

The Freedom of Burgess Park

a short cycle training course
organised by Southwark Cyclists

*“You don’t believe you can do something...
and then one day you can!”*





This project was funded by Southwark Cyclists with much-appreciated help from Southwark Council's Cycling Projects Officer (£500), Southwark Council's Healthy Living Unit (£400) and the Alan & Babette Sainsbury Charitable Fund (£500).

Report and photographs by Eleanor Margolies for Southwark Cyclists.

May 2006



*An entrance gate at the Burgess
Park Bike Track*

INTRODUCTION

Zoe, a 45-year-old Peckham woman of Nigerian origin, was told by her GP to get more exercise in order to lower her blood pressure and cholesterol levels. She had not ridden a bicycle since childhood, but started cycling again and saw improvements in her health. She encouraged friends in a similar situation to try cycling but failed to persuade them. On advice from SAVO (Southwark Action for Voluntary Organisations) Zoe contacted Barry Mason of Southwark Cyclists. In February 2006, they met to discuss setting up a short cycle-training course for local women.

In response to this request, Southwark Cyclists organised a short cycle-training course in April 2006. Three sessions, each three hours long, were held at Burgess Park Bike Track, with assistance and support from the track manager, Brenton Smith. The trainers were Patrick Field, Alison Butler and Denise Wilson of the London School of Cycling. Learners were recruited through West Peckham Surestart and through the 1st Place Children and Parents' Centre at nearby Chumleigh Gardens.

Southwark Cyclists made a number of important partnerships.

- Southwark PCT provided health literature and two community nurses;
- Burgess Park Bike Track manager, Brenton Smith, hosted the course;
- 1st Place Children and Parents' Centre, Chumleigh Gardens, provided 7 free crèche places in return for two places on the course.



WHY DO YOU WANT TO LEARN TO RIDE A BIKE?

“It’s a good way of getting fit. I love exercising, but my husband doesn’t. This way, I can drag him off to the park to ride.”

“My four children and my husband all ride and I want to be able to ride with them. It’s good to share things with your kids.”

“It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, but in the region of Uganda I come from women aren’t allowed to ride bikes. But here it’s different.”

“I would ride from East Street to my auntie’s house in Peckham. It’d be easier than waiting for a bus for loooooong.”

“To ride with my children in the park.”

“I used to ride a bike as a child, in the country, but I’m too nervous to start again on London roads.”



THE FIRST MORNING

A group of mothers walked to the Bike Track from the 1st Place Children's Centre. Other women came as individuals, from as far away as Lewisham and Greenwich, making a total of ten. A curious teenage passer-by joined for a day. Blood pressure and blood sugar levels were checked by the nurses and then the learners broke into groups according to their experience.

Women who had cycled in the past (some had not ridden for over 20 years) set off with Denise to recover the skills of starting off, braking and manoeuvring. Over the morning, they practised a number of exercises: riding as slowly as possible, as fast as possible, lifting



each hand off the handlebars in turn, riding in tight circles and keeping a fixed distance between riders going around the curving course in single file.

Patrick introduced the absolute beginners to the idea of moving to maintain your balance. He balanced a walking stick on the palm of his hand, showing how he needed to adjust his position constantly to keep the stick upright. In comparison to a stick, he said, a bicycle is much easier to balance, because it falls more predictably, either to the left or the right.

With Alison's help, the beginners were equipped with 'kick-bikes' – like scooters with one full-size wheel – and started to find their own balance. Over the course of the morning they moved on to fixed-wheel bikes and then graduated to ordinary free-wheel cycles.

More women arrived throughout the morning, and were incorporated into the groups. There were plenty of cycles to spare, and Jennifer, one of the nurses, took a turn round the course. More experienced cyclists tried out the kick bikes and Denise's own recumbent.

By the end of the first session, all the beginners were riding independently around the course.



'You are going to feel as if you're falling – and that's because you are. You're always falling a little bit one way and then a little bit the other.'



OBSTACLES IN THE PAST...

“My children laughed at me when I tried to learn in the park.”

“My son said to me: ‘You’re okay today, but tomorrow, after the course, you’ll have a broken arm and leg’. My other son said : ‘You’re too old to ride a bicycle’. Children think that adults can’t do anything, but we can, we can learn.”

“My brothers learned, but not me. They tried to teach me, but they used just to say ‘push the pedals, push the pedals’ and then they gave up trying.”

“I tried many times before. I thought I had a problem with my back or my legs, that they were somehow too heavy.”

“I got a bike last summer but I gave it away because it was doing nothing.”

“If I learn to ride, it will be a miracle.”





“It’s fantastic: when you go with it you feel free, you feel like flying.”

“Alison is perfect; she makes confidence in me.”

“I thought I’d feel nervous but I feel confident.”

“The trainer’s very good - she has patience.”

“The more you do it, the more it flows.”

... AND COMMENTS THREE HOURS LATER





“We’ve got to go to where our patients are.”

HEALTH BENEFITS

Janice and Jennifer, community nurses from Southwark PCT, were present for the whole course. They checked the participants' blood pressure and blood sugar levels, and brought along a range of health promotion leaflets on smoking, diabetes and heart health.



Arriving for the third session, Patience headed for the nurses rather than picking up a bike. 'I've got to get my blood sugar tested first', she explained. 'I've had porridge for breakfast today!'

Janice elaborated: 'Before beginning the course, we took everyone's blood pressure and tested blood sugar levels. All but one had very low blood sugar levels, and we couldn't understand why. We discovered that they had eaten nothing for breakfast or a just quick bite of toast – they were hungry! So we discussed breakfast, things like porridge and weetabix, and talked about making sure you

are hydrated. Their levels are much better now, and they're all feeling much better.'

The nurses talked individually to the learners, giving health advice in a friendly, non-medical setting. There were opportunities to discuss health issues that – while not seeming urgent enough to warrant a trip to the doctor – can have serious long-term implications. More immediately, the nurses managed to persuade all the women to eat breakfast and to carry drinking water with them. Besides the improved blood sugar test readings, there was a great improvement in energy levels, noticed both by the nurses and by the learners themselves.

This approach to health education appears to be labour-intensive but highly effective.





INTO THE PARK

In the third session, students were introduced to the use of gears, and began to practice looking behind while riding, in preparation for cycling on roads.

At the end of the course, all but one of the new riders headed out of the Bike Track and into Burgess Park. The ride in the park was quite challenging for beginners, including a steep hill, a narrow underpass shared with pedestrians and a short downhill 'off-road' section. As Alison commented: these learners rose to the challenge, but it could have been very off-putting for anyone less determined. The ride ended at the 1st Place nursery, where some of the learners met up with their children. The toddlers on tricycles seemed amazed and utterly delighted to see their mothers riding bikes.

Cycling together was quickly incorporated into make-believe play – 'Let's go shopping with Mummy!' – a good sign for the future use of bikes for practical journeys as well as leisure and fun.



Photographs taken at 1st Place by Jane Booth

CONCLUSION

The course was very successful and provides a useful model for future short courses. All the learners came away able to set off, ride and stop independently, and they were very positive about the experience both in their written feedback and in discussion. It was obvious from the laughter and smiles that everyone enjoyed riding together and learning something new.

One reason for the success of the course was the partnership with other local organisations. Some of the learners felt reassured by the companionship of other women they already knew, and by the support of professionals such as Jane Booth from 1st Place, who not only brought the group to the Bike Track from the nursery but stayed to watch. The work of the community nurses added an extra dimension, giving the impression that the course was not only fun, but provided an opportunity for participants to look after their own health and well-being.

The high ratio of trainers, nurses and helpers to learners meant that no-one had to wait around for a turn and everyone benefitted from individual attention. The mood was warm and humorous, and the teaching followed the pace of the learners.

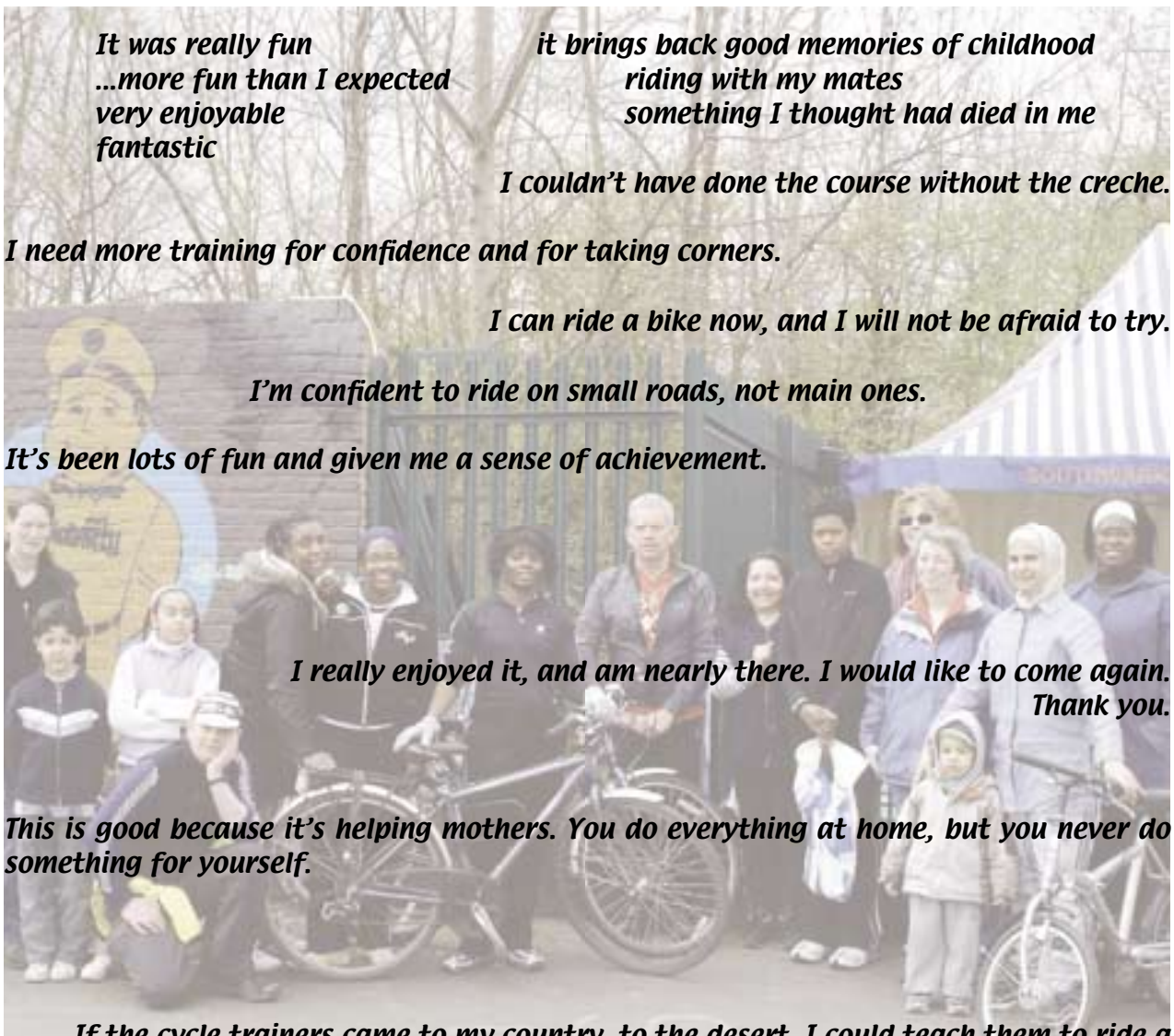
Finally, the personal qualities of the trainers were crucial: they were friendly, reassuring and informal, yet at the same time highly professional and insistent on correct use of the bicycle. Patrick's introductory theory talk impressed several of the learners, as it both gave reasons for feelings of anxiety ('You're going to feel as if you're falling'), and reassurance that that there was nothing particularly clever or magical about learning to ride as an adult.



*the trainers were friendly
excellent
very good
patient
helpful*

*I wish it was longer
I wish we had more sessions
I need at least two more sessions
...more practice*

*they make you feel confident
they talk slowly*



*It was really fun
...more fun than I expected
very enjoyable
fantastic*

*it brings back good memories of childhood
riding with my mates
something I thought had died in me*

I couldn't have done the course without the creche.

I need more training for confidence and for taking corners.

I can ride a bike now, and I will not be afraid to try.

I'm confident to ride on small roads, not main ones.

It's been lots of fun and given me a sense of achievement.

*I really enjoyed it, and am nearly there. I would like to come again.
Thank you.*

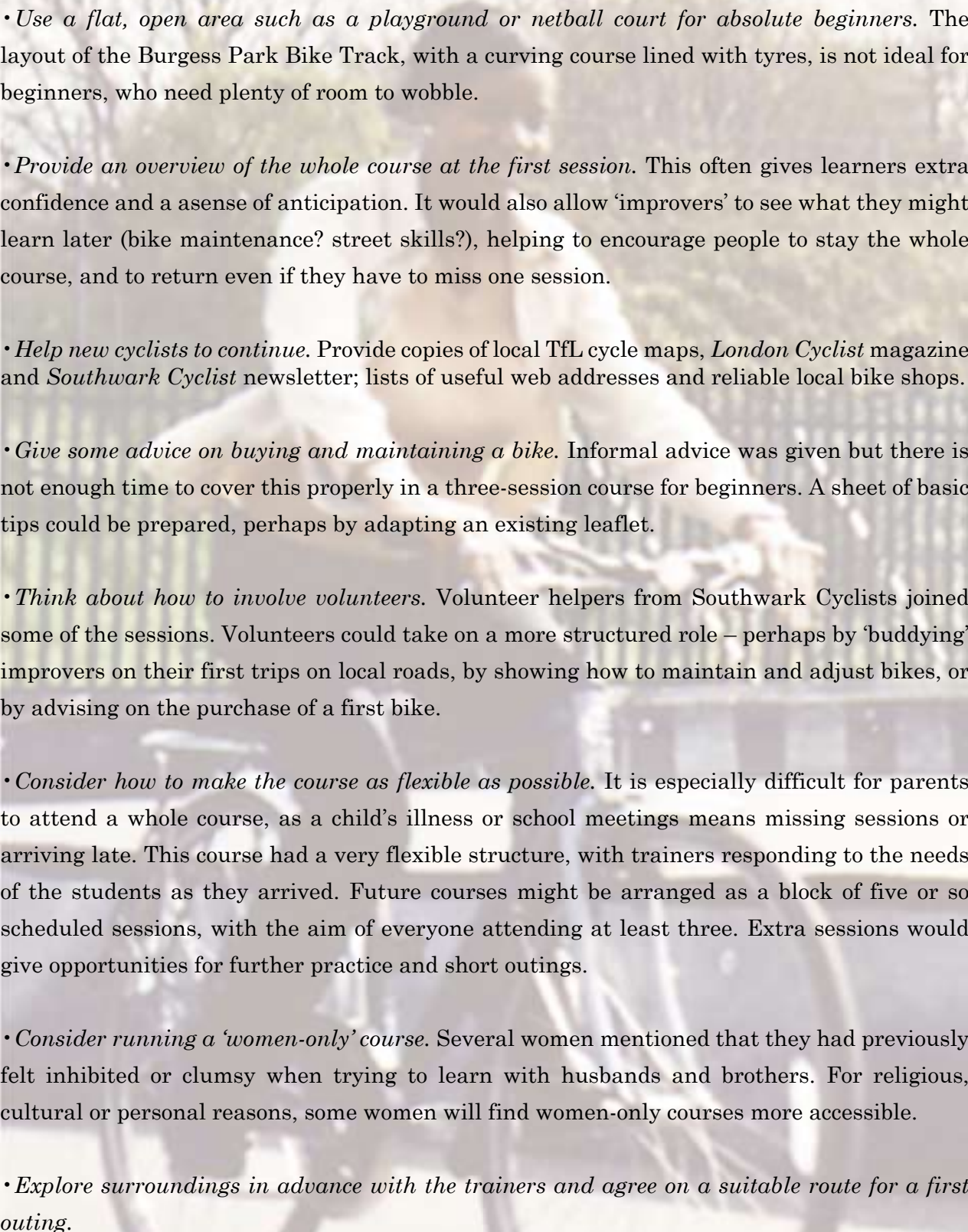
This is good because it's helping mothers. You do everything at home, but you never do something for yourself.

If the cycle trainers came to my country, to the desert, I could teach them to ride a camel! I can ride horses and camels, but I didn't believe I could ride a bike.

You don't believe you can do something...and then one day you can!



SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE COURSES

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- *Use a flat, open area such as a playground or netball court for absolute beginners.* The layout of the Burgess Park Bike Track, with a curving course lined with tyres, is not ideal for beginners, who need plenty of room to wobble.
 - *Provide an overview of the whole course at the first session.* This often gives learners extra confidence and a sense of anticipation. It would also allow ‘improvers’ to see what they might learn later (bike maintenance? street skills?), helping to encourage people to stay the whole course, and to return even if they have to miss one session.
 - *Help new cyclists to continue.* Provide copies of local TfL cycle maps, *London Cyclist* magazine and *Southwark Cyclist* newsletter; lists of useful web addresses and reliable local bike shops.
 - *Give some advice on buying and maintaining a bike.* Informal advice was given but there is not enough time to cover this properly in a three-session course for beginners. A sheet of basic tips could be prepared, perhaps by adapting an existing leaflet.
 - *Think about how to involve volunteers.* Volunteer helpers from Southwark Cyclists joined some of the sessions. Volunteers could take on a more structured role – perhaps by ‘buddying’ improvers on their first trips on local roads, by showing how to maintain and adjust bikes, or by advising on the purchase of a first bike.
 - *Consider how to make the course as flexible as possible.* It is especially difficult for parents to attend a whole course, as a child’s illness or school meetings means missing sessions or arriving late. This course had a very flexible structure, with trainers responding to the needs of the students as they arrived. Future courses might be arranged as a block of five or so scheduled sessions, with the aim of everyone attending at least three. Extra sessions would give opportunities for further practice and short outings.
 - *Consider running a ‘women-only’ course.* Several women mentioned that they had previously felt inhibited or clumsy when trying to learn with husbands and brothers. For religious, cultural or personal reasons, some women will find women-only courses more accessible.
 - *Explore surroundings in advance with the trainers and agree on a suitable route for a first outing.*

USEFUL CONTACTS

Barry Mason
Southwark Cyclists
www.southwarkcyclists.org.uk
07905 889 005

Brenton Smith
Burgess Park Bike Track
285 Albany Road
London SE5 0AH
020 7582 9191

Jane Booth
1st Place Children & Parents' Centre
Chumleigh Street
Burgess Park
London SE5 0RN
www.1stplace.uk.com
020 7740 8070

Mandy Lochrane
Southwark Primary Care Trust
Lister Primary Care Centre
101 Peckham Road
London SE15 5LJ
020 7771 3839/3849

Roger Stocker
Cycling Projects Officer
London Borough of Southwark
Chiltern House
Portland Street
London SE17 2ES

Patrick Field
London School of Cycling
147 Amhurst Road
London E8 2AW
020 7249 3779

On Your Bike
52-54 Tooley Street
London SE1 2SL
020 7378 6669

