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The Lee Valley velopark: a two-wheeled legacy opens to the public

After 18 months of work, the London 2012 cycling facilities have moved from Games to legacy mode and opened their doors to the public. The Leisure Review folded its maillot, adjusted its casquet and set off for the velopark.

For the staff of the velopark Monday 31 March is likely to have been a comparatively quiet day, even though it was the day that the Lee Valley velopark opened to the public. They will have been busy, of course, but at last, after all the recent business of official launches, major events and television coverage, after all the debate of Games-mode delivery and post-Games legacies, they will have been able to get down to some business of their own, the business of getting people on bikes and helping them stay there.

Before the public arrived, the velopark had already attracted plenty of coverage. Having waited eighteen months for the transition of the site into legacy mode, a lot of people were keen to see what this new bike-focused facility was going to look like. The formal opening happened on 12 March with press and speeches, important guests and a sprinkling of gold medallists; presentations were made and pedals were turned. This was followed almost immediately by the grand finale of the Revolution Series, the velodrome's first post-Games major event which gave several members of the GB track cycling team a chance to revisit the boards on which they had won so many medals at London 2012. A week later it was Sport Relief, putting the velopark in front of a huge Saturday night television audience on the BBC and serving as the start and finish point for a charity ride.

Such a build-up would probably ensure a full house on the opening day of any facility but the level of interest in the velopark suggests that there is a little more to the buzz than carefully managed public relations. With a long heritage of cycling in and around the capital, and with few cycle-specific facilities to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding cycling demographic, a great deal of hope and importance had been attached to the London 2012 cycling facilities by a great many people. Bookings have been brisk among clubs, corporates and individuals (with the usual grumblings among those who have found themselves already on a lengthy waiting list to get their wheels turning on the track) which suggests that the Lee Valley velopark is likely to serve as a regional focal point for cycling. With the Manchester velodrome having served for so long as the national home track, development centre and inspirational hub for GB Cycling's reinvention of our national attitude to cycle sport, the Lee Valley velopark seems well placed to offer a more southerly outpost of the British cycling revolution.

The facilities are comprehensive and the velodrome, designed by Hopkins Architects, serves as an elegant focal point and a beacon for those in and around the Olympic park. The numbers for a velodrome are always intriguing and London's is no different in this respect – the track comprises 92 square metres of Siberian pine held together with 300,000 nails; the velodrome took 98 weeks to be constructed and a team of 26 carpenters took eight weeks to install the track – but in other respects London's velodrome is unique. For example, maximal natural light minimises the use of artificial light and the heat it creates; the ventilation system enables the environment on the track to be

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micromanaged with natural air movement, minimising the need for air-conditioning (always disliked by elite cyclists) and minimising disruptive air currents across the track; the cable-net roof, which includes 16km of steel cabling, also reduces the amount of space within the building that needs to be heated, cooled or ventilated, enabling the optimal track conditions to be consistently maintained; entry and exit points within the glass walls that are a feature of the velodrome are also carefully designed to minimise drafts, serving as simple but effective airlocks as people move in and out of the building. Such features mean that the London velodrome is widely acknowledged as the finest and fastest in the world.

This velopark is said to be the only place in the world where track, road, BMX and mountain biking are all on one site; few venues could offer such options in such close proximity. Adjacent to the velodrome sits the BMX track, which is floodlit to maximise its opening hours. Although the track has been redesigned since the Olympics – the 8m ramp has been lowered to a less intimidating 3.8m and at 390m it is shorter by 60m – it will still serve riders of all abilities. The mountain bike facilities include 8km of trails with three skill levels: blue for novices, red for intermediate and black for experts. Designed and built by Dafydd Davis who designed the trails at the Coed Y Brenin centre, the mountain bike trails have their own bridge over the A12 and extend to the Lee Valley hockey and tennis centres.

Of all the velopark's facilities, the road circuit arguably carries the biggest legacy responsibilities. The Eastway cycle circuit, for many years one of the few closed-road cycle facilities in the country, was closed in 2006 to make way for the creation and development of the Olympic park. Fiercely protected and subsequently much missed by the capital's cycling community, Eastway had in its time hosted the great Eddy Merckx and seen both Bradley Wiggins and Laura Trott ride some of their earliest road races. With such heritage at stake, the road circuit has come under close scrutiny and many of the region's cycle clubs will be paying equally close attention to how the new circuit lives up to the promises made when Eastway was given up. The new facilities on which these hopes are pinned comprise a 1.6km, 6m-wide circuit that runs around the velodrome and BMX sites. The circuit is also floodlit and can be separated into three different smaller circuits to serve the needs of different types of training and group sessions. Initial impressions [see our active transport correspondent's review in this issue] suggest that there is much to celebrate.

In light of the Eastway connection, it was fitting that Laura Trott was on hand at the official opening in her role as ambassador for the velopark. She spoke with great warmth about her desire to be part of the inspiration for a new generation of cyclists and how important great facilities have been in the discovery and development of her own talent. Not having to drive all the way to Manchester or Newport, she explained with a laugh, would have made quite a difference to her and her family living in Hertfordshire.

Shaun Dawson, chief executive of the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, was careful to emphasise the legacy of Eastway during his presentation. "In the 1970s the great Eddy Merckx came to London and rode at Eastway circuit," he said. "Can you imagine? It would be like Pelé turning up at Hackney Marshes." Dawson explained that the vision of the velopark had been launched some 12 or 13 years ago when British Cycling was looking at expanding the impact of the Manchester velodrome and Lee Valley was considering the concept of a sports park. Then, with the 2012 Olympic bid, the opportunity arose to pursue these ideas and, with the success of the bid, came the need to not only deliver the venues but also a world-class legacy. This, he explained, was, and will be, down to great collaboration between all the partners involved in the development, delivery and management of the Lee Valley velopark.

Talking to the Leisure Review after the formalities were complete, Dawson was adamant about the focus of his work. "We've got to deliver on that legacy promise," he said. "We have to ensure that this is a popular and vibrant centre all year round. There has already been great interest and given the demand we will probably have to be open on Christmas Day!" He acknowledged the need for the development of income streams from corporate bookings, commercial events and sponsors, not least that of Cycle Surgery who will open a flagship store on site, but emphasised that this was about the need "to maximise opportunity for a significant public asset".

Asked about his most memorable moment of bringing the velopark from Olympic venue into the public domain, he paused to consider before recalling his first experience of riding on the velodrome. "I was able to ride on the track a little while ago and I got exactly the same feeling, that rush of adrenaline and achievement, that I got when I went rafting at the white-water centre," he said. "I only wish I was 30 years younger to have been able to have this fantastic opportunity, the opportunity of riding on this track." And what will success look like a year from now? "The velodrome and the velopark will be full of schools, full of clubs and full of commercial activities to support community development," he said. "It will be vibrant but it will probably be different to how it is now because it will have evolved in response to the needs of the people who use it."

As Dawson hurried off to talk to the BBC, we wished him luck and made a mental note to come back in twelve months to see what things look like on the track and in the rest of velopark. We are quietly confident that all the facilities will be busy bringing the joy of riding a bike to a lot of people from a lot of places. Less certain is that we will have grown to love the word 'velopark' but at least we will have got used to using it in a good cause.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review. His palmarès includes two very slow Etapes du Tour and, in common with all cyclists, his garage contains one bike less than he needs.

Read our active transport correspondent's review of the Lee Valley velopark facilities.

Read the Leisure Review editorial on the legacy of the Olympic park from the March 2014 issue

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