

For years, Alastair Hignell has managed to travel with his electric scooter by train from Bristol to London with no difficulty. But now that the Disability Discrimination Act is in force, his scooter has been banned from First Great Western Trains. Here he describes the strain of being banned from the train.

The Strain of Being Banned From The Train

By Alastair Hignell, Patron of the MSRC.



Alastair Hignell

Alastair Hignell was a top international rugby player and professional cricketer for Gloucestershire before becoming a commentator and reporter for BBC Radio 5 Live. Diagnosed with MS in 1999, he lives in Bristol with his wife Jeannie and sons Adam and Dan.



The Silver Dream Machine in happier times

The Silver Dream Machine is having a nightmare.

Without much hassle, my electric scooter and I have been to Australia, New Zealand, France, Ireland and Scotland. We have coped with hops across the Channel, changing stations in Paris, as well as long-hauls across the oceans.

But now we are left kicking our wheels after being banned from my regular train service in the UK.

To add insult to injury, this exclusion was enforced in October 2004 - the very month when the Disability Discrimination Act was supposed to make our lives easier. The irony is that the ban was almost certainly brought about in response to the new requirements of the Act.

"You're Not Allowed To Take The Scooter On The Train!"

Our misery began when a train official accosted us at Paddington Station. "You're not allowed to take that on the train," she said, pointing at the Silver Dream Machine. How could this possibly be, when, in the three years since I bought the buggy I had made the journey from Bristol to Paddington regularly?

At first I thought this must be some joke. But when a ticket inspector repeated her dictat, I knew she meant it.

The official informed me I'd been 'incredibly lucky' to make the journey so frequently, as company policy had prohibited powered scooters for at least six years.

A Zero Tolerance Policy Towards Electric Scooters

Not surprisingly, I was underwhelmed with gratitude. But what really disturbed me was to conclude that it's only as a result of recent staff training sessions on disability that the company had decided to instigate a zero-tolerance policy.

The next day, I rang Great Western to take this further.

All the phones at their Customer Relations department went unanswered for so long that I resorted to an e-mail entitled



'Please Ring Urgently.' Despite acknowledging its receipt and promising to respond in due course, they then said they never received this.



When I did get to hold an e-mail conversation with manager Mr Crane, he was in no doubt that the DDA was to blame: If the Act hadn't come into force, he told me, the staff would not have had training days from which they came up with a "problem" with scooters which led the management to impose the blanket ban.

He said: "The creation of our own Disabled Peoples' Protection Policy (DPPP) and the implementation of Part III of the DDA on October 1st has forced us to review how our policy in all aspects of disabled travel is communicated to customer-facing staff, hence the ban on powered scooters has now been enforced. This is supported by the Department for Transport and practised by all national train operators."

They promise negotiations with all sorts of bodies, but when? I want action, not words!

At least he agreed that all my train journeys with the Silver Dream Machine were not figments

of my imagination. But from that day on, the message from First Great Western is: 'If you've got a scooter, forget the train!'

Their solution? A wheelchair! Mr Crane told me: "Whilst I do accept that it may not be your preference, I can confirm that all types of powered or manual wheelchairs can be conveyed on our services".

And, amazingly enough, it doesn't matter how big the wheelchair or how small the scooter. Yet somewhere in the company's Disabled People's Protection Policy pamphlet - not far from the mission statement promising "our goal is to provide a train and a station network that is accessible to all our customers and meets the needs of those with disabilities in particular" - is a regulation prescribing the maximum length and width of wheelchairs permitted on their trains:

So says the company's 'Advice on the Carriage of Wheelchairs:' "Dimensions: The only restriction we place on the carriage of a wheelchair is that they are no wider than 700mm and no longer than 1200mm."



Yet my Freerider Richmond 4 measures 600mm wide and 1170mm long, thus falling within the wheelchair size guidelines!

Despite this, it is still not allowed on the train. Nor, according to Mr Crane, is any sort of powered scooter,



Got a scooter? Forget the train

"irrespective of whether the unit is folded down or not".

But First Great Western is not banning mothers and toddlers from their trains. If a parent wants to travel by train with one of those giant buggies, and all the paraphernalia that goes with it, First Great Western staff will be only too happy to offer assistance.



But if you want to take a powered scooter onto the train, and could fold it into smaller and neater packages than the afore-mentioned buggy, and even if you could do all this with no assistance at all from train or station staff, you would still be banned. How bizarre is that?

Mr Crane's assertion that it is "ludicrous" to compare baby a baby's buggy with a smaller powered scooter suggests a lack of knowledge of both items.

One wonders whether the ban on scooters is primarily to protect staff rather than help passengers. Mr Crane said: "We are looking in detail at how we develop a system that is fairer to those users of lighter-weight models but which at the same time does not place the burden of responsibility upon our station staff." But the staff have to decide whether a wheelchair fits their guidelines anyway – so what's the big difference?



Isn't this all a nonsense when the Disability Discrimination Act is in force? Yes, First Western does acknowledge that " a total blanket ban on the carriage of powered scooters is incongruous within the current climate of making services more accessible to disabled people."

But of course there's a catch. The transport provisions of the DDA have a get-out clause: Rolling stock that's more than 30 years old is exempt! And no new rolling stock is planned before the end of the company's franchise on April 1st 2006.



So, only a year and a half to go before a decision is made about whether a train company will introduce rolling stock that might some time in the future enable disabled passengers to travel as freely as the DDA intends they should. But meantime there's not much hope for powered scooter users like me. Now, that's what I call ludicrous !

How has this ban affected my life? It has severely reduced my ability to travel freely, and I have

already had to cut back on certain engagements.....e.g. dinner at the House of Commons. I have to drive more, and I take the strain instead of the train.

So how did I and the Silver Dream Machine get back to Bristol, I hear you wondering? Well, First Great Western agreed to bend their policy so I could get home.

Just this once, mind you.

Reply From First Great Western

The ban on scooters is not due to the Disability Discrimination Act. It has been in place for some considerable time prior to Part III of the Act coming into force in October 2004. However, as a result of the Act and the implementation of our Disabled Persons' Policy (DPP) we have been obliged to give our staff a clear message as to what our policy toward disabled travel is.

In virtually every area, this has meant improvements to the travel experience for disabled passengers, but in the case of powered scooters it has meant enforcement of the long- standing ban.

We believe a blanket ban is not in keeping with what the spirit of the DDA is trying to achieve and that is why we have initiated the industry-wide review of this policy.

There are five main areas of concern that caused the ban in the first place. These are manoeuvrability, weight, stability, speed and obstruction in the event of an emergency evacuation of the train.

There are over 150 scooter models currently on the market. These models have a massive range of technical characteristics with speeds varying from 4 – 8 mph and weight up to 169 Kgs (372 lbs or 26 stone!). Many have turning circles that are far greater than wheelchairs of the same size.

It is clear that many scooters are effectively road vehicles that are totally unsuitable for conveying on public transport - Mr Hignell has accepted this premise on several occasions.

It is equally true to say that some of the smaller, lighter models with an acceptable turning circle could probably be conveyed on public transport with little more problem than a conventional wheelchair.

It is determining how we create a policy that does not discriminate against this type of scooter and provides a clear message to our staff on the ground of what is and what is not permissible, that we are currently addressing.

Even with fold-down scooters there are still issues such as the combined weight of the constituent parts, the process of folding and un-folding where is it stored on the train, how does the passenger get safely onto the train without the scooter and how do they access facilities when the train is in motion.