

Learner cyclist Eleanor Parsons leaves her car behind and gets on her bike, thanks to some riding lessons for adults

The trouble with learning to ride a bike on the road is that, unlike a car, you don't have a big 'L' sign stuck to your back, and because of this, feel rather like a sitting duck.

As a virgin road biker, I'm not alone in feeling a little petrified when taking to the streets on two wheels. It's obviously unsafe to go at it like a maverick and take to the roads alone, and many of us don't have a willing and patient enough volunteer to accompany us. However, there is a solution... The CTC's adult cycle training scheme aims to get people like me trained up, confident and safe on the road. And it was through this that I contacted Life Cycle UK in Bristol, who offer lessons to get novices like me roadworthy. According to them, it only takes two or three sessions with their freelance instructors – who slot in lessons after work or on weekends – and you'll be up to the National Standard in no time.

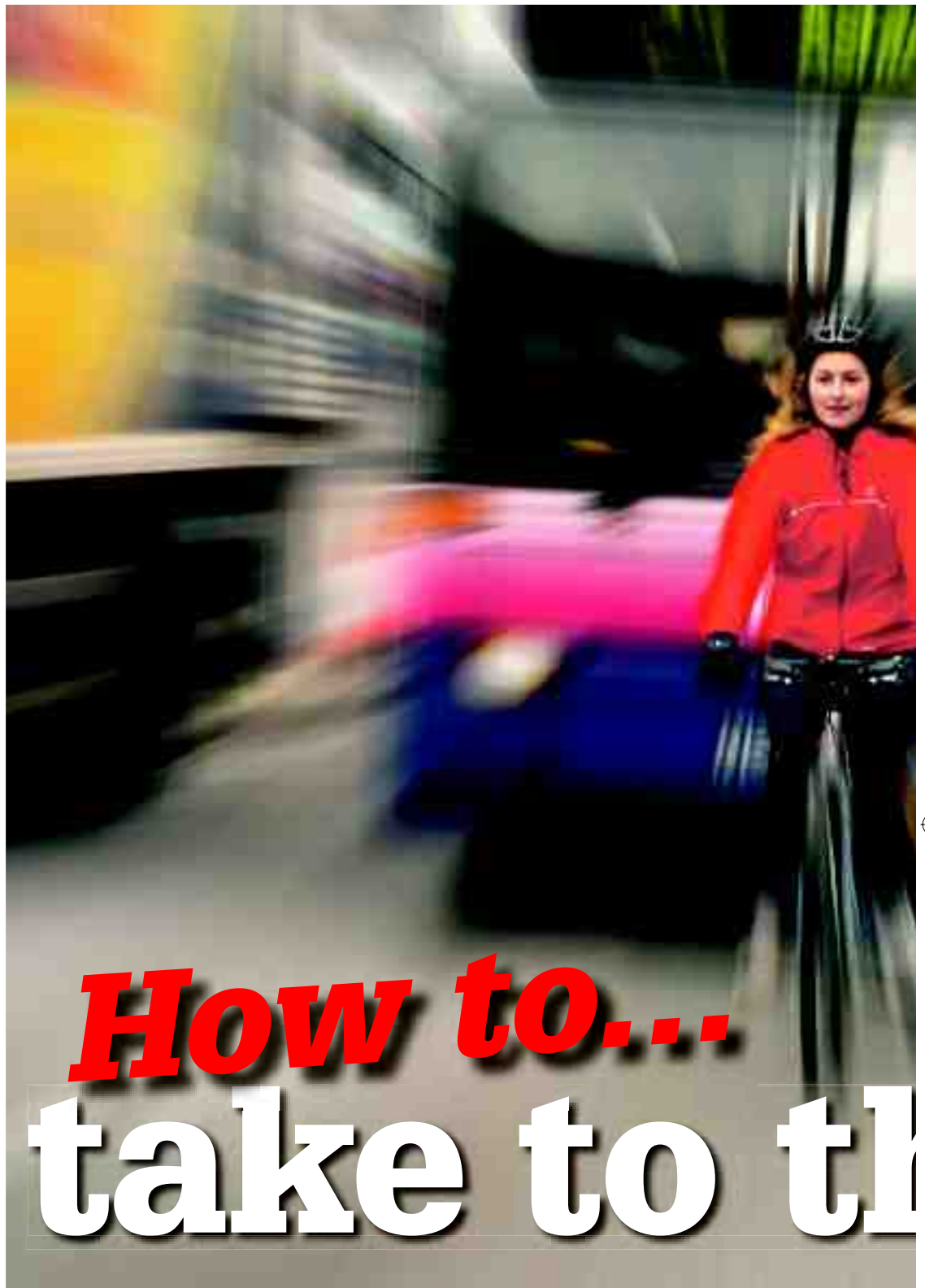
The National Standard replaces the old Cycling Proficiency, and has three levels. The first is for complete beginners, the second goes through everything you need to know to cycle safely on the road, and the third is for more advanced riders, focusing on the use of roundabouts, multi lanes and more: see www.ctc.org.uk for a full list.

The 'skill building' category, end of level one, start of level two, seemed to be the right standard for me – a polite name for totally useless. Veronica Pollard, my instructor, was there to raise my game. She would be responsible for giving me one-to-one tuition, cycling behind me like a personal coach while I learned about road positioning, how to look behind, signal and use gears.

Hitting the books

Before we got on the bike, however, we sat down for a theory lesson, which covered:

1. Turning left into a junction when you can't see what's around the corner. Don't follow the kerb into the road in case there are parked cars. Instead, aim for the middle, so that if there's a car following, you won't get trapped if it cuts in front of you.



How to... take to th



1. Turning left

2. Positioning for turning right or left at a junction. The key here is to stay in the middle, establishing your presence so that vehicles don't overtake.



2. Positioning for turning right at a junction



he roads



Pen to paper, tyre to tarmac

By now I was eager to practise this new-found streetwise cycling, something told me I wasn't going to be perfect. But first, a quick bicycle check: look for loose fittings, check the wheels spin smoothly and that the brakes respond. Then some comedy: After some balletic [read break-dance] leg bending I mounted the saddle and teetered on tiptoes, feeling very high up. "You should apply the brakes when you get on and off. It'll be a lot easier," said Veronica without a hint of irony. Already much steadier, I flicked the right pedal up with the top of my foot to get it into starting position. "Now, where do you think we should start from?" asked Veronica. We were in a gap with a row of parked cars behind us. Remembering that it's most important to remain visible,



4. Overtaking parked cars



3. Right turns: look behind well in advance, signal, then look behind again quickly. If it's clear, turn. This is the same principle as mirror, signal, manoeuvre in a car.



4. Overtaking parked cars: check behind you well before pulling out early. This should tell any following driver what you intend to do, so there's usually no need to signal. Cycle far enough away in case car doors open out, and when there's an opportunity, return to the left-hand side, about a metre from the curb and avoiding drains, broken glass and slopes.

5. Judging when to let cars pass: as a beginner, your reaction is to get out the way, but moving into gaps isn't always the safest place to be, because the driver



can no longer see you and you're likely to get trapped. If you really feel that you want to let traffic pass, you move into a gap if you can – but not right in – so that motorists can still see you when you want to come back out. If it's not convenient to stop, keep going!



3. Right turns

Starting out

I shuffled in line with the parked cars. "Yes, now drivers can see you and you can see what's coming," she said. So far, so good...

Let the skill building begin

We then made for a nearby car park, which is the obligatory training ground for any beginner. "Okay, we're going to turn right here," I heard Veronica shout from behind me. Veronica was doing the looking and signalling for me at this point and I was still welded to the bike like a blinkered horse [amazing what you can stick together with modern welding equipment – ed], wondering when I'd ever be able to lift a hand off the bars. Signalling often seems like one of the biggest milestones for beginners, but this can be easily overcome with a little confidence. It's a good idea to put in a few pedal strokes to build up some speed first. Then signal early while you've still got enough momentum to keep you steady in a straight line.

All together now...

On my second lesson we went out to a local housing estate. It was here that I'd have to perform the juggling act of combining all the skills I'd learnt so far. But Rome wasn't built in a day: gears were first.

With this in mind, I practised getting a feel of changing up the gears as I increased speed, then back down again, before coming to a stop. This would



Ellie takes here fresh new skills to the high street with instructor Veronica close behind

ensure that moving off was easier. Passing a group of kids, one showing off his no-hands trick, I felt like an over-sized child learning to ride, but that feeling soon goes away.

On the whole, my fear of traffic – after being encased in my car for so many years – was improving. The turning point may have been the time Veronica decided to shout: "Keep going and see what he does," as an MPV hurtled straight for us. Head on collision was my immediate prediction, but the car did slow down and we were able to move into a small gap to let it pass. It's all a matter of judgement, says Veronica: "Instead of thinking of them as inanimate cars, think of the drivers, who

are only ordinary people. Always try and make eye contact. It's human nature to pay attention then."

Third time lucky

With a little homework in between lessons, it was going much smoother, so we headed for some main roads. Eager to impress with my signalling ability, I think I must have over-done it a bit when Veronica asked: "Do you think it was necessary to signal then?" "Erm No?" I replied – there was no one there – but at least my balance was better. "Think of it as: if the driver needs to do something different, then you need to signal. So, if they're following close behind, you're slowing down in order to turn left or stop,

The basics of riding on the road...



STARTING OFF: Apply the brakes to keep the bike stable. From a standing position or sitting position, keep one foot away from the pedal on the ground. With the top of your shoe on the other foot, lift it up beyond the 'Nine o'clock' position and then rest it back on top of the pedal. That way you will have a longer down stroke on the pedal as you pull away and therefore more time to find the other pedal with the foot that was on the floor.

With the brakes still on this should be a strong, balanced position from which you can ride forwards in complete control at any time.



Good balance – no breakdancing here...



STOPPING: Always try to anticipate when and where you are going to want to stop. In fact observation and anticipation should always be your watchwords. This means there will often be situations where it looks like something may happen – a pedestrian approaching the kerb, or a car indicating to pull out in front of you – even if it doesn't. To be ready for any eventuality, cover the brakes with your first two fingers (on flat bars) when riding – this will save you crucial fractions of seconds should you need to do an emergency stop.

When coming to a planned stop, brake progressively, stop pedalling well before, then put one foot out to steady yourself as you stop. Don't

put both feet on the floor at once but keep most of your weight on the bike. Try this a few times with emergency stops thrown in. Get in the habit of moving straight into the Starting Off position above, ready for the off...



Practising in quiet streets is a good confidence builder

Starting out

Can you fix it?

Bike maintenance courses cover many of the techniques you will need out on the road: from how to use basic tools, cleaning, fixing punctures, adjusting your brakes, making sure your gears run smoothly and much more. Here are just a few courses...

The Mud Dock Bike Shed, Bristol
£5 ladies night workshops and demonstrations with wine and nibbles. ☎ 0117 9292151, www.mud-dock.co.uk

Life Cycle UK, Bristol
Workshops of one module per week for four weeks or Cycle Surgeries for large organisations. ☎ 0117 929 0440, www.lifecycleuk.org.uk

Oxford Cycle Workshop, Oxford
membership costs £25, which includes bring-your-own-bike maintenance sessions and other discounts. ☎ 01865 204799, www.oxfordcycleworkshop.org.uk

Cycle Training UK, central London:
one-day courses every month £60.

☎ 0207 5823535, www.cycletraining.co.uk
For other classes at your local bike shop in London see Transport for London: www.tfl.gov.uk.

Pedal Power, West London
Workshops are held each month for Pedal Power members costing £10 per year, but new members get their first workshop free. ☎ 020 8746 2120, www.pedalpowerlondon.org

Edinburgh Bicycle Co-operative
Branches in Edinburgh, Newcastle and Aberdeen. £16 for a half day, £45 for a day of intensive training. ☎ 0845 257 0808, www.edinburghbicycle.com

Try your local bike shop, cycle groups and local authorities or teach yourself with these useful websites: www.parktool.com/repair/, http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Bicycle_repair
Also get Sustrans to send you a leaflet on maintenance and for workshops near you: ☎ 0117 929 0888, www.sustrans.org.uk

or moving out to turn right. Otherwise, there's probably no need. Signal early on because you're going to need your hands on the bars to steer and change gear."

Since it was all coming together, we rode to the nearby High Street, which felt a bit like a computer game; dodging people crossing the road, car doors opening, people reversing. One at a time, I negotiated these obstacles and reached a mini roundabout where we U-turned slowly and went back for more.

I actually had a smile on my face. "Now you lead us," said Veronica. I took over, leading her left and right and on to busier roads. "Good positioning. Well anticipated. Excellent. Look behind," I kept hearing while heading for home.

"Okay, well I must get on," said Veronica, drawing alongside me. And that was it. Off she went and off I went. I can now officially cycle.

If you know anyone who may benefit from lessons like these, or you have a spouse that you'd like to introduce to the wonders of weekend rides with you, the CTC website has a list of accredited cycle trainers all over the UK: www.ctc.org.uk, ☎ 0870 607 0415. Life Cycle UK cover Bristol, Bath, Gloucester, Cheltenham and a one hour lesson costs £25. www.lifecycleuk.org.uk, ☎ 0117 929 0440.

For a comprehensive commuting guide on what kind of bike to ride, what to wear and what you should take with you – plus more roadcraft advice – see page 35



Ellie perfects signalling and steering one-handed



STEERING CONTROL: Start by cycling round in a big circle, working inwards into a tighter circle with tiny turns of the handlebars.



LOOKING OVER YOUR SHOULDER: Some will find it easier to look right than left or vice versa. Practise both ways by twisting the waist and getting a really good look behind. Ask someone to stand behind you and shout: "How many fingers am I holding up?" If you wobble, try again, this time making sure you keep some of your attention on continuing to steer straight with the handlebars.