

## **One thousand footballs a day: confessions of a former car commuter**

One thousand footballs. Now *that*, for some children (for those, at least, not completely overwhelmed by the electronic revolution), would be the ideal Christmas present. But other interpretations are also possible. Here we can use it as a measure (unofficial, but quite striking) of the carbon dioxide cost of a single day's commuting by car.

How so? Well, I live in Keyworth, to the south of Nottingham. It's quite a way from the university – but not extreme as a commuting distance, by modern standards. I used to drive every day into work. The round trip was something under fifty miles – a gallon of fuel, say. Burnt, and emerging from the exhaust pipe that makes about 10 kilos of carbon dioxide – and that in turn might be considered in terms of volume which (at normal atmospheric pressure) comes out to 5 cubic metres. That in turn is a little hard to visualise, but the average football is a little over 5000 cubic centimetres. So, with each cubic metre containing a million cubic centimetres – that comes out as 200 footballs per cubic metre. And hence to our thousand footballs. Not bad for a day's work.

With well over half a billion cars in the world today, small wonder that the Earth's carbon dioxide concentration is rising fast – possibly faster than at any other time in Earth's history. That will have all kinds of consequences, from global warming to ocean acidification. And so, how can one do anything to – even very slightly – put the brakes on this trend?

Forsaking one's car and throwing oneself on to the tender mercies of the bus and train network is one way. How does it work in practice? Well, for the past year, I've been doing exactly this, and here's a progress report.

First, there's the question of convenience and good old habit. It's just so *easy*, for sure, to step into the car, switch the radio on, and swing out on to the road. In my case, one has to substitute that for walking to the bus stop (close by, luckily), then waiting for the bus. Once on the bus, it's half an hour to the railway station – then taking the next train for the half-hour's journey to Leicester station – and then twelve minutes' brisk walk to the department.

It's an hour and a half one way versus under an hour. So – it takes longer. It's more expensive. I haven't done the sums (which are complicated) – but it's probably not hugely more expensive, all in all. It's less flexible, because you're dependent on the bus and train schedules. And – when you're beginning this adventure, a major stumbling block is ignorance of quite how these schedules mesh together – for some trains are definitely better than others (those that you can board early, and sit in the warmth – rather than stand on the platform until doors open just before departure). There's a certain amount of preliminary trial and error. It's good during the day (frequent buses and trains), worse in the evening (the former, in particular, become much less frequent).

*But* – driving a car is, in general, wholly wasted time (though there may be entertaining things on the radio). And, with modern traffic conditions, it's not a pleasure, particularly anytime around rush hour (which seems to be most of the day). Especially at the end of the day, it's plain tiring - which involves its own dangers, of course. There is the (non-trivial) problem of parking, too.

Whereas, for all the waiting at bus stops and delayed trains – on the whole, I've found public transport to be more relaxing - and, because of this, less tiring. I've also found it much more productive. One can work on the train and – with a little practise – almost equally well on the bus. Editing, writing, marking, preparing lectures and all that kind of thing is all eminently possible. It may only be four spells of half an hour a day – but it's also four generally *uninterrupted* spells of half an hour. All in all, I'm getting more work done. And when one wishes to step off the treadmill for a spell – there's always that trashy novel or the i-Pod.

All things considered – my life is significantly better. And I'm not going back to commuting by car. Why did it take me so long to change? Habit, I guess, and having the car by the house, and a soupcon of fear of the unknown (of not knowing, specifically, quite how all the parts of the public transport system fitted together).

If the University wants to encourage this (because the carbon savings, on a personal level, are substantial) – how can it help? Some things are already being done, I believe, such as reduced prices on season tickets. This might be explored further (money talks, after all). And finding ways to make work a bit more flexible might also help. There's possibly still scope for some creative encouragement, in all sorts of ways.

I'm already converted, though. The laptop's in the bag, and the trashy novels are being lined up for future journeys. And by five years time I'll be up to a million footballs of carbon dioxide, left in the ground. Wouldn't that be something?

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