

Taking a spin around a spinner of news

It's strange what happens to those who ride bikes. They meet the oddest of people, find themselves in the quirkiest of situations. Peter Reynolds takes off his cycle clips and shares some of those moments

This morning it was Peter Mandelson who popped up in front of me on my cycle ride through London.

It's a regular, enjoyable and meditative experience. Strangely, it frequently brings me into close proximity with London's great and good. Maybe it's only in those few minutes each day that I am allowed to move in their elevated circles.

I think I irritated Mr Mandelson a little. Pedalling south down Ledbury Rd, approaching Westbourne Grove - me, a rather dishevelled, unshaven figure unwashed but enjoying the morning sun and there was

another, in similar condition but on foot in baggy shorts, not looking too happy.

We hesitated for each other. I adopted a motorist's attitude and he waited whilst I crossed the Grove. I acknowledged him with a friendly "Mr Mandelson".

"Good morning", he replied, the irritation evident that I had made him wait. The delight of cycling is to be motorist one minute, pedestrian the next - as it suits. Mr Mandelson should sympathise with this happy, chameleon condition. The thought amused me as I pedalled on.

It would be impossible not to admire a man who, whilst not the original, must be the most notable "spin doctor" of all. Yet, I fear that he has committed the cardinal sin, ignored his blind spot and chosen himself as his client. He cannot see the way that he is seen, even thought that is the essence of the skill he sells.

In the moment when one passes by on a bike, one can detect a lot. The bystander is ob-

served without observing and by the time they do, you are gone. Mr Mandelson looks strained, and well he might. The management of perception is easier when everything is potential and the reality of government does not interfere. He has succeeded without compromise in his goal, obtaining the all-pervasive, dynamic, "without portfolio" role which is the zenith of his art. But should he have gone on to take on this Millennium job and even more?

The skills that are required of a spin doctor are - the analogy must be made - of those of a spin bowler: skilful in a gentlemanly way, deceptive within the rules, defensive and conservative in approach, making way for the fast bowler to come through but seizing any opportunity that is presented. Are these the same skills that are needed for the new role Mr Mandelson occupies?

To be a spin doctor, a manager of communication, is an honourable profession, a skill essential to the presentation of



any message in a world where truth is subject to endless distortion. I am unsure that it is what is needed to be part of government.

Encouragement is also appropriate for someone who, in that unguarded moment, looked as if he needed it. Mr Mandelson takes full credit for managing New Labour through the media maze and into government. The country needs people who have the

ability to manage communication like this. But do we need them running the country?

So I pay my respects yet I question his present role. Perhaps I underestimate him and he has other skills which we do not know? Or - is this the Peter Principle? I feel pretty sure that the man who is expert behind the scenes is not generally the man who is expert up front but, perhaps, he will confound us all.

of techniques, every extra inverted second increases the chance of your helmeted head clashing with a rock downstream. Serious canoeing is a far cry from the

Russett spares onlookers any embarrassment during his transformation, changing on a little mat by the car, head poking from an enormous towelling bag complete

and even heated pools to master techniques including the roll, p to the choppy stuff can be surpr

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RE-CYCLED

When Norman Lamont came to my rescue

Where Kensington Park Road joins Pembridge Gardens, the flow of traffic from Notting Hill Gate swoops round on to a mini-roundabout that crowds with commuters bustling to and from the Tube station. On a rainy morning it's a treacherous and surprising mêlée of London life. For good reason, then, today my bicycle was by my side and wheeled carefully across the busy junction. Ignorant of any weather forecast, I had been unprepared for the rain and was now dripping wet. Then who should come waddling across the road but Norman Lamont, in pristine pinstriped condition, holding an umbrella aloft.

My cheeky greeting, "Some would say you're not wet enough!" prompted a friendly smile and the umbrella shared. We walked towards the Tube - I assume that that is where he was going - and I had the impression of a shrewd and kindly man, intent on some business that must disappoint him, way below the heights where once he was a main player.

"Oh, who'd say that then?" was his robust response. I was encouraged to ask, what did he think of the new leader? What reply I expected, I do not know. I'm not sure I know what response I'd give if asked the same question - and in those doubts, perhaps, is the essence of the answer. Loyally, though: "Oh, he's wonderful isn't he?" I suggested that even in view of recent events, it would have been disastrous for the Tories if Ken Clarke had been chosen, and I would swear that Mr Lamont's face dropped slightly, which seemed in contradiction to his earlier view.

We parted company with a nod and a wave. It makes no sense and is at least discourteous to try to wheel a bicycle around such a busy corner, so I was confined to the road. I was left with a strong sense of a man grievously wronged, yet intensely loyal. Someone who took it on the chin on behalf of colleagues, and who remains rather bemused at the way that fate has treated him.

What cruel judgements have been made of this man! In that instant of unexpected confrontation, when one's guard is down, integrity is evident or not. I judge entirely from instinct, with no qualification except my own experience, and I want to be more generous than others. I think his intellectual and technical skills have never been in doubt. I don't see how his courage of fortitude can be questioned. Perhaps it is only in self-serving skills that he has failed, in which case it may well be the residents of Kingston and surroundings who are the real losers. In the way Mr Lamont offered me his umbrella I see a simple but appropriate metaphor. This is a generous yet pru-

On the trail of the

From cider in a pottery to home-made lemonade in an almonry, John Shearlaw takes a walk around the Somerset Levels.

Somerset in late autumn is cider country. Everywhere there is the tangy whiff of freshly pressed apples. This six-mile circular walk round the heart of the Somerset Levels begins and ends with cider. Along the way it uncovers other mysteries of the moor, once a teeming centre of commerce, now one of the world's most important sites for wetland wildlife.

Cider-maker Bruce Bond and Mary Kembery, a potter, are open all year at Smocklands, just outside the village of Drayton, some eight miles east of Taunton. Bruce's potent brew, Black Toad, takes its name from a creature that survived 30 years in an old cider sump. For 50p a pint, takeaway container included, you can decide for yourself whether to feel sorry for him.

It's downhill from here and right on to School Street, towards Midelnay Manor (c1490), which stands on a small rise. All around is the criss-crossed landscape of the moor, with drainage ditches (or rhynes) bisecting the fields like pencil lines.

Turn left at the bridge, signposted to Langport, and follow the raised bank of the Isle river to Midelnay pumping station and the Parrett river. Mussel shells crunch underfoot, dredged from the river to make a path.

Herons crank along the banks, searching for the Levels' most elusive wildlife treasure - the eel.

It's a mile-long stroll through the willow banks to Muchelney bridge. Cross it to visit the medieval monastic settlement of Muchelney Abbey.

In the adjacent parish church of St Peter and St Paul a painted ceiling, dating from the early 1600s, includes surprisingly topless angels. At the nearby almonry complex, refreshment is at hand, probably for the first time since the Dissolution. Smoked eel, chocolate cake and home-made lemonade attract visitors all year round.

After returning to the river, recrossing it and turning right, the path follows the Parrett to Muchelney Bridge



winter much flooded, and become the f

The valley port's elevations standards ancient times was water. A Levels, the trade artery; town was a vital local industry the economy formed their in 1909 St only to the E

The glory the river may times. The I

here and how to learn

Parakart is very new. The UK now has a grand total of nine Parakart Association (PKA) approved instructors who can offer training courses and advice on buying equipment.

A basic set up includes: buggy (£199 upwards), 3-4 metre power kite (£200 upwards), harness (£45), protective pads, helmet and goggles. Waterproof clothing

mission, reducing stress on the arms and upper body.

This is a good idea, with an official speed record of 54mph, and over 60mph claimed unofficially.

Just trundling round in circles for the fun of it is enough for many, but there is also an aggressive racing scene (competitively trundling round in circles for the fun of it) in which Brits excel.

UK's most comprehensive training set-up, with three instructors based in Salisbury. Their one-day, all-inclusive starter courses cost £40, and wind permitting should have you successfully performing the basics by the end of the day. The first three readers to write to them at 45-47 Fisherton Street, Salisbury, Wilts SP2 7SU, will receive a free training course at their Salisbury base on 8 February 1998.

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RECYCLED

Westbourne Grove: a call from Björk

From the shops of Queensway, past cheap Indian restaurants, designer furnishers, run-down grocers, video stores – through the nightmare, five-way Chepstow Corner where the buses terrify the bravest cyclist. This is Westbourne Grove, where poverty and wealth exist side by side as nowhere else in London.

I pedal past Madonna's favourite jewellers, the Antony Worrall Thompson restaurant and a sudden clutch of antique shops, to the very centre, where eccentricity crowds upon chi-chi health club, where the ultimate designer caff overlooks prizewinning public toilets – the very point where, each year the Carnival parade is judged. Where else would you expect to pass by Björk, surely the oddest woman in town?

I push on towards Portobello, and the realisation comes only when I've cycled a few yards past. She sits alone on a bench outside the pub, mobile clamped to her ear, a bizarre collage of unrelated garments and the earnest, squeaky sound of her voice in what I assume is Icelandic, and, even judging from that tiny snippet, was evidently of some importance or concern.

What could possibly be of concern to this strange lady? It must be the pursuit of some creative endeavour, a new venture into realms of music, sexuality and art with which to bemuse and fascinate her public.

Or maybe it is a recalcitrant boyfriend, some pushy impresario.

The Grove: poverty and wealth, design and eccentricity, glam and Christianity; elegant beauties, down-and-out beasts. This tiny woman, multicultural, arty and intense, evident wealth in Oxfam clothes, personifies it all.

Pedal along the Grove any day of the week, and you will find it's London's *passeggiata*. This is a wonderful, brave, spirited area, and Björk is perhaps its definitive inhabitant.