

Bryony Gordon



MAD WORLD

An e-bike nearly killed me – this dangerous fad has to be stopped

I was nearly killed the other morning on my walk to the gym. There I was, imagining what unique hell the Crossfit instructor might come up with for that day's class (burpees three ways? Kettlebell swings?) when I came to a bottleneck of pedestrians trying to work their way around four bicycles that had been parked slap bang in the middle of the pavement outside McDonald's. A group of food delivery riders stood chatting on either side of the bikes, blocking much of the rest of the walkway as they waited to pick up their orders. Meanwhile, pedestrians like myself queued politely to get past, the riders seemingly oblivious to us.



Walking into trouble: e-bikes left on pavements are a pedestrian hazard

Then, just as it was my turn to navigate what remained of the pavement, one of the riders, clearly arguing with a colleague, lurched backwards suddenly, gesticulating wildly. To avoid being knocked over by him, I instinctively veered off the pavement and into the road, where a double-decker bus promptly passed half an inch from my head.

I felt the rush of air as it drove past me. The hairs on my arms stood up. A surge of adrenaline shot through me, as I became vaguely aware of a woman asking if I was OK. I nodded, and carried on my way, one of those “sliding doors” moments that could have ended very differently, were it not for a few, tiny millimetres.

Not a single one of the riders acknowledged what had happened. I suppose they would probably argue that I should have checked the road before I veered into it. Then again, I might counter-argue that as a pedestrian, I should be able to walk on a pavement that isn't blocked by numerous bicycles.

Still, it's no wonder the delivery riders feel entitled to use the pavements as their own personal bike parks – go to any city and you will struggle to walk more than 100 yards without having to dodge an e-bike dumped in the middle of the street. These bike rentals are all the rage right now, because they're quick, they're cheap, and they're environmentally friendly. But there are almost no proper docking stations – they are operated through apps – meaning that these chunky, clunky cycles are being left all over pedestrian walkways, with little consideration for anyone travelling around on something as old-fashioned as their own two feet.

I've taken to photographing particularly idiotic examples of bike parking and posting them on Instagram. As a result, people have started sending me snaps they have taken. The other day, a woman shared a photo of an e-bike that had been parked upside down on its handlebars. I'm sure whoever parked it this way thought it was terribly funny at the time (midnight, on the way back from the pub), but to the early morning commuters who come across these bulky bikes, they are rather more annoying.

What is an annoyance to me is downright dangerous to anyone who is disabled

Still, what is an annoyance to me is downright dangerous to anyone who is partially sighted or disabled. Recent research by Guide Dogs found that 97 per cent of people with visual impairments had encountered problems with street obstructions, citing a “dramatic” increase in the

number of rental e-bikes and e-scooters.

A report published this month by the Policy Exchange think tank found that the dumping of e-bikes had turned many pavements into no-go areas for the disabled. It said that the failure of government, councils and police to tackle the problem meant they had become a “significant safety risk” to the 20 per cent of people with disabilities.

Lord Shinkwin, a parliamentarian who is himself disabled, has said that discarded bikes have made cities “completely impassable” for wheelchair users. “At best it’s obstructive and

impassable” for wheelchair users. “At best it’s obstructive and at worst downright dangerous. The fact is they are larger and much heavier than a normal bicycle, making them impossible to move from a wheelchair.”

Meanwhile, the National Federation of the Blind of the UK found that on a trip to Newcastle earlier this year, dumped scooters were “creating dangerous trip hazards” for visually impaired, disabled and elderly people. Not only that, the scooters they found were often in such a state of disrepair that they also posed a danger to those riding them.

And yet precious little is done about any of this. Local authorities struggle to act against e-bike firms because there are no bylaws or regulations around them. The odd council has signed contracts with dockless-bike firms, forcing them to move poorly parked bikes and to penalise riders who abandon them on pavements. And in Westminster, they have started seizing dumped bikes.

“We’ve contacted the major dockless bike operators and made it clear that if they don’t remove their bikes the council will – and we’ll charge them for doing so,” said Cllr Paul Dimoldenberg. “Any money we raise will go towards improving cycling infrastructure on our streets.”

Argggghh! How about improving walking infrastructure on our streets? It’s as if, in the great war between motorists and cyclists, us pedestrians have been completely forgotten about. I am so sick of hearing drivers sitting on their bums, whinging about Ulez and bike lanes.

In the meantime, the citizens we should be looking after the most - the disabled and the elderly - are finding it increasingly

hard to get around towns and cities because greedy e-bike rental companies have seen a lovely big loophole in the market and exploited it. And everyone else is forced to take part in a complex obstacle course when all they set out to do was a few burpees at their local gym.