried to learn something about the specifics of local transport and the economic context. I didn't use recording or have set questions.

The larger study, for the book project, now has about 60 workshops visited over a long period since 2015, and the ones I focused on in 2024 were particularly in the North of England and Scotland (Table 1). I did conduct a few formal interviews with directors or managers of bike workshops where it was important to delve deeper into rationales and modes of operation. My positionality as an older, British male cyclist may have helped or hindered, but more importantly I actually help to run a workshop myself on a weekly basis in

[5] Eg a bad case of COVID in June, meaning an unproductive stay in a hotel. There were also punctures and bike failures, but I was in the right environment!

Melbourne. WeCycle[6] builds up and gives out bikes for refugees and asylum seekers (Type B), and I also have been fixing bikes since learning from street mechanics back in Ouagadougou in the '90s when I was doing my PhD research in post socialist Burkina Faso. Having some repair skills, and an ability to talk about the problems and demand for secondhand bikes, enabled some trust to be built. I use a Birdy folding bike (Figure 1), which was also picked up and featured in an industry magazine following a chance encounter at a new shop in Lancaster.[7]

- Bikekitchen Wien – Vienna Austria, March 2024 http://www.bikekitchen.net/index.php/English_description
- Julian House Bike Project, Bath (several times) https://www.jhbikeworkshop.org/
- Bike for Good, Glasgow, Scotland 21-22 Mar 2024 [Southside and West hubs] https://www.bikeforgood.org.uk/locations/glasgow-south-community-hub/
- Pedaller's Arms, Leeds UK [8 April 2024] https://pedallers-arms.org/
- Manchester Bike Kitchen, Sale (May 2024) https://www.mcrbikekitchen.co.uk/
- The Charity Bike Shop, Chorlton, Manchester
- Recyke y'bike, Newcastle, May 2024 https://www.recyke.bike/
- The Bike Project (Camberwell, London shop) https://thebikeproject.co.uk/
- Recycle York (actually a business, but with some charitable activities. June 2024) https://recycleyork.co.uk/ Other York businesses visited.
- The London Bike Hub (LBH), Greenford, London June 2024 (founded by David Eales, RIP) https://londonbikehub.com/
- various other interviews (eg Tim Dant, March 2024) and city visits (Vienna, Paris, Graz, Lyon, Lund)

Previously visited, some in UK
https://bikeworkshopsresearch.wordpress.com/workshops-visited/

Table 1: Workshops visited, Feb-June 2024.

Key concepts and findings

Cycling in the UK

Cycling in the UK features strongly in urban sustainability transitions thinking and planning, because it's part of what Hendlin (2016) calls a 'low hanging fruit' to reduce CO_2 emissions and encourage active, healthy mobility. E-bikes have increased significantly in recent years but are less 'sustainable' given the need for Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) in current battery technologies.[8] Bikes can of course be a 'just' and equitable form of transport because they are quite cheap, and cut across class, gender and wealth differences quite effectively

[6] https://www.wecycle-melbourne.com/

[7] (interview) 2024, 15 July. Simon & the Birdy: a long-term friendship. *Riese & Müller Magazine*. https://www.r-m.de/en-gb/magazine/simon-birdy/

[8] I was able to participate in another project on critical mineral supply in Europe during my trip, hence trips to Vienna. https://miningbeyondhotair.org/

(Batterbury & Vandermeersch, 2016). They're accessible to almost all people, with some exceptions. They are simple to fix. They're objects of passion and desire, which came up in this research. Cycling is also a social activity in certain settings, meaning it has more dimensions than riding and repair alone. Social activity and forms of 'mutual aid' (Batterbury et al. 2025) expressed in workshops was of interest in this project.

In 2024 in Britain, however, there were concerns that cycling has dropped off government agendas, faced with many other pressing national issues. From 3.3m bikesales in 2020 during the COVID 19 pandemic, post-Covid has seen a very significant return to car use across Europe. I heard this from respondents, and it is documented in government surveys. The annual DfT (Department for Transport UK) travel survey in 2023 says "people in England averaged just 47 miles by bike annually, a 17% drop on 2022, and just over half the distance recorded in 2020, when Covid restrictions created a cycling boom." (Topham 2024). This is a huge decline. On average in 2023, cycling trips made up 2% of trips and 1% of distance travelled, an average of 72 miles (116km) for men and 23 miles (37km) for women.[9] An attitudinal survey for England by DoT showed 7/10 of those surveyed never rode, and unsafe roads were an explanation of this for the majority (61% of respondents), over 50% cited poor road surfaces, and bad weather (36%). Only 33% said they did not cycle because they were too far from destinations, which is perhaps a little more hopeful if better logistics and multi-mode journeys could assist in future.[10] In 2023, the DfT, under the previous Conservative government, slashed £380M of the £710M promised in 2021 for the UK's active travel budget, citing fiscal pressures, leaving only £100M to spend between 2024 and 2025.[11] This was challenged in court, but the current Labour government has not yet, to my knowledge, announced new active travel measures.

Supply side and demand side key concepts

Faced with these depressing statistics and the regression in cycling, and funding over the long and short term, it would be tempting to suggest that renewed funding for *supply-side*, "hard" infrastructure measures must be the key issue to redress the lack of active travel in the UK by bike. More 'supply' means more cycle lanes, parking, and addressing poor safety at junctions, roundabouts, and on crowded streets ('traffic calming' and speed reductions). The majority of bicycle planning in the UK, as elsewhere, focuses on these very issues, although very constrained in the current policy environment. Better infrastructure – bike lanes, segregated riding, and parking are all expensive, in a Britain beset by post-Brexit austerity, declining levels of investment in the public sector, and a huge rise in the cost of living since at least 2021. Significant alterations to the roadscape require years of planning, in addition to large budgets, and require public consultations. Cities like Paris and Brussels are fully engaged in this process.

On arrival in the UK, I soon confirmed that cycling measures are not high budget priorities for government at present, since retooling local streetscapes is very expensive and there is a financial crisis. News reports in 2024 were also full of stories of populist citizen resistance to basic traffic calming measures and LTNs (low traffic neighbourhoods), and local government backlash against bikes, with efforts to ban them from city centres, later initiated in Grimsby. While there has been government money to build smart motorways like on the M6 and M4

[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-survey-2023/nts-2023-active-travel
[10] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-attitudes-study-wave-9/national-travel-attitudes-study-ntas-wave-9-cycling
[11] https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/dfts-active-transport-budget-has-more-than-halved-14-03-2023/

over the last 8 years, the budget for local measures of use to cyclists is pretty slim and probably falling, depending on the locality. Even the much-debated HS2 fast train megaproject has been radically scaled back to save money. In Lancaster for example, cycle provision is frankly poor, despite efforts by Lancaster Dynamo and other community groups to insist on more than a little bit of paint on the roads and some Sheffield stands in the shopping area and at the hospital (it was not always this way, with decent investment made with European money over 20 years ago). The city council has little money to improve this (interview, March 2024).

A key argument I have uncovered over the years, and again found in Britain in 2024, is that there's also a *demand* issue around cycling, and workshops are part of increasing this demand and getting people on bikes. Demand-side measures are those that increase willingness to cycle, enjoyment, and knowledge of safety and bike maintenance, rather than provision of infrastructure. Exploring these issues in the UK made the project distinctive. They are discussed in a small literature, which I have assembled in several languages.[12] Also, British theorist of cycling, Peter Cox, makes a small remark in one of his books that "Mechanical expertise as the exclusive property of professional is one of those elements that is radically challenged by the formation of community owned and run cycle repair workshops often known as bike kitchens" (Cox 2024, 260). Democratising repair skills is radical, as I will explain later; it is not about avoiding bike shops but part of making cycling an affordable quotidian activity: a practice.

Demand-side measures to improve cycling modeshare are more than offering cycling proficiency tests in schools, or joining cycling racing or touring clubs. What has been missing across my entire life of cycling (starting in 1960s Britain) is what French speakers call *vélonomie* – the state of knowing how to ride safely and confidently, and *also having skills in bike repair*. Variously termed the 'human infrastructure' (Lugo 2018) or 'soft' measures to improve cycling modeshare, or the 'bikespace' (Batterbury & Manga 2022), the demand for cycling is taken for granted in countries like the Netherlands, where it has clearly influenced the provision of better supply-side measures. Getting people on bikes and riding them in the UK is not just a function of providing infrastructure, it also needs willingness, confidence, and social networks among riders. No matter how weak these are at present, and how much better they are in parts of continental Europe, *demand for cycling needs to increase, and research can help identify how to do this*.

Bicycle justice issues

I was keen to follow up earlier work looking at social justice in Brussels workshops (Batterbury & Vandermeersch 2016) that looked at who attended them, and how inclusive they were. This was not such a central focus of this 2024 project, partly because of the mobile method and shortage of time, and so evidence collected in the UK did not focus so much on who *used* workshops. In North American literature, the key components of bicycle justice have been around race and ethnicity, and the difficulties felt by minorities in a majority white, middle class cycling world (Luo 2023, Lugo 2018). Amy Luo's thesis showed this keenly, in everyday cycling, cycle clubs, and dismissive attitudes towards women of colour in cycle shops in Vancouver (Luo 2023). In Britain, a daily litany of unjust infrastructure and driver behaviour is exposed on social media, much of this affecting any cyclist or pedestrian. Marginalised communities, however, were mentioned in several workshops, particularly Newcastle, Glasgow and London, as needing the support of bike projects and Type B workshops are dedicated specifically to certain groups. Most workshops also have women

[12] https://bikeworkshopsresearch.wordpress.com/publications/

and/or LGBTI+-only events, reflecting the majority male dominance of the conventional bike repair scene.

Bike protests or more 'conventional' lobbying can actively confront bike injustices like road dangers and driver behaviour (Cox, 2024, 106). This can involve diverse urban residents, but overt protests are rare in the UK, and often localised to infrastructure campaigns or Critical Mass rides.[13] Collective actions fighting for the streetscape and rights to public space in general, and access to low carbon mobility are undertaken by lobbying organisations and city groups like the London Cycling Campaign and, for example, a local group I was once a member of, in the Borough of Ealing, whose target actions remain poor transport policies and infrastructure. They are part of the 'human infrastructure' of urban cycling, but very different to the everyday repair activities described in this report.

Assemblage

The BA fellowship has allowed me to refine a model bike repair assemblage (Figure 2).

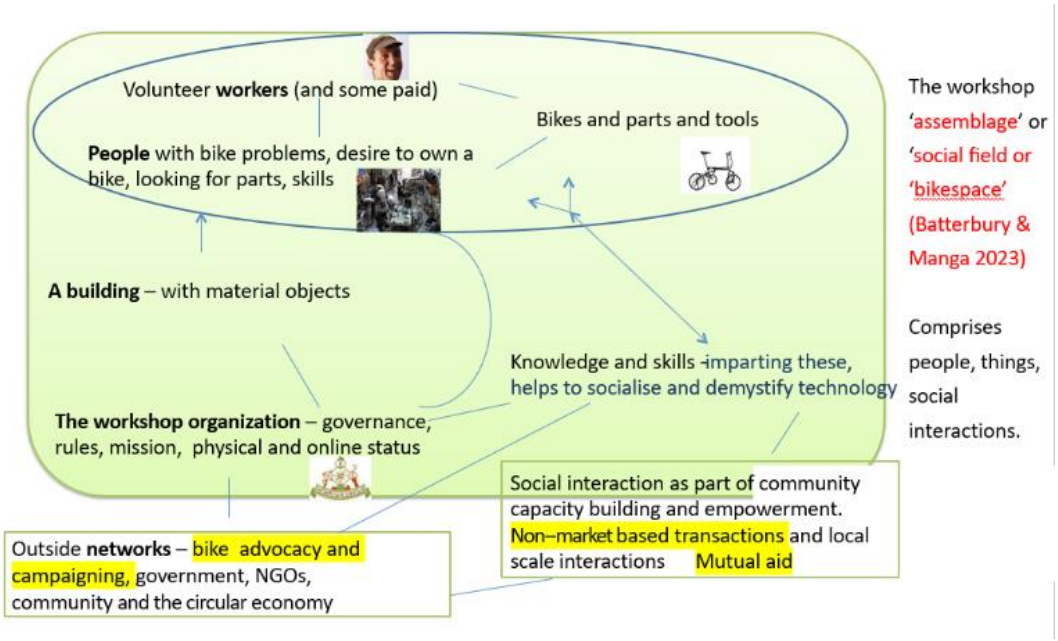

Figure 2. The bike repair assemblage in a notional workshop.

A workshop is in green. At the top of the figure, in the lozenge-shape, we have a workshop 'core' with bikes and parts as a material set of objects. They are linked to volunteer workers, who assist the process of bike repair (some are in fact paid). The act of repair is performative, and central here – there is work on practice theory and repair that describes some of these activities (Batterbury & Dant, 2019; Abord de Chatillon 2022). There are also people who visit, with their bike problems looking for parts and repairs, developing skills as they learn and experiment (Batterbury & Manga 2022).

These activities are in most cases housed in a building, sometimes with complex lease/ownership arrangements and of different suitability and quality. Britain has workshop organisations with a variety of council-owned properties, commercial leases, reduced rent

[13] Lefebvre is often cited by bike activists for his work on the right to the city, and urban struggles (Cox 2024).

arrangements, and possibly, building ownership. Workshops are organisations with rules, opening hours, governance structures, and financial obligations. Also from participating in the core activities, knowledge and skills are imparted, which *leave* the workshop with the people that acquire them. This is particularly important where using tools and repairing are skills that have been lost in some modern households.

The broader social and material interactions with wider communities are shown as part of the assemblage, best characterised as forms of 'mutual aid'. This concept, dating to Kropotkin (1902) and Proudhon, is useful to apply to the convivial relations that workshops support and nurture (see Batterbury et al. 2025). There are different outside networks that the workshops belong to. These include citywide, regional or national/international networks. The best example of such a network is in France where there is a national membership organisation, Heureux Cyclage, and some circular economy initiatives, particularly those managed by ADEME (Agence de la transition écologique, French ecological transition agency) on bike use and re-use, for "promouvoir l'utilisation du vélo comme mode de transport quotidien" (promoting bike use as a mode of everyday transport).[14] The point of thinking of a workshop as an assemblage for me is not to develop a theory, but to see how they operate and what makes them tick. Sadly, in the UK studies I found some failings in the assemblage, for example a lack of customers, or volunteers, or supportive and joined-up government policies. These have beset the bike sector post-Covid, so the political economy of cycling had ripple effects on workshop functioning and sustainability.

Key aspects of British workshops and their diversity of operations

British workshops are present in a variety of locations and different types of premises, mostly in inner cities. A specific British typology would be difficult to develop, given this diversity. Here, I stick to the Type A,B,C categories above, and give examples.

Broadly, I found a greater presence of large social enterprises (Type C), for example Bike for Good in Glasgow and Recyke y'Bike in Newcastle, with a number of employees and operations across a large urban area. These larger entities can sometimes afford market rents for premises (Figure 3). The model of a for-purpose social enterprise (Type C) is quite distant from the community-based workshops or *associations* found all over France (Panorama 2023), in Brussels, and in some other countries I visited like Sweden and Austria (with Type A workshops open to the public). However one Type A workshop was established and registered as a CIC (Community Interest company) in 2024, the Colchester Bike Kitchen, and a small workshop in Machynlleth in Wales, Seiclo-Dyfi Community Bike Workshop, has secured funding to run Type A activities.[15]

[14] https://avelo.ademe.fr/programme-avelo

[15] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/15550603/filing-history

Figure 3: Main rented warehouse of Bike for Good in Glasgow, fitted out for bike sales and repair, including the Glasgow sharebike fleet. Sign for the Type A self-repair activity at Southside Hub in Govanhill.

In Britain bicycle community activities are generally housed in rented premises, subsidised or not, and they must therefore pay rent and other costs including heating in winter. The Pedallers' Arms in Leeds (Figure 4) has an innovative solution: it has two components, where a repair/sales/training venture called the Bike Mill[16] cross-subsidises an open community workshop (Type A) on the ground floor.[17] Rental costs have increased in many city locations with some gentrification, like inner Glasgow and Leeds, threatening the Pedallers' Arms in particular where a building redevelopment for apartments is a real possibility. Other projects take advantage of cheap spaces, like the London Bike Hub which is situated at the rear of a small community centre, and the Manchester Bike Kitchen with its two locations. Interviews did not reveal *ownership* of premises, as is the case with a few US workshops for example in Portland, Chicago and Los Angeles that I have previously visited, but my sample was small. These American workshops took advantage of the Global Financial Crisis in 2007-8 to buy warehouses at knock-down prices.

[16] https://leedsbikemill.org/who-we-are/
[17] https://pedallers-arms.org/

Figure 4: Pedaller's Arms, Leeds

As noted above, social enterprises (Type C) dominate the types of community bike workshops in the UK. This is visible from a keyword search of Companies House data, where many are listed. Several I visited were CICs or Community Interest companies, which means not for profit, with profits committed to the community, and they all had some paid staff. Employees, often below five and as many as 40, need to be paid from income generated and this imposes greater responsibilities on directors and board members.

Two smaller organisations of this type: The London Bike Hub (Type C) was established by David Eales (a dynamic and well-known cyclist) as a limited company in 2010 in the largely working-class and multicultural suburb of Greenford in outer West London, but it has always had a community purpose. This has enabled it over the years to sell new and used bikes and to develop paid training and maintenance classes (eg how to maintain Brompton folders, which were manufactured nearby). LBH was also able to apply for community grants to work with schools and in low-income housing areas in West London. It has had several Directors over the years, and two or three core workers since the founder sadly passed away. By 2022, company records show a small turnover of £34,000 and my interview there revealed some previous activities had been suspended, as is common with the post-Covid decline in bike use. The Julian House workshop in Bath is larger, linked to a homeless and youth support charity and with a few paid staff. It has remained a constant also trains people for jobs in the sector. It saw a decline in revenue to £291,000 in 2023-24 and the closure of a second workshop in Trowbridge, but still sold c1,000 bikes as its core activity, plus supporting inclusivity initiatives.[18] Its contributions from grants were smaller than other workshops, some of which have received Lottery funding. I visited often, and this workshop cite a HACT 'social value added' contribution to society that is estimated in monetary terms to be a little greater than their turnover.[19]

Two larger examples: Bike for Good in Glasgow (founded 2010) is also registered with Companies House as a Scottish charity. It evolved from a market stall to having around 40

[18] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/03450273/filing-history

[19] A tool to measure social value added, using estimates of wellbeing and shadow pricing. Cycling creates wellbeing, as does assisting the disadvantaged or vulnerable. https://hact.org.uk/tools-and-services/uk-social-value-bank/

employees and 60 volunteers in 2024 (interview, Greg Kinsman-Chauvet, the CEO[20]). It retains charitable purposes but Greg wanted to build up an efficient and fiscally responsible social enterprise model rather than a volunteer workshop. Total income/expenditure hovered around £800,000 in 2023, with income largely from repairs and sales, but with several grants to enable type A activities including bookable self-repair sessions (Figure 3), bike loans, and participation in festivals.[21] In terms of social impact, there are several important local activities, and volunteers are trained who sometimes move on to jobs in the sector. Recyke y'Bike in Byker, Newcastle (Figure 5) is a registered charity and was a CIC from 2006-2018. Its initial aims were to support socially excluded individuals, promote health through cycling, and educate on repair and reuse of bikes; a specific aim to recycling was added later, and in 2024 it offers a lot of useful parts for sale.[22] A variety of activities take place in a central large premises and a second in Chester-le-Street, including a Women on Wheels repair session (Figure 5), outreach to prisons and schools, and build-a-bike for volunteers. I talked with their Community Engagement Coordinator, Fran Welsh. Expenditure and income sits at around £350,000 a year, with two-thirds accounted for by salary (13 people, the majority mechanically trained). In 2024, a crowdfunder campaign was in operation to help the organisation get though winter, with high utilities bills in the large Newcastle workshop. Crowdfunding will benefit from donations being doubled by the Aviva Community Fund.

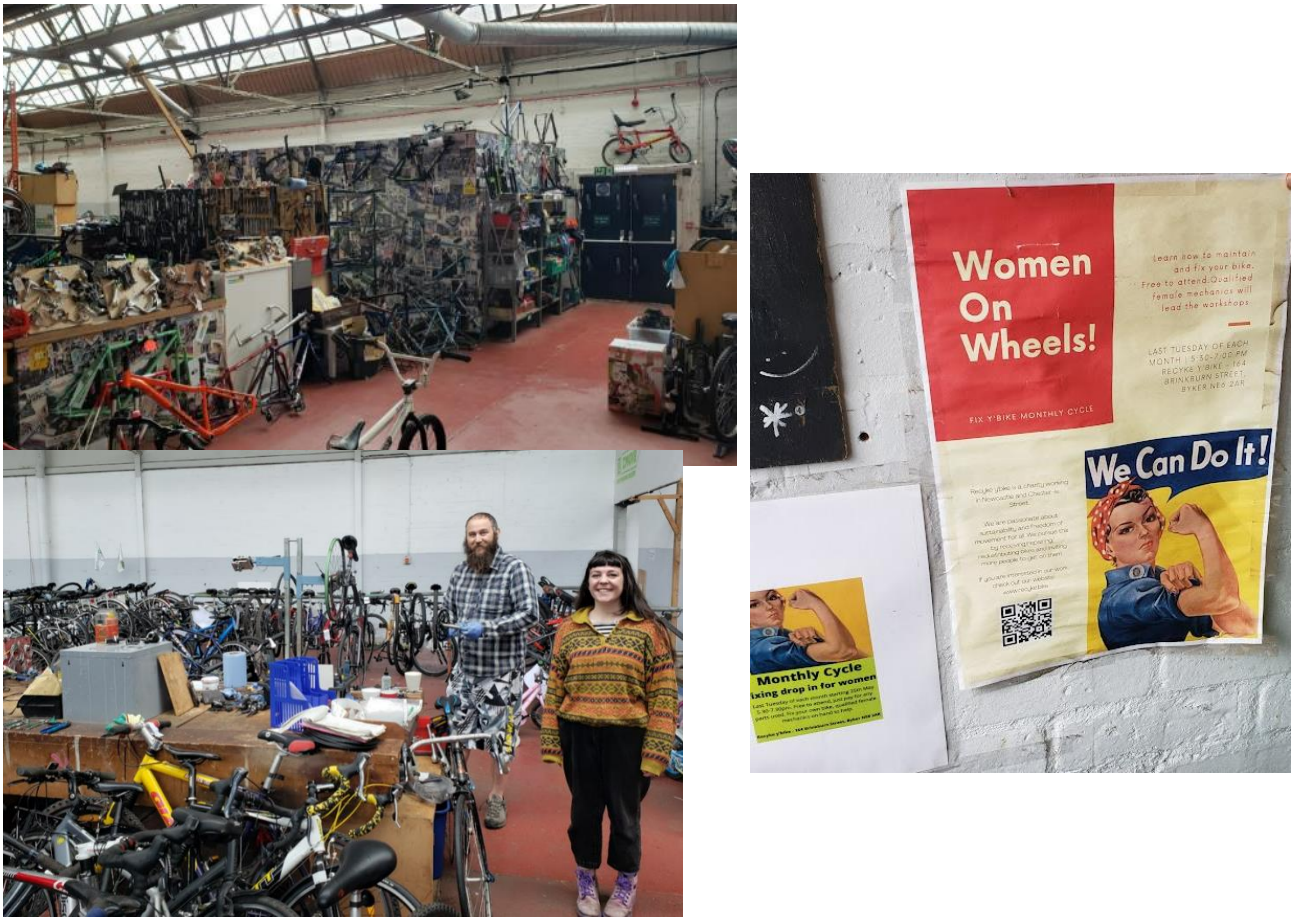

Figure 5: Recyke y'Bike, Byker, Newcastle.

[20] He says he is the Cycling Enthusiast Officer

[21] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/SC376469/filing-history

[22] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/05839547/filing-history?page=6

These crowdfunding appeals are not unusual given the particular post-pandemic challenges facing the bike sector; Bike for Good operated a GoFundMe in 2023, with the CEO confirming that subsidising charitable activities from bike repairs and sales has got much harder with inflation and cost of living challenges. In London, The Bike Project with its hq in Brixton and a store in Camberwell, South London (Type B) reported "significant financial challenges …the cumulative effect of …the extremely challenging fundraising environment, staggering rises in costs, huge demand for our services…." leading to a fundraising campaign. In 2024, a famous French Type A workshop in Bordeaux, Récup'r (Pichot-Garcia 2023) operating on much smaller income and margins, was doing the same and raised €20,000 on HelloAsso, aided by the Heureux Cyclage network. Récup'r were close to being unable to pay rent and salaries due to a cut in a government grants (the French economy is doing no better that the UK in 2024) despite several innovative local programmes and parallel activities like a sewing workshop. A published interview showed this fundraising was strongly against their principles of frugal self-sufficiency.[23] The need for these campaigns in the community sector is not encouraging. They are often linked to seasonality as well as economic forces, with a drop-off in income from bike sales and repairs in winter.[24]

The Bike Project in South London is a Type B project begun in 2013. Its aim is to support people in need, specifically refugees and people seeking asylum, through bike ownership. This is a large operation. It works largely in London but with programs elsewhere (a second hub is in Birmingham). Around 1,000-2,000 bikes a year are refurbished, with accessories and ridership training offered to these clients. There are over 25 staff (salaries are 40% of costs) plus over 100 volunteers.[25] It obtains significant income (over £3m in 2022) though grants, donations and events in the UK's largest and richest city and from beyond, and also operates a shop selling refurbished bikes in Camberwell, with some quite high-end examples (Figure 6). Its purpose to assist groups in need (similar to WeCycle in Melbourne, which I help to run) includes building riding confidence, ease of movement though active travel, and addressing marginalisation and inequality. Unusually, there are dispersed drop-off points for bikes staffed by volunteers, and repaired and donated bikes can come back for maintenance. Surveys show high satisfaction and continued cycling among their recipients. Fundraising is at a scale higher than other workshops with central London charity events, online support initiatives, and there is clearly good marketing: even estimates of CO_2 avoided through bike use in annual reports.

Type B workshops like these operate in tandem with social services and care agencies to identify 'clients' and these come from several British cities. Other Type B workshops with a particular mission include a small bike project in Lancaster assisting people seeking asylum and refugees for over a decade, which I worked at myself for two years until 2019. Outcomes of the gifted bikes were greater mobility among clients for attending education, classes and jobs, with the bikes travelling with the individuals, who often moved to different cities or towns. The Lancaster project also obtained a grant to train new arrivals in riding skills and safety in 2018. To maintain these as safe spaces, projects are sometimes not in the public domain.

[23] https://www.lacledesondes.fr/article/pourquoi-lassociation-recup-r-est-menacee-de-fermeture

[24] Even I found Glasgow almost too wet and cold in Feb-March, and I am a hardy cyclist very used to the north and west weather.

[25] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/08359498/filing-history

Figure 6: The retail outlet of The Bike Project, Camberwell, South London.

Community bike workshops require community support, through volunteering and other contributions. Mutual aid implies a two-way interaction with the community, in social bike spaces. I found their volunteers to be very wide ranging, often multilingual, and with varying skills. Their central position in the assemblage of a workshop inspires friendliness and conviviality. While there have been some breakdowns in conviviality, and examples of sexism and discrimination as experienced in the social services sector in countries like the UK and Australia, I only found one minor example in my months of fieldwork. In the literature there is some talk of unfriendly spaces, and hence gendered time allocations in the repair space. British employment policies supporting diversity like the Equality Act 2010 are beginning to filter through into this sector, which doesn't always have great regulation in smaller organisations, but does have to meet employment law. There was visible diversity in ethnicity, age, and gender among staffing and volunteers in the workshops I visited.

Prefiguring and alternatives

From the deprived urban contexts that exist across the UK, bike workshops emerge as something positive, where mutual aid, self-help, and bike-anchored social networks seem to be thriving away from the state, and often with minimal resources and funding. Workshop activities are, for founders, staff and dedicated volunteers, not utilitarian – meaning, not formed and run just to gain some material benefit: several staff told me they stay for the emotional rewards and sense of purpose, rather than financial gain (Cox 2024, 68). Prefiguration of a more cycle-friendly world takes different forms in different countries and workshops.

In France, lots of people cycle and use conventional bikes (and increasingly, eBikes) although high levels of automobility are also a problem; it might seem sensible to devolve bike maintenance to bike shops like the ubiquitous Decathlon chain, but workshops help people learn to fix their *own* bikes. This vélomobility, or level of autonomy, is quite noticeable in cities like Lyon, with a decent network of workshops (Rigal 2022). It may actually be prefiguring some kind of lower carbon future for France, where resources are going to be

scarcer, and where we will need to fix things ourselves (France has stronger government policies on repair and re-use than the UK as well, see for example the activities of Ecologic on the *économie circulaire*, circular economy[26]). Community bike workshops want to be full partners in the French low carbon transition, receiving government funds for recycling bikes (emails, Heureux Cyclage *rayons* network). Degrowth and zero growth ideas that are advancing across Europe, still aspirational, are compatible with bike workshop ideals.

The bike space is cultural as well as utilitarian – in the Netherlands bikes are everywhere, used every day, and small repair shops do the job of maintenance rather than community workshops (there are some, for example at the University of Amsterdam[27], but rare). There are ample ways that workshops complement bike shops. Shops, at least in the UK, restrict themselves to the sale of new bikes and components and with narrow margins. This need not be the case, as Recycle York, The Charity Bike Shop in Manchester, and Julian House bike workshop in Bath (Figure 7, the last one also sells new bikes) show.[28] These are hybrid type B & C organisations, with charitable purposes, low overheads, and also offering a service. Secondhand supply of bikes, repair skills and equipment in workshops is a form of prefiguration of what the transition to the future will require in lower-consumption Western economies. Repair does not have to be devolved to bike shops alone.

Figure 7: The Charity Bike Shop, Chorlton, Manchester (Type B) and Recycle York (Type C).

Discussion

To sum up, bike repair is a powerful thing. In a world of concern about resource use, bike repair combines material practices (you have to actually learn things, and do things) and particularly in a bike workshop of Type A, this means working as part of a community

[26] https://www.ecologic-france.com/
[27] https://student.uva.nl/en/topics/repair-your-bike-at-the-bike-kitchen
[28] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/03450273/filing-history

economy in webs of bike spaces with a social rather than utilitarian or profit-motivated purpose.

Several respondents found these to be extremely liberating spaces at a personal level. One volunteer in England talked of a misspent youth in a poor urban area, and how their workshop gives back to support youth programs in their own area. Some found themselves in a bike workshop as part of personal recovery or difficult life circumstances as well. Community bike workshops help volunteers and visitors to find common purpose, even if just a small one and for limited time, through fixing bikes for people in need (Type B).

To respond to the first research question (p.1), this research found workshops build *demand* for cycling in material and symbolic ways. They are not alone in the 'bikespace' and Britain still has inferior and in some cases worsening conditions for cyclists. But they are part of an important *bricolage* of community, learning, conviviality, and active travel. While there is some evidence of new kitchens and workshops being established, the political economy of cycling in the UK does not make this easy at present. The UK has a very long way to go as a cycling nation.

On the second research question, understanding how these workshops operate, the respondents and the research interviews were surprising given my experiences and past research elsewhere.[29] Britain's [post]-austerity, neoliberal governance arrangements mean strong inventiveness is needed to keep workshops functioning. Financial agility was present – in sourcing funding from city authorities, Lottery schemes, crowdfunding and so-on, but also I am sure it is responsible for why Type C workshops are most common, because salaries and rents must be paid in those. Moving from all-volunteers to paid staff is a major step. Unlike the Type A workshops/*associations* in France (many of which have small or no state support for shoestring, largely voluntary operations), the British workshops cannot rely on basic salaries paid from government unemployment and retraining schemes, with willing helpers on top. They must sell secondhand bikes to break even, offer activities like training at basic rates, and conduct repairs to bring in much-needed income. Some social entrepreneurship skill is needed to do this. Some Type B workshops like Julian House in Bath were established with this model in mind, with any profit channeled back into the charity that supports them. This model does work (with a challenge being the downturn in bike sales post-pandemic[30]).

On the third research question, "Are community bike workshops 'prefiguring' a ‘low carbon future’ in a significant way by encouraging repair and re-use?", the answer is yes. A low carbon mobility transition is social and convivial, not only technical. It can and should involve bike workshops embedded in the local economy, recycling, re-using, transferring skills, and reducing the need for new things. The key here is a commitment to "convivial tools" as prefigured by Illich, a very unconventional thinker, back in the 1970s. He said

> “Tools foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user. The use of such tools by one person does not restrain another from using them equally. They do not require previous certification of the user. Their existence does not impose any obligation to use them. They allow the user to express his meaning in action.”

[29] Comparative thinking about data collected in the UK was possible because while I grew up there, I have spent most of my life overseas and I work a lot in Francophone environments. Additionally, there are more affluent local conditions in Australian cities where workshops are less numerous.

[30] https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/03450273/filing-history

And, “Tools are intrinsic to social relationships” (Illich, 1973, web version). I see this every weekend volunteering in a bike workshop: the cluster of people trying to index gears, passing a cable through a frame, improvising a bracket, straightening a wheel, or discussing the needs of a refugee client. Talking, reflecting and doing. A commitment to mutuality in workshops was present where I visited in the UK, but within the constraints of neoliberal Britain, where funding is scarce, and costs for everyday life seem to be rising. This is the reality facing workshop volunteers and staff.

Part of prefiguring the future in Britain will involve looking across the Channel (Pichot-Garcia, 2023; Abord de Chatillon, 2022). For example, France has networked urban workshops (in major cities like Lyon or Grenoble, an umbrella workshop grouping is called a *clavette*). They share information and even move parts around. Heureux Cyclage has training workshops and an annual meeting for workshops across the entire country. There is nothing like this in the UK, just some glimmers of cooperation in cities including Glasgow where some bikes are passed to another workshop with different client needs. Visibly holding to anarchist principles, the Bike Kitchen in Vienna (Figure 8) works with a similar organisation in Bratislava. The Bike!Bike! annual conference in the Americas is another example of a progressive network of workshops extending across the continent.[31] In a city like Melbourne where I live, there are almost 5 million people. We have a bicycle recyclers group with about 30 members, and we debate the needs of the population we are serving, bike storage issues, and we exchange parts and information. This is nascent mutual aid.

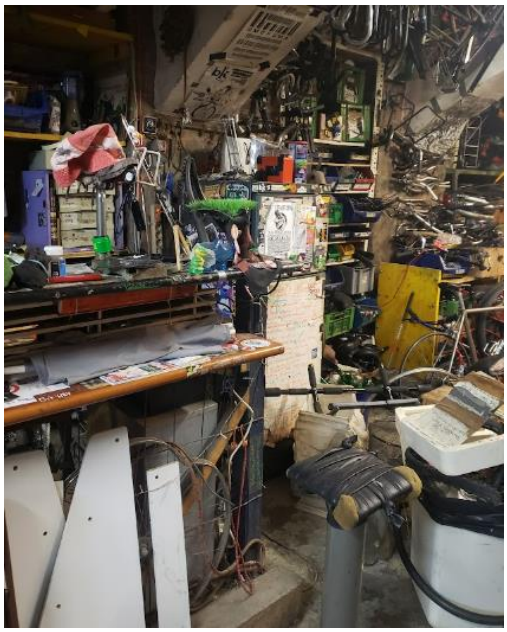

Figure 8: The Bikekitchen Wien – Vienna, Austria: a quintessential ‘Type A’ workshop.

I was left with a recurring image after 5 months in the UK. It was not a pleasant one. Think of a sci-fi movie or series set in post-apocalyptic Britain, like the *War of the Worlds* Anglo-French tv series.[32] In some undefined future scenario, modern tech has been destroyed, and people are grabbing material objects, repurposing electronics or modes of transport for

[31] https://en.bikebike.org/about/
[32] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9686194/

survival, constantly trying to get things working to meet their pressing everyday needs. Bikes take on new value. That's exactly what these types of bike workshops are prefiguring, giving us technical skills (even scavenging!) and a low impact mode of transport, sometime based on 40 year old bike components. I saw the most amazing ways in which people adapt and interchange bike parts to operate well, given limited resources. Some even have alternatives to petroleum-based lubricants, and worn tyres (one of the main waste products) are taken to businesses that recycle them into tarmac and gravel surfaces. Their prefiguration is about using less, and less damaging, stuff in our lives, and this goal cuts across class and gender. Gibson-Graham talked about this in their work on building community economies and a postcapitalist politics (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Some bike workshops are already ahead of the game.

Conclusion

The conclusion from this investigation of UK community bike workshops is that there is a solid, but not well networked or developed, number of such organisations in British towns and cities. They are important in practical terms for building demand for bike use in these urban environments, in contradistinction to mainstream automobility culture, and to planning efforts focussing on improving cycling infrastructure. They often struggle with local variants of British austerity, which appears to have worsened after leaving the EU and the onset of the Ukraine war, and this has definitely echoed into a shortage of funds coming to the community sector from donors, grants, city authorities and local councils. The supply-side infrastructure has been suffering as well, most visible in 'pothole Britain' and in northern cities like Lancaster and Leeds, although infrastructure budgets lay beyond the scope of this study.

Britain is yet to reset transport policies following the July 2024 election, and the 'freedom to enjoy automobility' is expressed in oppressive, soul-destroying traffic congestion, unnecessity car use, and opposition to many LTNs and even bike lanes. This is unlikely to change with the rollout of EV vehicles. Public transport is more expensive than it should be to encourage a move away from cars. Austerity and lack of funding traverse different publics, rich and poor, but so does the desire and the ability to cycle. The desire of urban planners and some political actors to increase cycling mode-share particularly in cities, moving towards sustainable mobilities, is still present. But lower carbon forms of transport are unlikely to be taken up without cultural change, alongside regulation. This is where *demand* measures, like the presence of a bike workshop in a community, are important. Internal to workshops, a recognition of British diversity along the lines of class, identity, gender, and income is required, as well as more secure access to resilient funding and stable premises.

The British bikespace (Batterbury & Manga 2023) is an environment where the social life of the bike and its users, some of it in workshops, can complement material changes to the supply of cycling infrastructure and active travel. Community bike workshops are prefiguring the future of demand-side, community led, everyday riding and repair. Roll on.

Outputs so far

I gave a talk at the end of the fellowship at CeMoRe at Lancaster University, that is available online. It will be accompanied by a short blog entry. I completed an accepted manuscript with Australian colleagues, that incorporates some of the findings. I plan to complete the OA book

on bike workshops globally, to which the British Academy research will contribute. The Academy research could also form the basis for an additional publication. Inspired, I have continued to Chair and volunteer at WeCycle in Melbourne, where I live. We continue to supply over 250 bikes a year to refugees and asylum seekers.

1) Talk: Batterbury SPJ. 2024. 'Community bike workshops, community development, and active travel.' CeMoRe, Lancaster University, 20 June https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yJHeQlAIz4
2) Associated blog from this report, in prep, linked to the above at CeMoRe.
3) Talk: Batterbury SPJ. Aug 2024. 'Very mobile methods. researching community bike workshops across Europe.' SGEAS, University of Melbourne.
4) (in press, Open Access) Batterbury, SPJ, Uxo, C., Abord de Chatillon, M., Nurse, S. 2025. Community bike workshops in Australia: increasing demand for cycling through mutual aid. *Transactions on Transport Sciences*.
5) (interview) 2024, 15 July. Simon & the Birdy: a long-term friendship. *Riese & Müller Magazine*. https://www.r-m.de/en-gb/magazine/simon-birdy/
6) Open Access jointly authored book – still ongoing, but advanced.
7) Website additions: https://bikeworkshopsresearch.wordpress.com/
8) Renewed links to academics and collaborators, particularly in Lancaster, Manchester, Lyon, Paris and at several workshops nationwide.

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