

Leith Cycle Co – small business big heart



Richard Dowsett owns and runs Leith Cycle Co on Leith Walk.

“We are a small independent retailer dealing mostly in bikes for commuters and families. There was a bike shop here before but I bought the business from some chaps who were moving on. We have tried in the last 10 years to turn it into something a little bit more personal with better service and better quality of repairs.

“Before this I was managing accounts for a business that sold fitness equipment, so I come from a health and fitness background; I have a degree in that and moved on into cycling. I’ve always cycled. It has been a lifelong interest, but it was frustrating going into bike shops around the country and getting really poor service.

“My aim here was to bring a good level of customer service to the bicycle trade. To be fair I think that is more common now, and I think customer service has improved. But it is still nice to be able to offer a friendly personal service to anybody who walks through the door.

“There are more cyclists now than before. There have been a lot of big sporting occasions which have brought cycling to the fore. And of course there is a lot of talk about sustainable energy not creating bad gases and a lot of talk about health and fitness. People try to keep themselves in good shape by doing some exercise. Plus there is the cost of fuel and congestion all of which make bikes a more viable option. People are trying pushbikes to get around the city.

“We sell electric bikes which are getting more and more

popular. I had been a little bit shy of that genre for a while because they were very expensive or not great quality unless they were. But now they are getting to be a bit more affordable and they suit so many people. Not everybody wants to be super super fit and a lot of people don't want to arrive at work hot sweaty especially if they don't really have anywhere to change.

“Edinburgh is a very hilly city so even for people who are in reasonably good health some of the long hills especially when you are carrying lots of stuff can be quite hard so they are really good for that sort of thing. You can use the motor to get you to work nice and fresh and then you can cycle home but the motor will get you up the steep hills.

“But there are also lots of other people who might have good reason for having an electric bike. Older people who are perhaps trying to get back into fitness, people with cardiac rehab or joint issues that they are trying to work on, electric bikes really help those people get onto a bike and get moving. Ultimately it is just a proper bike with electric motors, so you can ride it like a bike but have that extra assistance when you need it.

“I even like riding them myself!



Richard Dowsett Leith Cycle Co

Richard also offers [bike hire](#), evident from the range of bikes sitting outside on the street waiting to be picked up.

“This shop has always done bicycle hire, although we only have a very small shop so we can't have a particularly large fleet but the hire is certainly really really popular. Come the summer months we get people from all over the world emailing us and picking up bikes to go either round the city or up into the Highlands into the far reaches of Scotland.

“Some people go away for a few days and some for a few weeks. It is a really nice side of the business because we literally do get people from all over the world coming here just to hire bikes from us. And obviously during the Festival it’s really popular. There’s a lot of people who just don’t think twice about it. That is the way they travel, they go to a city and they get bikes, that’s what they do especially across the rest of Europe.

“There aren’t a lot of shops in Edinburgh doing bike hire – it’s quite hard work! It can be quite disruptive to the rest of your business when people just turn up wanting bikes and they need a lot of maintenance too. But we meet some amazing people from all over the place as well as local people. Some locals bring their visiting friends in to get a bike so they can all go out cycling together.

“It can also be a good way for someone who is thinking about getting a bike to try it out. They can hire a bike, have a go at doing their commute without making that financial commitment until they are really sure that that is what they want to do.

The shop is filled with spare parts for bikes, although Richard says it is harder to ensure that they keep everything that would ever be needed: “It is getting harder and harder for small businesses with the internet taking over. A lot of people will just buy stuff on their phones when they need it but we try and keep as many of the essentials as we can. Cycling is a very big category so it is impossible to keep everything and in most cases if someone comes in today I can have it for them tomorrow. Yes they could probably go and buy that on the internet but they wouldn’t necessarily know what to get or how to fit it so we are still very much needed!

“The most expensive stock we have for sale is of course a bike. They can range from £10,000 down to £250. Road bikes, high end mountain bikes and commuting bikes can

cost several thousands of pounds but we don't sell those every day!

"Essentially this is a family business. My wife Sarah does the books when she is not looking after our two small children and I have my colleague Rod who helps me keep the shop going.

"I do take holidays. We have a young family. Being a parent you have to fit in time off when the children are on holiday. Really I should be working all summer without a holiday, but then I would never get to go away with my family when the weather is nice.

"The shop doesn't close when I am away – Rod will be here running things!

☒ "I do see us as a public service. A lot of our customers use their bikes to get to work on a daily basis. So it is the same as if they were using a car or getting on a bus to commute. It is absolutely essential to them so we're trying to keep that element of Edinburgh on the move as much as we can. There is a lot of competition in the bike trade in Edinburgh now but we offer a service to people trying to get into fitness or exercise and their bike is the way of doing that.

"We offer a level of service which is different because anybody can walk through the door of this shop and feel unintimidated. We are not fit athletes, we're not young people who spend the whole day reading magazines about bikes. We're just normal people with families and normal lives but we're into cycling. We can relate to people of all ages. Both of us have been fairly unfit and also pretty fit so we know what it feels like!

"I was looking for this sort of business to invest in and I wanted something that was in an area of Edinburgh that still had a bit of a local feel to it. Cities tend to do that quite well; big cities are made up of lots of little areas. Leith

has its own very strong identity and a village feel about it. People are passionate about hanging on to the Leith-ness.

Situated on the part of Leith Walk that has been resurfaced, Richard says it was only a couple of years ago that the street was designated the worst place to cycle: "We now have a very short stretch of nice cycle lane now, but east and west of it is pretty much like a third world country. I think Edinburgh has a lot of work to do there. There's a lot of talk and there does not seem to be a great deal of action.

"Leith Walk is a really good conduit into the city centre and we do have a stretch of really smooth pretty well-marked cycleway right here. I see more people cycling up and down here now than we have done for a while.

"One of the best things about Edinburgh and one of the things that attracted me to this site is that we are only a short distance from the Water of Leith cycleway. That takes you all the way to Balerno where you can pick up the canal and head out to Falkirk. It is really pretty and goes through some lovely spots. Or going the other way you can head down to the Shore and turn left for Cramond and Fife or right to East Lothian.

☒ "We send a lot of people down the coast following the train line so they can have a beer and lobster in North Berwick and get the train back!

"Then there are all the cycle paths around Edinburgh up Arthur's Seat and the Innocent Railway Path. There are masses of great little routes that you can take from just on our doorstep. From that point of view Edinburgh is a fantastic city. Plus the fact that nowhere is really very far from anywhere else. You can get right across to the other side of Edinburgh in about 30 minutes if you are a reasonably good cyclist. So when you factor in trying to find somewhere to park and the cost of parking a bike is by far the best way to

get around which is why a lot of people hire bikes here when they visit on holiday because they can see the city really easily and quickly by bike.

Two German doctors hired two bikes and went all the way up north beyond Inverness. I then got an anonymous letter through the post with an Edinburgh postage mark on it which had two keys in it. The letter explained that they were really sorry but they had to go back home. We figured out that these two keys were for the padlocks on the two bikes we had hired out. It turned out that the bikes were locked to each other outside the police station in Pitlochry. The tourists had tried to get on a bus in Pitlochry but couldn't do that with bikes so they just abandoned the bikes, took our panniers and went home. So we had to go to Pitlochry and pick the bikes up!

We had another one where someone had a problem with a bike in Fort William and they just left it outside their B & B. They did not even think about taking it to a bike shop and getting it fixed! It doesn't happen very often actually!

Richard is thinking of starting bike maintenance classes. He firmly believes that there are some things that people should be able to do themselves.

It helps remove some of the irritating things about cycling. If you have a puncture then it can be quite annoying! It would be quite good for people to learn the basics, but there are some tasks which need specialist tools.

Richard has plans for expansion : he hopes to start up another shop in East Lothian and perhaps move to a larger shop on Leith Walk.

We have a good stock of VOLT bikes and we are the only stockist in Edinburgh right now.

☒ And what about moving into the tourist space by offering some guided tours? "Well, fitting in guided bike tours is

impossible for me time wise, but we do work with Tartan Tours and a little network of people who will help guide some of our bike hire customers around the city or further afield.

“But we may move into that in time.

“I do enjoy what I do – maybe not so much in the winter time, but yes most of the time I do enjoy the independence of running a small business! We meet some really nice people here. Every time you do something for a customer that makes them happy it gives you a real buzz!”

Contact Richard at [Leith Cycle Co](#) for all your biking needs.



Richard Dowsett Leith Cycle Co