



ROAD RAGE!

50 YEARS OF PLANS
FOR MOTORWAYS
THROUGH BLACKHEATH

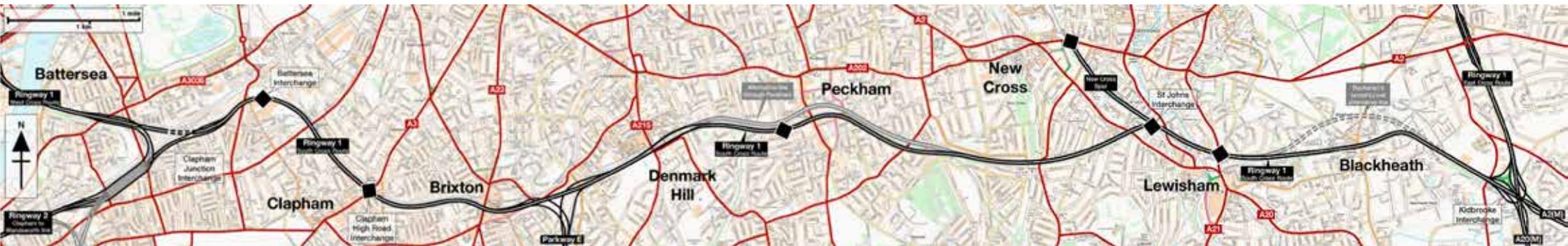
PAUL WRIGHT



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The South Cross Route.
The most destructive and controversial component of Ringway 1.



Utopian view of car travel in the 1960s. New motorways promised family holidays, easy access to friends, relatives and work.



Brutal devastation caused by motorway construction along Westway 1962-70.
An eyesore and loss of air quality for those living and working close by.



Blackheath Hill

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there were plans to construct an eight-lane motorway through Blackheath which would have destroyed most of the Village. This was only one, albeit the most extreme, of several plans for major roads through Blackheath developed in the twentieth century.

These plans were rooted in a single idea. Anyone who has ever sat in a traffic jam on Blackheath Hill may have wondered why the main road connecting central London to the major arterial road to Dover (the A2) is a single lane. The same question has exercised planners for decades and has spawned multiple proposed solutions: The Shooters Hill Bypass, the Dover Radial Route, the New Cross Spur and the South Cross Route section of Ringway 1. These were all designed to address this basic issue.

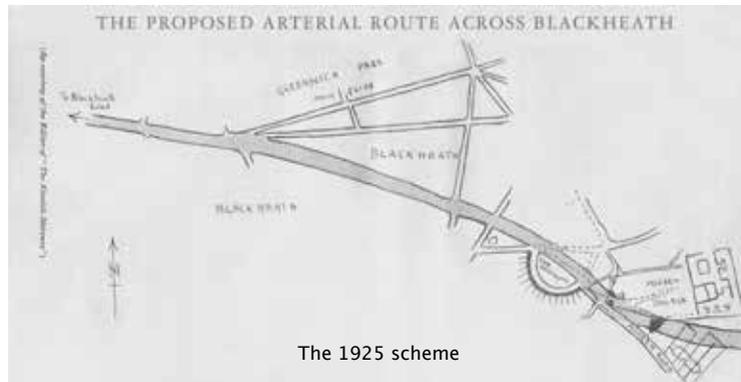
EARLY DAYS

Plans to drive new roads across the Heath date back at least to the eighteenth century. In the late 1760s plans were developed to create a major road across the Heath as part of a scheme for an improved link between London Bridge and Woolwich. The same plan would have seen the Heath turned over to sheep grazing on what has been described as an 'industrial scale'.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw various plans to run railways across the Heath. This led to the inevitable disputes with powerful landowners including the Brandrams and Cators. The main railway line ended up running south of the Heath and through a series of cuttings and tunnels as it continued on to Bexleyheath¹.

In 1914 an 'Arterial Roads Conference' convened by the Ministry of Transport produced a plan to create an arterial road that would connect Blackheath and Morden Road allowing traffic to bypass Shooters Hill. The plan was shelved, presumably because of the outbreak of war, but was revived in 1925, to the consternation of local residents.

¹ London Borough of Bexley: *The Bexleyheath Railway*, www.bexley.gov.uk



The 1925 scheme

Opposition to the 1925 plan was based partly on the argument that such a link was no longer needed – a surprising claim in the light of the burgeoning of road traffic in the inter war years. The claim derived from the fact that the bypass was originally intended to spare horse drawn vehicles the need to negotiate Shooters Hill. The growth in the use of motor vehicles and the consequent decline of horse drawn traffic, it was argued, now rendered the proposed link otiose².

The plan was abandoned but it represented the first serious suggestion to divide the Heath through the creation of an arterial road; an idea that was to recur in various forms over the following sixty years.

THE BRESSEY PLAN 1937

Car ownership in the UK increased almost ten-fold between 1912 and 1934 – from around a quarter of a million to 2.4m. In the early 1920s there had been one car for about every fifty people in the UK. By the mid-1930s the number had fallen to one car for about every seventeen³. Sir Charles Bressey, a retired civil servant in the Ministry of Transport, was set the task of addressing the implications of this for traffic congestion in London. He was encouraged in this by the Minister, Sir Leslie Hoare-

² Correspondence in the Blackheath Local Guide and District Advertiser, July 1925.

³ Wayne Asher: *Rings Around London*, Capital History, 2018.

Belisha, best remembered for giving his name to the orange beacons on pedestrian crossings. In compiling his report, Bressey had as an adviser no lesser figure than Sir Edwin Lutyens.

Bressey's proposals were set out in an official report in 1937⁴. Unlike later schemes, his report did not present a single grand plan. Instead, rather pragmatically, he identified twenty-four 'centres of congestion' around London and proposed sixty-six new roads or road improvements to address these. Along with piecemeal local improvements were several London-wide big ideas, such as an improved South Circular Road (to match the North Circular which had opened in 1930), an east/west arterial link between Acton and Leytonstone and a north/south link between Barnet and Croydon.

Significantly, it was intended that much of the north/south link would take the form of an elevated highway, reflecting Bressey's preoccupation – infatuation even – with ideas emerging from the United States. He had been particularly impressed by the 'parkways' being developed in that country; wide, fast-flowing roads with no traffic lights or roundabouts, connected to other roads by means of 'graded intersections' that is, flyovers and under passes. Bressey was an early proponent of the kind of cloverleaf interchanges which are commonplace today but were unheard of in the UK at that time.

Bressey's plans inevitably generated a great deal of attention when they were published, particularly in London. The Illustrated London News gave them extensive coverage in several of their editions in 1937. In one, they published a number of fanciful drawings based loosely on Bressey's ideas as well as others coming out of the United States at that time⁵.

It is important to note that while these ideas were inspired by the Bressey report, they did not form part of it. It is hard to believe that they were advanced seriously; they must have been suggested tongue in cheek. However, this is not very obvious from the text surrounding them where it is hard to find any suggestion of humour or irony. This is a significant

⁴ Highway Development Survey 1937 (Greater London).

⁵ Illustrated London News, various issues, 1937.



(Top) An overview of Bressey's plans for London roads.
 (Above) One of several off-the-wall ideas inspired by the Bressey report.

EVACUATION!

the most effective A.R.P

Overhead roads such as this can simplify and expedite exit from London.

London's streets are crowded enough in peace time. In a time of emergency it is appalling to contemplate the chaos! With every vehicle available pouring on to our narrow thoroughfares in search of escape, all traffic would be paralysed; choked roads would be death traps—targets the indiscriminate bomb would rarely miss.

Orderly evacuation is the most effective of all forms of air-raid protection; the measures to secure it are London's greatest and most pressing need.

Sir Charles Bressey in his report has outlined a practical scheme, which by the provision of overhead roads and tunnels could to a large extent simplify and expedite evacuation.

Designed primarily for peaceful purposes, they would become invaluable in times of war. The need for them is as urgent as any form of defence. The sooner they are put in hand, the safer will London's millions feel—and be.

Overhead roads need not be eyesores; note the graceful span of that concrete arch and the slim pillars that support, and afford access to, the broad double-track highway.

The cost of such roads will necessarily be high, but compares favourably with that of tearing down valuable buildings to widen and straighten existing roads. And overhead roads have the additional merit that under them



the traditional appearance of London can be maintained unimpaired.

CEMENT AND CONCRETE ASSOCIATION, 52, GROSVENOR GARDENS, S.W.1.

The Cement & Concrete Association thought that elevated highways were a great idea.



Two more fanciful schemes along The Embankment
and at Southwark Bridge.

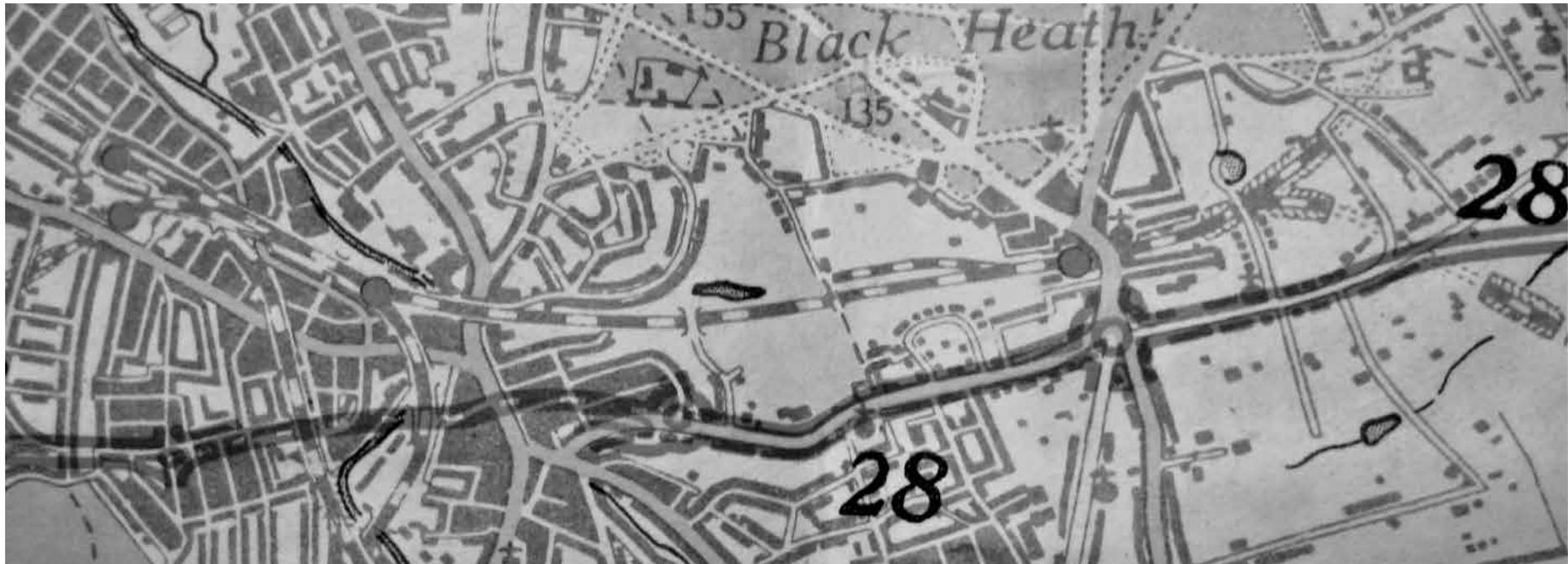
reminder that attitudes to traffic in cities were at best ambivalent in pre-war days. The car was king and so it would remain in the public's imagination for at least the next thirty years.

Another edition of the Illustrated London News from the time contained the advertisement shown on page 13⁶. This directly references Bressey's ideas for elevated highways and shows such a structure sweeping across the Thames and a stylised London. The emphasis is on the potential for fast, obstacle-free roads to facilitate evacuation of the populace in the event of war. This is not altogether surprising as the advert was placed at a time of heightened international tension prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. The emphasis on rapid movement of the population foreshadowed arguments advanced for the construction of the US interstate network during the cold war. Who, one might speculate, would wish to base their advertising on such an important issue of public policy and security? The answer can be found at the bottom of the advertisement – the Cement and Concrete association who would of course have had a considerable vested interest in the construction of an extensive network of elevated highways.

Bressey had identified the A2 running across Blackheath as one of his centres of congestion. His proposed solution was radical – the creation of the 'Shooters Hill Bypass'. Travelling west, this would have seen the creation of a traffic junction at Kidbrooke with a major arterial road running along Blackheath Park to the 'Concert Halls' roundabout, past the newly erected Selwyn Court and down Lee Terrace and Belmont Hill. At the junction with Boyne Road there would have been a further roundabout forming the entrance to a flyover across Lewisham. The road would then have continued to Brockley, just north of Nunhead Cemetery.

This radical scheme posed an early challenge for The Blackheath Society which, at the time of its publication, had been in existence for less than a year. The Society's reaction was one which is by no means unknown in amenity societies and can be paraphrased as: '*We agree something needs to be done – but don't build it here...*'. The Society suggested that Lee High Road

⁶ Illustrated London News, July 1938.



Brassey's plans for an arterial road along Blackheath Park and Lee Terrace plus flyover.

would provide a better link with inner London with any flyover being 'brought to ground' at Blessington Road rather than Belmont Hill⁷. Such an approach was neither surprising nor out of keeping with the nascent Society's views on Blackheath's place in the world. Less than a year earlier, the Society's founder and first President, Douglas Percy Bliss, had written in a letter to a local periodical: '*Can we any longer afford to sit by, indignant but unprotesting, while unenlightened public and rapacious private enterprise repeat the disastrous blunder of Eltham, or let Blackheath sink to the level of Lee or Lewisham?*'⁸. Blackheath owes an enormous debt to Douglas Percy Bliss but his views would not meet today's expectations regarding neighbourly tact or political correctness.

Bressey's ideas for Blackheath raise all kinds of imponderable questions. Would Blackheath Park really have been turned into a major traffic artery? What would have happened to the Concert Halls roundabout? What would the implications have been of turning Lee Terrace and Belmont Hill into major (presumably multiple lane) arterial roads? And how would the flyover at Boyne Road have worked in practice? We will never know, because the plans were never articulated to that level of detail. Bressey's ideas died a death. It is generally assumed that the outbreak of war provided the final blow, but the sheer complexity of dealing with over 150 planning bodies and the cost – at least £120 million at 1937 prices – also proved to be prohibitive factors.

⁷ The Blackheath Society letter to RIBA, 1938.

⁸ Letter from Douglas Percy Bliss to the Blackheath Local Guide and District Advertiser, October 1936.

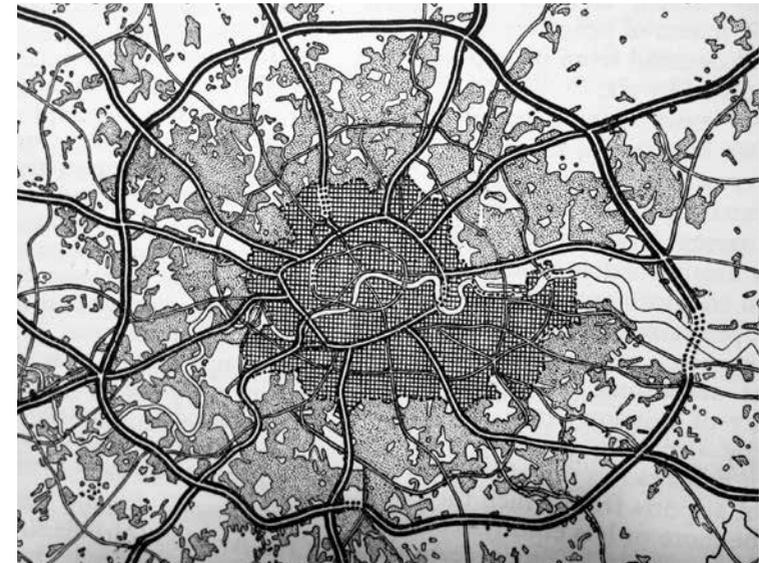
POST-WAR ABERCROMBIE

As allied victory in the Second World War became increasingly assured, there was a growing conviction that Britain should be a better place to live than it had been earlier in the twentieth century. Housing, health and education should be improved, with more opportunities and a better quality of life for all. The Beveridge Report embodied this ideology which also underpinned the election of the Labour government in 1945. Cities which had suffered extensive bomb damage would not only be rebuilt but reorganized to make them more rational and pleasing places to live. And this was going to be achieved through planning. The planners, it was believed, knew best; there was little need to keep those affected informed – let alone consult them. Sir Patrick Abercrombie, Professor of Town Planning at University College London was the personification of this postwar spirit. There is no doubting Abercrombie's sincere wish to make London and other cities 'better' but he was lofty, patrician and authoritarian in his approach, setting the tone for urban planners for a generation to come.

Abercrombie produced two plans for London before the end of the war⁹. His 1944 plan was comprehensive. It ran to 215 pages dealing with housing, industry, recreation and transport. His plans for the capital's roads accounted for only fourteen of these pages, but were nevertheless extremely radical. As the map shows clearly, he envisaged a set of ring roads surrounding London intersected by major roads connecting London with the rest of the UK. What we now know as the M1 for example, would have penetrated deep into London, terminating just north of Marble Arch. Abercrombie's plans retained the Bressey ideas of new east/west and north/south routes.

The innermost of Abercrombie's radial roads would have connected central London districts, running through Bayswater, Vauxhall and across a new bridge just east of Tower Bridge. Of most relevance to Blackheath however, would have been the road forming the second ring from the centre connecting New Cross Gate, Clapham, Battersea, Chelsea, Camden

⁹ County of London Plan LCC 1943 and Greater London Plan LCC, 1944.



(Top) Sir Patrick Abercrombie
(Above) Abercrombie's road plan – concentric ring roads.

Town and the Isle of Dogs. This road would not have passed through Blackheath but (travelling anticlockwise) would have run through Deptford before turning north to enter a new tunnel under the Thames before continuing up the west side of the Isle of Dogs. A spur would have linked this road to the main Dover road. Travelling east, the spur would have run along the existing A2 as far as the south west corner of Greenwich Park whereafter a new road would have cut across the Heath on its way to a major intersection at Rochester Way in Kidbrooke.

The Abercrombie plan went through a number of iterations during the second half of the 1940s. The Blackheath Society which had been in abeyance for the duration of the war turned its attention to the plans in 1948, regretting *'the revival of a proposal abandoned 20 years ago ... for a new major road across the Heath'* – a reference to the aborted 1925 scheme mentioned earlier¹⁰. The Abercrombie scheme for London was formally abandoned in 1950 mainly due to its prodigious cost. Small parts of it did materialise with the widening of the North Circular at Finchley Road, the widening of the Euston Road and the creation of a dual carriageway at Park Lane. In general, however, it became clear that Londoners just wanted to get on with rebuilding their city without regard to a grand plan – a problem that Wren had also encountered following the Great Fire almost three hundred years earlier.

But the need to do something about London's burgeoning traffic remained. Motor vehicle ownership in the UK doubled to around nine million during the 1950s. Something needed to be done and, notwithstanding the formal abandoning of Abercrombie's scheme, the idea of a circular arterial road around London had firmly taken root in the minds of politicians and civil servants and was to resurface in various forms over the next forty years.

¹⁰ The Blackheath Society Annual Report, 1948.



The spur across the Heath



THE 1960's PLAN FOR BLACKHEATH'S MOTORWAY

The plan outlined by Edmonds in 1962 was part of what was to become known as the 'Motorway box' scheme for an orbital road around London, though this wider context was not apparent at the time. Few details of the wider London plan were published before the late 1960s and it went through a number of iterations. The plan for Blackheath changed little however and is shown best in the following map produced by the (then) GLC in 1971¹³.

Tracing the route from the west (Blackheath Station), the road would have entered a cut and cover tunnel round about the Station car park on its eastward journey from Lewisham, emerging around the site of the Post Office before running along the line of Blackheath Grove and to the side of Wemyss Road. It would have cut across Pond Road and The Keep before entering another cut and cover tunnel beneath Blackheath Park on its route towards Kidbrooke.

- | | | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
| Joins railway | Beneath village | Alongside | Destroys |
| north of station | (cut and cover) | Wemyss Road | Blackheath Grove |

- | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------------|
| 5. | 6. | 7. | |
| Through | Across | Ends at | More detail of the |
| The Keep across | Blackheath Park | Kidbrooke | destruction that would |
| Pond Road | (cut and cover) | | have been wrought by |
| | | | the road can be found |
| | | | in the annexes. |



¹³ The LCC was replaced by the GLC in April 1965.

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MOTORWAY 'HORRIFIES' BLACKHEATH

Fight the L.C.C., a packed protest meeting tells the local councils

Staff Reporter

BLACKHEATH is "horrified" by the London County Council's plan for the Dover Radial route. And a packed protest meeting of villagers said just this on Tuesday night.

The meeting of more than 400 villagers, led by Shadow Cabinet Chancellor James Callaghan, passed the following hard-hitting resolution:

"This meeting is horrified at the L.C.C.'s published proposals of the Dover Radial Route, which it believes will unnecessarily destroy the character and amenities of the district.

"The meeting calls upon the Greenwich and Lewisham borough councils to oppose the L.C.C.'s demands and to reserve our representatives to discuss our case."

People poured into All Saints' Hall long before the meeting was due to begin.

By the time Mr. Callaghan, Christopher Chazomay, M.P. for North Lewisham, and local councillors filed onto the platform, Blackheath people were being turned away.

Others, determined to see the meeting through, pulled up their coats to sit on the hall floor and the piers.

Mr. Callaghan, who lives in Blackheath, said: "We are at the beginning of a revolution with our relationship between those who live in an area and those who wish to speed through it."

Peters out

He pointed out that the L.C.C. wanted to know whether the road would run through their new housing estate at Kidbrooke.

And he added: "This road has not been devised as a scientific project. It has been devised as a means of giving the housing people the go-ahead.

"The road peters out at St. John's. What happens there no-one knows. There is no co-ordinated plan in this particular scheme.

"While I am willing to accelerate traffic as quickly as possible around the Village, I believe the conduit and convenience of the people here is as important as that of the people who speed through it.

"If the road has to come here, we must ensure that it causes the minimum of inconvenience to those whose land and houses it will face.

"But I think we are right not to just put up a blind opposition to the scheme."

Devastating

Then Councillor Ian Hay Davison described in detail the devastating route the road would take through Blackheath.

He told how the "cut-and-cover" method of tunnelling would mean that houses would be knocked down, earth dug out and then the road laid.

Councillor Hay added: "Then they

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WHAT THE REPORTER SAYS

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THE GREAT BLACKHEATH MOTORWAY SCARE: PHASE 1 1962

Among the many distinguished residents of Blackheath in the early 1960s was James Callaghan, the MP for Cardiff North. Callaghan was to go on to hold all four of the great offices of state (Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Chancellor and Prime Minister) but at that time was a member of the Labour opposition under Hugh Gaitskell. In February 1962 Callaghan hosted a party at his house at 17a Montpelier Row. One of those present was Richard Edmonds, Roads Committee Chairman of the Labour controlled London County Council. The story of what transpired that evening is recounted in the volume *Guardians of the Heath*¹¹. 'Faced, as he imagined, by faithful political allies, Edmonds launched cheerfully into an account of the motorway the LCC was proposing ... The 'Dover Radial Route' was to come in from the south-east with a final link, probably eight lanes wide, between Kidbrooke and Lewisham. It would involve cut-and-cover tunnelling through Blackheath Park and the Village. Houses and shops would be demolished for a distance of about a mile alongside the railway. Blackbeath Grove, the Post Office and all the shops in the Village up to the apex formed by Tranquil Vale and Montpelier Vale would be completely destroyed'.

As the *Guardians of the Heath* notes, one can only wonder about the kind of reception Edmonds thought he would receive in outlining a plan which would not only have destroyed an historic and valued part of London, but the homes of many of those present. Callaghan is said to have responded: 'If you propose that in public Dick, I will personally lead opposition to it'.

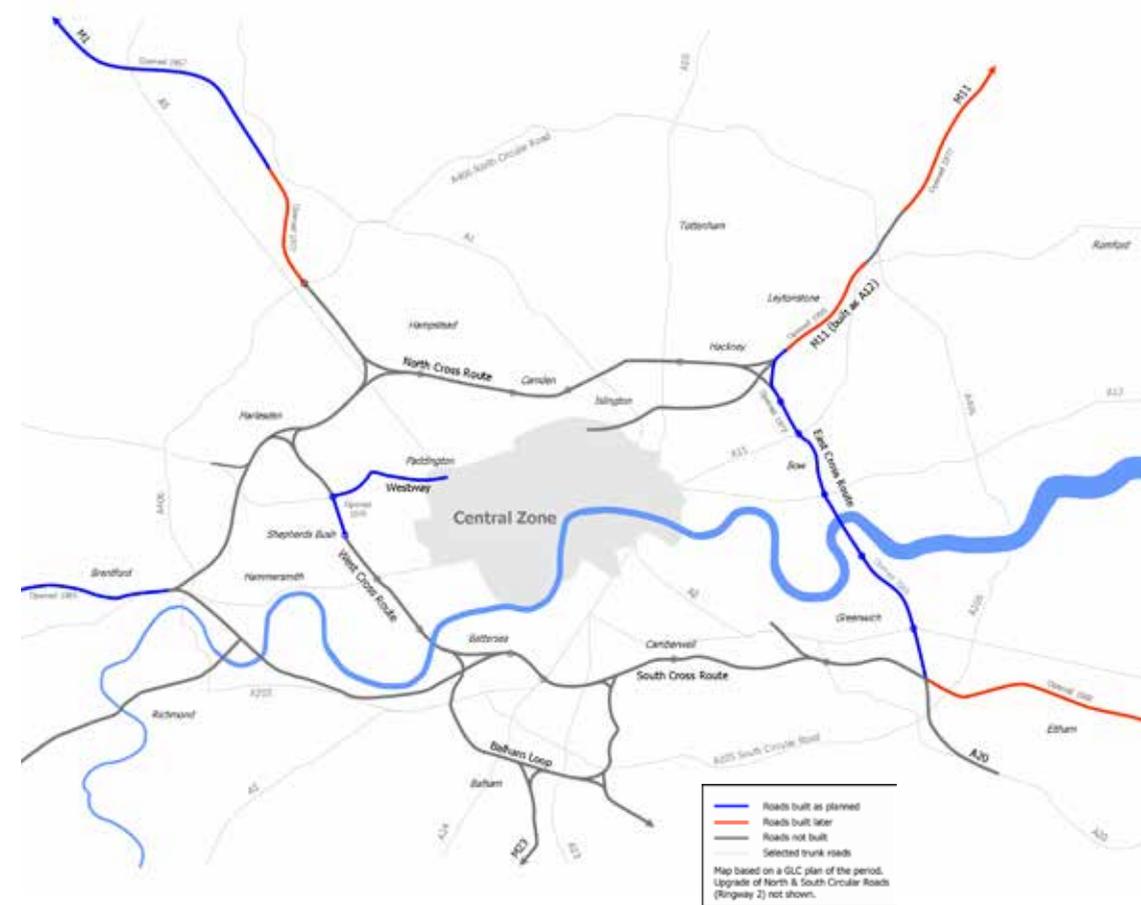
Surprisingly, and for reasons that are not recorded, the news of the motorway threat did not become public until June 1962 when an article in the Blackheath and District Reporter carried the headline 'Motorway Horrifies Blackheath'. A Dover Radial Route Campaign Committee was formed and the Cator Estate Residents Association, horrified by the proposed desecration of Blackheath Park, started collecting signatures for a petition to the LCC. In September Callaghan chaired a meeting at All Saints Hall which was attended by 400 people. The meeting was

Outrage in September 1962

¹¹ Felix Barker and Tony Aldous: *Guardians of the Heath*, The Blackheath Society, 2009.

addressed by current and future MPs for the area and local councillors. Callaghan was quoted as saying *'We are at the beginning of a revolution in our relationship between those who live in an area and those who wish to speed through it'*. Another of the speakers was Roland Moyle, a resident of The Keep which was in the direct line of the proposed road, who would later become MP for Lewisham North. The meeting was the genesis of the Blackheath Motorway Action Group (BMAG) which, in one of its leaflets warned that *'a path would need to be blasted for it {the motorway} right through Blackheath Park and the centre of the village itself ... many homes in its path will be destroyed, others will find themselves perched on the verge of a roaring maelstrom of traffic'*¹². The petition gathered 2000 signatures and was taken to County Hall personally by Audrey Callaghan, then an LCC councillor.

The LCC can best be described as having been disingenuous in responding to representations by local people. Local people need not worry it was suggested because 'the motorway won't visibly pass through Blackheath Village'. It was also claimed that the community would be no more divided than at present because the road would follow the railway. The points need hardly be made that, while the motorway would be underground for part of the route through Blackheath, this would be achieved by excavating a trench wide enough to accommodate an eight-lane motorway, resulting in the destruction of everything in its path. The trench would then be covered over and populated with early 1960s style buildings. Moreover, an eight-lane motorway is on a completely different scale to two railway tracks and would have irrevocably divided what remained of the area. An alternative idea which emerged during these discussions was that the road might be accommodated in a 'deep bore' tunnel running a little to the north of the main proposed route and under the Heath proper. As the name suggests, this would have been an excavated tunnel rather than a cut-and-cover trench and, as such, would have avoided large scale destruction of the Village. Attitudes to this idea were never more than ambivalent – it would have been better than the wholesale destruction of the area but unwelcome all the same. The idea remained in the background to become a serious proposition almost ten years later by which time attitudes to it had hardened considerably.



The London motorway box
(Ringway 1) as proposed in the 1960s.

¹² BMAG leaflet quoted in Asher op. cit. page 45.



(Top) Southwyck House Brixton, sometimes known as the ‘Barrier Block’ designed to sit alongside the motorway that never was.
 (Above) The Westway under construction cutting a swathe through west London.

THE GREAT BLACKHEATH MOTORWAY SCARE: ‘PHONEY WAR’ 1962-69

Following the alarms and drama of 1962, surprisingly little happened on the Blackheath motorway front. The authors of ‘Guardians of the Heath’ describe the LCC as staging a ‘tactical withdrawal’. Whether or not that was the case, no compulsory purchases were made and no work was begun. Again quoting the ‘Guardians’ volume: ‘For nearly seven years the {Blackheath} Society felt safe to turn their attentions away from the motorway to gentler matters such as clearing pre-fabs from the Heath, saving trees and debating whether it was desirable to reintroduce horse riding’¹⁴. Such was the level of complacency by the late 1960s that a Blackheath resident wrote to Roland Moyle, by then MP for Lewisham North, to say ‘my feeling is that people in Blackheath are surprisingly apathetic to the proposal’¹⁵.

What is very clear however is that the LCC/GLC remained wedded to their ideas of an orbital motorway for London and that road building continued apace in other parts of London. The planners’ focus was the so called ‘motorway box’ a rhomboid shaped road around London which incorporated the Dover Radial Route.

The LCC/GLC remained extremely secretive about the exact details of the motorway box, the lack of information – let alone consultation – reflecting the ‘planners know best’ philosophy of the period. As late as 1969, the GLC was claiming that there was ‘no firm route’ for the ‘South Cross Route’ – the southern section of the motorway box. We now know however that ‘the box’ as a whole would have been around 30 miles long and would have consisted of eight lanes with 23 intersections, 10 of these with motorways. 60 percent of the road would have been above ground and it would have resulted in around one million Londoners living within 200 yards of a motorway.

This detail was not disclosed at the time however and fragmentary information about the proposed motorway box and its likely path was often revealed in the most bizarre circumstances. The Blackheath

¹⁴ *Guardians of the Heath* op. cit. page 76.

¹⁵ Quoted in Asher op. cit. page 64.

Motorway Action Group itself stumbled on the fact that continuing west from Blackheath, the planned motorway would continue to Peckham, Brixton, Clapham Junction, Battersea and Hammersmith indicating that the road proposed for Blackheath was part of a much larger plan. The leader of the Labour group on Wandsworth council reported in 1964 that a housing project had been blocked because of LCC plans to build 'some road' alongside Clapham Junction. This, on investigation, turned out to be part of the planned motorway box¹⁶. Also in 1964, Battersea Borough Council was stopped from building a public swimming pool because, it turned out, the LCC had earmarked the site for road construction¹⁷. A legacy of this period of secrecy and obfuscation remains in the form of the 'Barrier Block' in Brixton. Now renamed Southwyck House, it is often mistaken for Brixton prison. It is a building whose design is no less startling now than it must have been when it was constructed in the late 1960s. It was intended to run alongside the motorway and its unusual design features arise from the need for it to contain and deflect the associated noise.

Notwithstanding the secrecy surrounding the grand plan, road building in London proceeded apace during the 1960s, often providing baleful examples of what might be in store more widely. The widening of the Euston Road and creation of an underpass (1964), the opening of the second Blackwall Tunnel (1967) and the Bow flyover (1970) all provided sobering illustrations of what urban motorways would look like. Most revealing of all however was the Westway, constructed between 1966 and 1970.

Many harrowing stories have been recorded of families and communities shattered by the Westway as it blasted its way through the inner suburbs of west London. The road came to have a particular significance for anti-motorway campaigns in London and elsewhere. Although not part of the motorway box/ringway scheme as such, the Westway was one of the appendages of the wider scheme designed to provide a direct route into central London. It was also mostly elevated, something which was recognised as having particular significance later when it was revealed

¹⁶ Asher op. cit. page 59.

¹⁷ Roads.org *Postwar Planning*.

that around 60% of the motorway box would be above ground. There was a growing realization that the dark, noisy and lead-fume filled concrete caverns to which those living adjacent to the Westway were consigned would increasingly become a major feature in the lives of many Londoners if the scheme went ahead.

As fragmentary evidence emerged about the proposed motorway box (later to be renamed Ringway 1) other parts of London began to mobilize. Gradually it became clear that the new road would devastate whole areas – 12 acres of Camden Town would be lost for example. And the housing implications, already vividly demonstrated by the Westway, started to become apparent. The GLC itself acknowledged that up to 20,000 homes would be lost across London, displacing up to 60,000 people, a figure which campaign groups challenged as being too low. This at a time when there was already a housing shortage; nearly 200,000 people were on waiting lists for council housing by the late 1960s.

A key figure in the London wide anti-motorway campaign was Douglas Jay, MP for Battersea North and a resident of Hampstead. Both areas were threatened by the new road. He was the main force behind the creation of the London Motorway Action Group (LMAG) to which the Blackheath group (BMAG) became affiliated. Roland Moyle, who by this time was MP for Lewisham North, joined the group along with twelve other London MPs.

Although they shared the same broad objective, relations between LMAG and other interest groups, including BMAG, were not always completely harmonious. Aside from its London-wide coverage, one of the main strengths that LMAG brought to the campaign was an insistence on rigorous, evidence-based argumentation. This approach was embodied in an academic called Michael Thomson, a transport economist at the LSE who acted as an adviser to LMAG. In a rigorously analytical but also surprisingly readable volume, Thomson was scathing about the empirical and analytical foundations supporting the Ringway scheme¹⁸. His conclusion was that, contrary to the GLC's view, London motorways

¹⁸ Michael Thomson: *Roads in a London Report of a Working Party*, London 1969.



Douglas Jay



Roland Moyle

would generate 70-100% more traffic than would otherwise materialise. Existing roads would be more congested with increased traffic in residential and shopping streets. Motorways would not, he argued, lead to savings in overall journey times, especially in inner London.

Thomson based these findings on rigorous statistical and econometric analysis. To some extent however he was underlining what common sense already suggested to many people. Charles Bressey himself had noted that the Great West Road which had opened in 1925 had at once attracted large volumes of traffic. But there had been 'no diminution' in traffic on existing routes (which included Brentford town centre). On the contrary, traffic volumes on those routes had increased two and a half times in the ten years following the opening of the new road. Bressey however had either not appreciated, or had chosen not to point out the significance of this finding¹⁹.

Taken in a larger context, Thomson was arguing against a tendency still seen today where policy makers observe a likely future trend such as an

¹⁹ Quoted in Asher op. cit. page 16.

increase in city populations or traffic volumes and conclude that more capacity must be created to accommodate this. Unsurprisingly, the projected increase then occurs as the new capacity is exploited. Without the new capacity created on the basis of such official projections, alternative outcomes may have occurred such as lower car ownership or vehicle owners choosing to limit their use of cars choosing instead to use public transport. A common sense version of Thomson's critique had in fact been provided as early as 1955 by the US social commentator Lewis Mumford who said: '*Most of the fancy cures that the experts have offered for New York's congestion are based on the innocent notion that the problem can be solved by increasing the capacity of the existing traffic routes ... Like the tailor's remedy for obesity – letting out the seams of the trousers and loosening the belt – this does nothing to curb the greedy appetite that caused the fat to accumulate*'²⁰.

THE GREAT BLACKHEATH MOTORWAY SCARE:

PHASE 2 1969-72

Blackheath, which had been designated London's first conservation area in 1968, was roughly awakened from its slumber in the following year by the publication of the 'finalised' Greater London Development Plan. This gave the go-ahead for the now renamed 'Ringway 1' scheme to include the 'South Cross Route'. Notwithstanding the change of name, this threatened Blackheath with the same eight lane motorway partly enclosed in cut and cover tunnels that had first been mooted in 1962. The GLC acknowledged that 124 homes and 29 shops in Blackheath would have to be demolished and that a further 221, presumably on the periphery of the road, would be 'seriously affected'.

This produced another call to arms. A pivotal event in the campaign was a meeting held in All Saints Church on 17 April 1970. Significantly, it was held in the church proper not (as with the 1962 meeting) the church hall – the rare if not unprecedented use of the building for a secular purpose. The church was packed notwithstanding heavy rain and the fact that the nation was spellbound that evening by the touch-and-go return of the ill-fated Apollo 13. In the course of this and a follow up meeting,

²⁰ Lewis Mumford: *The Skyline The Roaring Traffic's Boom*, New Yorker, April 1955.

£700 was raised – a substantial contribution towards a London-wide fighting fund of £5000 established by LMAG. The inevitable petition was launched and those whose properties were most directly threatened by the plans were invited to display black-bordered stickers to this effect.

The Blackheath Society's membership increased sharply in the light of the renewed scare. The number of household members increased from around 470 in 1968 to around 700 at the end of 1969²¹. Membership increased further as the threat continued, reaching around 880 by the time the crisis had passed in 1973.

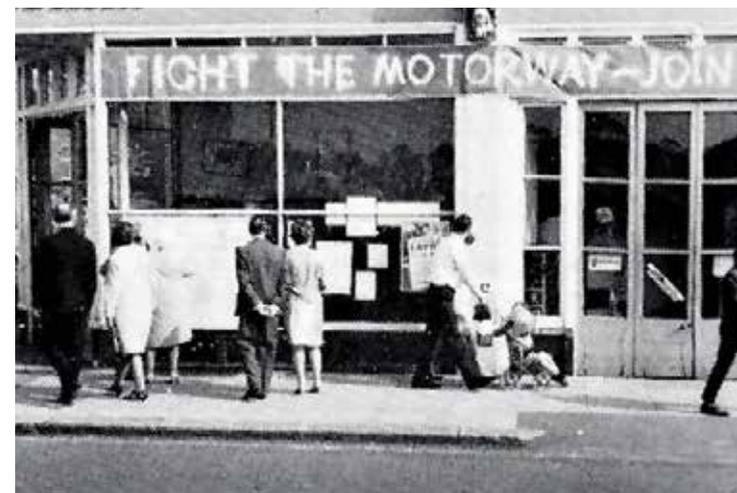
The Society made a number of critical interventions. A campaign headquarters was established in (ironically) a shop that had formerly sold car spares on the corner of Royal Parade and Montpelier Vale. Most important of all, the Society's committee endorsed a proposal by the newly appointed Chairman of the Society, Bobby Furber, that the Society should spend £1000, a significant sum in 1970 prices, on a document that the Society would submit to the Committee of Inquiry that was to be held into the Ringway scheme. This document, finalized in September 1971 and called the *Proof of Evidence*, was the work mostly of Roger Martin and Neil Rhind. It set out a meticulously argued case against the motorway, supported with extensive background on the Village and its history.

The final paragraph of the *Proof of Evidence* summed up the Society's position: *'The GLC has accepted that Blackheath is a special case where 'special solutions' will need to be considered. ... In our view 'consideration' is not sufficient. The destruction of Blackheath Village and the spoiling of the quiet residential areas which surround it is not justifiable in terms of some hoped for, but as yet unproven, improvement to London's orbital traffic conditions'*²².

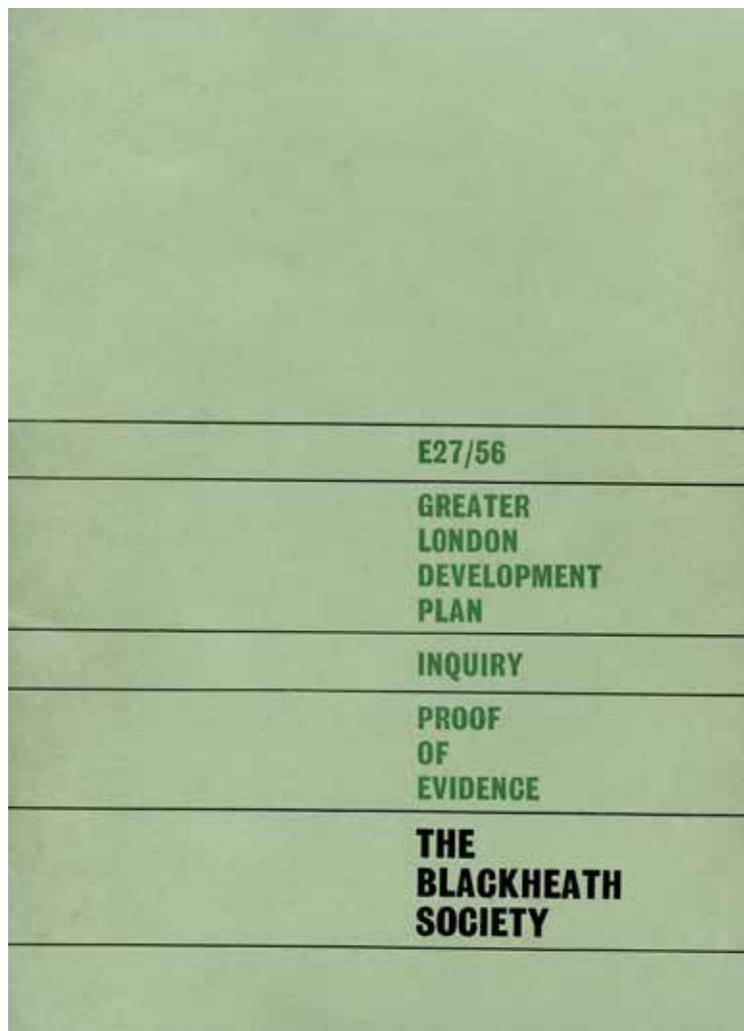
The *Proof of Evidence* was presented at the Public Inquiry into the Ringway Scheme conducted by Frank Layfield QC, which sat for two years from July 1970. It had been expected that 10,000 objections to the scheme would be made – in the event 28,000 were received. The GLC had retained the distinguished urban planner Sir Colin Buchanan

²¹ The Blackheath Society Annual Report 1963-69.

²² *Proof of Evidence*, page 15.



(Top) Posters like this were placed on threatened properties.
(Above) Campaign HQ housed in a former motor spares shop.



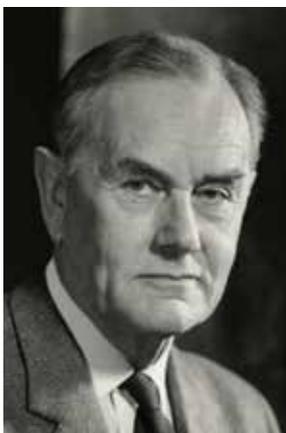
The Blackheath Society's Proof of Evidence document.

to advise it on its plans and made the surprising and, in the event game-changing, decision to allow The Blackheath Society and a number of other interest groups to discuss their objections with him.

There was no way of knowing at the time whether this meeting would help the Society's cause or not. Buchanan was on record as broadly supporting the Ringway scheme. He was thought to be more concerned about the effect of roads on open spaces than on houses. He himself was reputed to be a keen motorist and caravanner, albeit one who embodied the schizophrenia towards the car that was emerging at the time. He recognized that the car was a 'fascinating possession' with the enormous appeal of allowing its owner to go anywhere. At the same time, he accepted that 'all indications are that, given its head, the car could wreck our towns within a decade'²³. Buchanan had produced a seminal work called *Traffic in Towns* in 1963. It was widely pointed out however that this was ambivalent in a number of areas, allowing both proponents and opponents of urban motorways to find arguments to support their case. A reasonable starting assumption might have been that Buchanan would support the GLC, who had after all appointed him, over the objectors.

It was therefore with some apprehension that The Blackheath Society team met with Buchanan. They need not have worried. Buchanan came out firmly against the motorway as planned. To quote the Guardians of the Heath: *'In his [Buchanan's] opinion no road works ought to jeopardise the Village as a shopping centre and the attractive streets bordering on the railway should not be harmed. If anything, Blackheath ought to become a quieter, safer and even more pleasant place in which to live. Buchanan said he regarded the trees and mature gardens as an almost Arcadian feature'*.

With such an endorsement from its distinguished adviser, it would now be virtually impossible for the GLC to continue with its original scheme for the South Cross Route. What, however, was to be the alternative? This was the cue for the re-emergence of the idea for the deep bore tunnel which had first been mooted in 1962.



Sir Colin Buchanan



Plan for the deep bore tunnel.

Buchanan's advocacy of the tunnel solution was not, in retrospect, so surprising. He had expressed enthusiasm for planned sunken motorways in Philadelphia as well as in Bath and elsewhere in the UK²⁴. The GLC broadly accepted the idea of a tunnel under the Heath – albeit one can imagine, without enthusiasm. It is hard to avoid the impression however that The Blackheath Society and local residents now found that their bluff had been called to some extent. The tunnel was clearly a preferable alternative to the original motorway plan – resulting in the demolition of 'only' 18 homes for example. But once the original motorway plan was off the table, there seems to have been an increased focus on the disadvantages of the tunnel itself. The Blackheath Society pointed out that it would have 'a disastrous effect on Granville Park, Heath Lane and the Close at one end and The Lane in Blackheath Park at the other'²⁵.

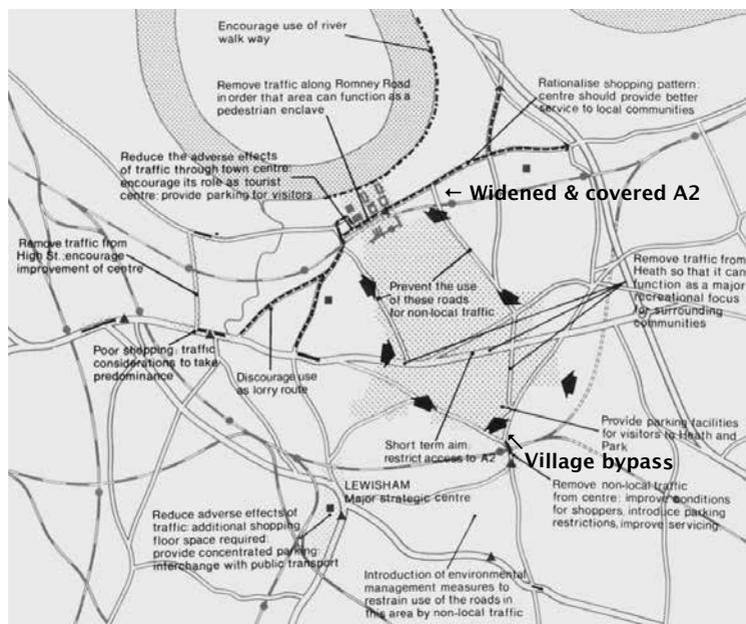
With the benefit of hindsight it seems clear that by the early 1970s neither the tunnel nor, for that matter, Ringway 1 as a whole was ever going to be built. The tunnel itself would have cost £15 million at pre-1970s inflation prices. And the inevitable question would arise 'if that's the answer for Blackheath, why not tunnels in other sensitive areas under threat, such as Chiswick or Hampstead?' And what, for that matter, constitutes a sensitive area?

Attitudes to roads and traffic were also changing. The sheer awfulness of schemes such as the Westway, a growing awareness of environmental issues and a cooling of the postwar love affair with the car were factors in this. So was economics. The UK had been beset by persistent balance of payments problems throughout much of the postwar period culminating in the devaluation of sterling in 1967. The Chancellor, Roy Jenkins is reported as having been opposed to the Ringway scheme, not least because of its ruinous cost at a time when he was struggling to restrain domestic demand. And even the Minister of Transport, Richard Marsh was at best ambivalent about the scheme. These misgivings were not expressed publicly however, because Prime Minister Harold Wilson had reportedly 'gagged ministers from speaking out publicly about it'²⁶.

²⁴ Quoted in Simon Gunn: *The Buchanan Report, Environment and Problems of Traffic in 1960s Britain*. Twentieth Century British History, 2011.

²⁵ The Blackheath Society Annual Report 1973/74.

²⁶ Asher op. cit.



Two of Buchanan's other ideas for Blackheath.

The death knell for the Ringway scheme was the 1973 GLC election. The scheme had enjoyed bipartisan support throughout the 1960s but Labour, which had actually launched the plan, now campaigned on a platform of scrapping the ring road. It duly won and the Ringway scheme was dead. Some parts of it did go ahead such as the road between Hackney and the A2 main Dover road which had originally formed the eastern side of the motorway box/Ringway but the scheme as a whole was scrapped.

Unsurprisingly Blackheath residents needed formal confirmation that the nightmare of the motorway which had been present for ten years really had disappeared. Roland Moyle wrote to Reg Goodwin, the new leader of the GLC in June 1973 to seek such reassurance. This elicited the reply:

*'I can assure you that we have no intention of building any motorways in London: that was the decision we were elected to implement and that I intend to stand by'*²⁷.

In the euphoria surrounding the removal of the motorway threat, two other ideas put forward by Buchanan for mitigating the effects of traffic in the area received relatively less attention. In addition to the deep tunnel for the motorway, his report did contain two further, quite radical, ideas for traffic in the area²⁸. The first was a scheme to address the volume of heavy traffic through Greenwich town centre by re-routing much of it away from the A200 and A206 to the A2 across the Heath, which would be widened to four lanes to accommodate it. Unsurprisingly this idea was met with outrage though concerns were partially allayed by the suggestion that the widened A2 would be buried in a cut and cover tunnel as it crossed the Heath. The exact length of the tunnel was never precisely specified but the assumption was that it would have extended from Dartmouth Hill to Stratheden Road. The A2 therefore would be much busier but, save for a couple of ventilation structures, it would have been invisible from the Heath, removing the barrier between it and Greenwich Park. What worried local residents and The Blackheath Society, however, was the likelihood that the realization of the plan, which was expected to take up to ten years, would be phased. The diversion of traffic and the widening of the road would almost certainly precede construction of the tunnel by some years – a nightmare scenario compounded by the awful possibility that the tunnel might never in fact materialize. The Blackheath Society made strenuous representations to the GLC insisting that any such project be completed in one go. In the event none of it, save for the ineluctable increase in traffic on the A2, actually happened.

The third Buchanan idea not to materialize was the construction of a modest single carriageway two lane road east of the Village located behind the shops which would have freed the shopping street of traffic. It seems that this would initially have started at Wemyss Road joining this with Blackheath Grove, with a plan later to extend this across the railway continuing on to Bennett Park.

²⁷ Guardians op. cit.

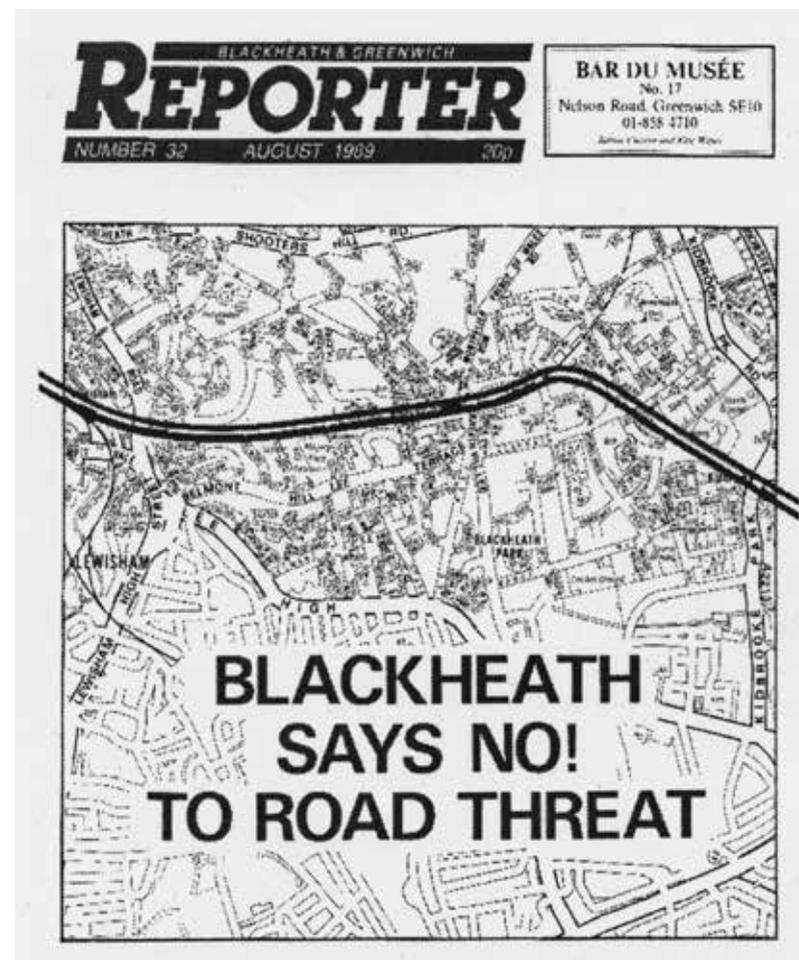
²⁸ Buchanan & Partners: *Greenwich and Blackheath Study*, GLC April 1971.

1980s – THE MOTORWAY RETURNS

Blackheath residents had every right to think that the spectre of the motorway which had hung over the Village for over ten years had been laid to rest in 1973 and that was that. They were proved wrong. In 1986 the Department of Transport engaged consultants Travers Morgan to examine possible solutions to the growing traffic problem on the South Circular. Two years later Travers Morgan published a report containing nine options, two of which would have had direct implications for Blackheath²⁹. Both of these envisaged roads across the Heath closely following the line of the earlier proposed motorway: one option revived the idea of a motorway, the other was for a narrower toll road along the same route.

Even though fifteen years had elapsed since the Ringway scheme had been seen off, the Travers Morgan proposals touched nerves that were still raw and prompted an immediate and furious response. Over two hundred people attended a meeting at Blackheath Concert Halls in July 1989 with another hundred or so being turned away because of lack of space. It seemed clear from the outset that the Blackheath route was in fact unlikely to be the DoT's preferred option. Addressing the meeting, Bobby Furber the outgoing Blackheath Society chair who had done so much to oppose the Ringway scheme, described the plan as a 'distant threat' that was unlikely to materialize. In a metaphor perhaps calculated to resonate well with Blackheath residents, Councillor Ron Pepper described the scheme as 'kite flying' by the DoT but warned nevertheless that 'it is necessary to cut the string now'. The following month Furber wrote to the Minister Cecil Parkinson revisiting the 1970s arguments that had prevailed in seeing off the motorway as well as pointing out that, with the development that had taken place since, the number of houses impacted would be even greater. Local councillors and MPs once again supported the 'not Blackheath' campaign and a petition with no fewer than 8000 signatures was presented to the DoT.

The Department showed itself to be as disingenuous in some of its replies



Outrage in August 1989

²⁹ Travers Morgan: *South Circular Assessment Study Stage 2 Report Option*, December 1989.

to representations as its predecessor the Ministry of Transport had been twenty-five years earlier. In response to a letter from Rosie Barnes, the SDP MP for Greenwich, an official claimed: *'It has not helped matters for scare stories to be circulating about options involving motorways when the consultants were told from the outset that new motorway building was not thought to be part of the solution. Their preliminary options published in the summer of 1988 make clear that none of the options involved the construction of a motorway'*³⁰.

Opposition to the Travers Morgan plans throughout south London came to be coordinated by a group called ALARM (All London Against Road Menace) which at one stage had 200 local affiliate groups³¹. ALARM proved itself more than equal to seeing through the kind of humbug proffered in the letter to Rosie Barnes. One of their publications featured on its cover a picture of a six-lane motorway in a cavern on the edge of which a number of semi-detached houses perched precariously. The development, in Woodford, was clearly a motorway notwithstanding earlier DoT protestations to the contrary.

The Travers Morgan plans were finally laid to rest in December 1989 when Cecil Parkinson scrapped all ideas for a comprehensive rebuilding of roads in south London, opting instead for a piecemeal upgrade of the South Circular and other roads together with improvements in public transport such as the DLR extension to Lewisham and improvement of the East London line.

CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT

To the extent that current Blackheath residents know about the motorway scares at all, they may be aware that there were plans to build a major road through the Village in the 1960s and that The Blackheath Society was instrumental in seeing this scheme off. That,

³⁰ Letter from Robert Atkins (DoT) to Rosie Barnes MP, 7 November 1989.

³¹ ALARM proved itself extremely adept at publicity seeking stunts. On one occasion ALARM organised a mock valentines day card campaign saying 'I Love London – you are killing it'. It culminated in Cynthia Payne the famous madam turning up at the DoT to give the minister, Cecil Parkinson a two foot long valentines cake with a pink heart sliced by a big black road. Private Eye reported that the minister walked into the room and, on seeing the cake, flew into a rage and ordered the offending confection to be removed and destroyed immediately. Quoted in Asher op. cit. page 144.

as far as it goes, is correct and the campaign against the motorway would indeed be a strong candidate for the Society's finest hour.

The development and demise of this and other road schemes for Blackheath need to be seen in a broader context however. The schemes themselves were offered to the solution of the ever-increasing problem of road traffic at a time when the car was hailed as an instrument of democratization and the role of public transport was being downplayed. As has been seen, plans to run arterial roads or motorways across Blackheath popped up regularly over a period of at least seventy-five years as the idea of providing a 'better' link between inner London and the main route to Dover proved to have an irresistible appeal to tidy minded planners. From the 1930s onwards, these were part of much bigger plans for 'improved' road networks throughout London.

Just as the schemes themselves were London-wide in scope, opposition to them which crystallised in the late 1960s was also coordinated at a London-wide level. Vigorous opposition by local groups such as BMAG was instrumental in frustrating the motorway plans. But so were a range of other socio-economic factors – a growing disenchantment with cars in cities; the sobering effect of roads such as the Westway and their impact on local communities; and hard economic analysis which reinforced the common sense view that, rather than ameliorating traffic congestion, building new roads simply added to it. And after 1973, increases in fuel prices brought home the need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

The last words in this story should perhaps come from Neil Rhind, distinguished local historian, co-author of the 1971 *Proof of Evidence*, participant in the pivotal meeting with Sir Colin Buchanan and current Blackheath Society President. At the height of the 1989 scare, Neil Rhind wrote: *'I'm certain that when the Travers Morgan nonsense has been buried some other well-meaning 'consultant' will in twenty or thirty years' time come up with a road improvement plan requiring the ruin of a small part of South East London, but'*, he continued, *'they will make the same mistake because it is the part that we hold precious'*.

ANNEX 1

Buildings threatened by the motorway:
Blackheath Park to Pond Road and Blackheath Grove to Blackheath Station.



1. The Keep



2. The Keep



3. 75 Blackheath Park



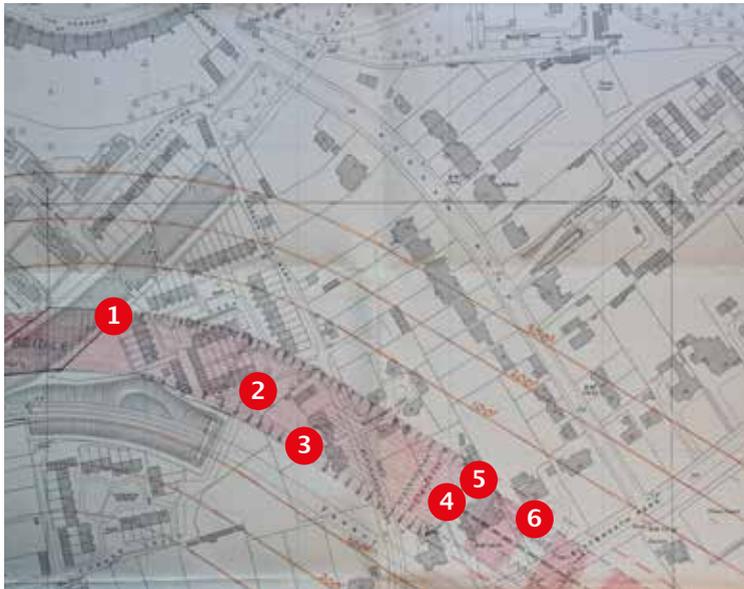
4. 99 Blackheath Park



5. 99 Blackheath Park



6. 101 Blackheath Park



ANNEX 1



1. Tranquil Vale



2. Station Car Park



3. Blackheath Grove



4. Blackheath Grove



5. Wemyss Road



6. Blackheath Grove



7. Pond Road



ANNEX 2

Where the deep-bore tunnel would have surfaced west of the Heath.



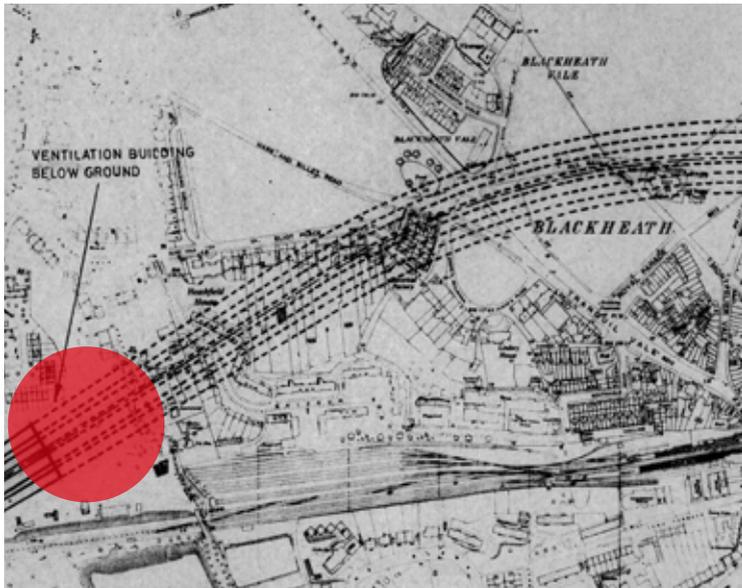
St Joseph's Vale



St Joseph's Vale



Granville Park



PAUL WRIGHT

Paul Wright has lived in Blackheath for over thirty years. He is a long-standing member of The Blackheath Society and has, for several years, been a member of the Planning Group which aims to preserve the character of the area by ensuring that new development is appropriate and of a high standard. He worked as an economist in the Bank of England and International Monetary Fund and later in his career was extensively involved in the development and practice of international financial regulation and financial stability issues.

THE BLACKHEATH SOCIETY

The Blackheath Society is one of London's oldest and largest amenity groups, and has been actively safeguarding the amenities and heritage of the Village and the Heath for over 80 years.

www.blackheath.org
office@blackheath.org
020 82971937

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