A GOOD MOVE

What's it like towing a three metre long trailer through five miles of York's suburbs? Peter Eland found out as he moved office by bike.

The timbers arrive at the Centre

The platform in the office takes shape ...

and how it looks now.

ABOVE: Graham Horne of Wheel Alternatives donated Velo Vision a computer and 'executive' chair, to be picked up from his home in Bishopthorpe, a few miles south of York. Computers are surprisingly unfragile, and this one came to no harm at all as it was bumped back to the office, cushioned neatly by the chair. Not something I'd attempt in the rain!

MAIN PICTURE: Because the Centre is a bit isolated, and close to a rough area, it's all fairly high security: hence the fence, shutters and alarms

Looking back on the move into the Velo Vision office, I am struck by how easy it seemed at the time. I've been moving things around by bike, trike and trailer for years now, so some of the precautions and preparations just come naturally. Yet judged against what you can carry on a 'normal' bike, it was a serious operation. I hope this account of how I did it might be interesting and perhaps instructive if you are contemplating moving a big load, safely and relatively easily. Of course, you also need to bear in mind that York is flat!

I share my office with Wheel Alternatives, who run cycle courier services around the city. Their fleet of workbikes was very handy for some of the moving. Most of the time, though, I relied on home-built trailers towed behind my S-327 recumbent trike or my scrappy old MTB – both with low gears and good brakes. It's pretty much inevitable that any trailer you use for big loads will be home-built: really big commercial ones just don't seem to exist (except for the superlative Bikes at Work models from America). This isn't the place to talk about building trailers, but do overbuild, and don't worry about the weight – this is a utility vehicle.

My first task was to build a platform on 'my side' of the office, to bring my desk up to window height, and to create a huge storage 'cavern' below. Luckily, I had been offered some recycled timbers, recovered when the Scarborough lifeboat slipway was refurbished. The trouble was, they were in Haxby, a village to the north of York, and about five miles (8km) or more from the office. The individual timbers were 3m (10") long, 22cm (9") wide and 7cm (3") thick. A tricky load, clearly. The first step was to make a 'reconnaissance' to look at the timbers and to check out the route.

Some could clearly be cut to size at the garage where I was loading up, and would then be easy enough to carry. But the 'problem load' was going to be the two timbers which would go right across the room, supporting the joists. I almost weakened and asked a friend with a car and a roof-rack ...

But no! The weight was not unreasonable – the two timbers together weighed around 80kg. The problem would be finding a way of carrying them that would be safe and controllable. One method would have been to borrow a Cycles Maximus trike, and to have the timbers running up each side – but the Maxes were busy on delivery duties, and I had another idea.

So, packing a good set of nuts, bolts, drills, straps and ropes in a pannier, I set off for Haxby. At the garage, I dismantled the trailer, and balanced the two beams over the the 'cross-beam' connecting the two trailer wheels. Nails went in either side of the cross-beam to stop it shifting, and then it was strapped up hard against the timbers using a ratchet strap. To test strength, I stood on it – no problem.

The rest of the trailer is a rectangular frame with the drawbar jutting away from it. This needed to be secured to the front of the timbers. With no need to worry about a few extra holes, I simply bolted it all together with some M8 studding. Then, it was just a matter of drilling a hole for the flagpole, tying a bright plastic bag to the back, and I was away.

Gently up and down a side-street is always a good idea to 'bed down' the load and as a final check. Aim for a few potholes. I also tried a few emergency stops, to gauge the braking. All seemed secure, and the trailer tracked along nicely; with just the extra resistance of two rather squashed 12" trailer tyres to worry about. Rated at just 30psi, they were soaking up a fair bit of energy. I'd used them with heavier loads before, so wasn't worried about pinch flats or the like.

So, onwards slowly to York. The traffic was nice and patient as I swung around onto the main York road. It was just my luck to hit going-home time for the local schools, so I was treated to a chorus of "Nice bike!" and "Give us a ride, mister!" all the way to the end of the village. I'd been careful to miss rush-hour, but had forgotten about school...

I stopped briefly at the underpass for York's ring road, to check all the fastenings. Everything looked OK, so pulled off again, the load heavy up the very slight gradient out of the subway.

It's surprisingly tiring towing a trailer draining beyond the physical effort. I always feel very concentrated, always alert for unusual noises, always thinking of the extra length and aware of traffic building up behind. You've also definitely lost any anonymity, so I'm scrupulous about riding considerately, and generally wear a bright yellow top to look more 'official'. I pulled over several times to let traffic past.

Almost home, and the worst part of the journey. I had to cross a main road, which was busy with traffic, and it was a hill start at the junction. You'd hardly notice it unladen, but with that trailer in tow and with already tired legs, it was a stressful few minutes until a kind driver pulled up and let me out. After that, it was back streets all the way, and time to relax and take some photos before unloading.

The office is in an urban nature park, St Nicholas Fields, just to the East of York's city walls. Used for many years as a rubbish tip, the site was eventually judged too dangerous to develop (because of all of the nasty toxins) and for ten years or so it was basically left alone. In that time nature regenerated the site, and a surprising amount of wildlife had moved in. A local community group, the Friends of St Nicholas Fields, was formed in 1992 to manage the site, and in 1999 they applied for Millennium funds to construct the Environmental Community Centre.

The Centre's purpose is largely educational, and school groups often use the place. It's also the site for a community composting and recycling scheme. The whole building is a showcase for environmental technologies: the water supply is filtered rainwater, and heating is either passive solar (the building is triple-glazed, and the huge south-facing glass area means it heats up fast) or from a wood-burning stove. Composting toilets are used, so there's no sewage to dispose of.

Electricity is generated by the 2.5kW wind turbine and 1.5kW of photovoltaic cells. Any shortfall is taken from the national grid, and any excess power is sold back. The idea is for the building to be energy-neutral over a year, but at the moment more power is being used than generated. Velo Vision is partly to blame: they'd counted on all of the offices using laptop computers and LCD screens. That's not something I can afford just yet.

The drama was more or less over after moving the big timbers. Joists from the timber merchant were easily moved by trailer, and I borrowed a Maximus trike to get the floorboards. Only for my most expensive computer did I call a taxi it was raining heavily at the time. All in all, a good move!