

The Streatley by-pass

One of the most contentious issues affecting the countryside and its communities is, has been and probably always will be, the building of a major new road. It is doubly so when the area through which it will travel embraces a landscape of ‘outstanding natural beauty’. The picturesque and unspoilt village of Streatley was, in the middle of the 20th century, the subject of a major controversy about the A329 road from Reading to Wantage or Oxford that passes through it. If the proposed plans had been successful, its charm would have been destroyed for ever.

On 26 May 1960, Berkshire County Council (BCC) in a letter to Streatley Parish Council (SPC), stated that ‘long term proposals for dealing with traffic problems in Streatley were not yet finalised. The Highways and Bridges Committee considered traffic conditions might be improved at the junction of the A329/B4009: this would involve some demolition’. On 17 June it was confirmed that an aerial survey of the A329 from Purley to Crowmarsh had been commissioned by the County Surveyor from Fairy Air Surveys and that this included a provision for a Streatley by-pass. His letter dated 13 October said ‘various alternatives for dealing with safety at The Bull crossroads were being considered whereby it might be advisable to acquire Wells Stores and the adjoining property on the corner’.



Streatley crossroads 1960s [GSLHS collection]

On 2 February 1961 a meeting of SPC was told that plans were being prepared by BCC involving a by-pass for the village. Chairman Judge Mais said ‘the building of the M4 would come first whether north or south of Reading. At the The Bull Major Rance’s place would have to come down. Ministry of Transport approval to plans being prepared has been given but detailed proposals will probably lead to a Public Enquiry’. One councillor

claimed that ‘one or two pedestrian road bridges had been mentioned’. A special Parish Meeting took place on 28 September when 85 parishioners were present. An urgent meeting with the County Surveyor was requested. SPC at their meeting on 2 November passed a special resolution stating:

They were unconvinced that there was a need for the construction of a new road across the High Street, either a dual carriage, or at all. Insufficient attention had been given to an alternative route for Wantage traffic, increased use of the route from Reading to Oxford and the effect on traffic when the M4 was opened. Until the final route of the M4 was known it would be folly to start the proposed dual carriageway through Streatley. This plan would destroy the village of Streatley and the amenities of the Goring Gap. Furthermore to demolish the village shop and the adjoining premises as a temporary expedient to improve The Bull crossroads was utterly unreasonable - a deplorable act. The proposed dual carriageway is utterly unnecessary because through traffic especially heavy vehicles should be diverted away from the Goring Gap. If this was done there would be no need for other than minor improvements at The Bull. Streatley Parish Council appreciated the need to improve safety at the junction of the A329/B4009. It might be necessary to demolish the village shop and adjoining premises but this could only be justified if plans for a dual carriageway were abandoned and no other method of improvement could be devised. A traffic census should be undertaken at the Wallingford/Wantage roads junction showing the number of vehicles travelling in either direction. The Parish Meeting has requested that the Streatley Parish Council takes all possible steps to prevent any carriageway crossing the High Street and wishes these views to be conveyed to the appropriate authorities.’

The above resolutions were sent to the County Highways Committee and BCC and on 22 February the latter wrote to SPC stating that no progress on any of the issues raised in their resolution was likely to be achieved for two years.

In February 1964 the Ministry of Transport made public its proposals for road connections to the M4. The route of the new motorway was confirmed as running south of Reading to a junction at Theale. A month later the County Council agreed to acquire land for road improvements to the A329, initially by negotiation, but by compulsory purchase if necessary. In May the County Chief Planning Officer outlined options for the line of the M4 west of Theale and included a reference to the A329 through Streatley. However in October the Ministry of Transport announced that spending on capital road construction would be restricted.

April 1965 saw Amey Asphalt awarded a £58,800 contract for road improvements to the A329 by *The Grotto* just east of Streatley Hills. In November Major Rance, owner of Wells Stores was appointed a Bradfield Rural District Councillor. In the following year a meeting between the Oxfordshire and Berkshire County Councils discussed the problem of

increasing traffic through the Goring Gap on the A329. Berkshire confirmed that a 'tunnel route' under Streatley High Street would involve a bridge or underpass 100 yards east of The Bull crossroads. In March there was growing public concern about increasing traffic flows on the A329 once the Theale interchange came into operation. The County Surveyor announced that the preparation of formal plans for the Streatley by-pass were going ahead but that Ministry of Transport approval would have to be obtained as a 75% grant towards the construction costs would be needed.

In June 1966 Judge Mais, still the Chairman of SPC, inspected the BCC's plans for the A329 and met the Country Road Engineer whom he invited to address the Council. In response the County Surveyor stated that he was not ready to discuss publicly such plans. In November he announced that on completion of a survey on traffic volumes running between Oxford and Reading and the use of alternative routes he would have discussions with Bradfield District Council.

On 28 March 1967 SPC held a special meeting to discuss the future alignment of the A329 in the light of the many rumours circulating in and around the Goring Gap and Reading. Two days later the *Reading Evening Post* ran a front page story headlined 'The Battle of the Goring Gap' over a highly emotive quote 'it's rather like acid thrown in the face of a beautiful woman'. The story caused an uproar, especially it was the first time that many people in the Thames Valley really became aware of just what BCC's plans might entail. These the newspaper claimed were to drive a 70ft wide dual carriageway from Tidmarsh in the south to Crowmarsh in the north. The route would mainly follow the line of the existing A329 and building it as far as Streatley would cost £5m.



Reading Evening Post
30 March 1967

On 3 May a packed Special Meeting of SPC attended by 130 people heard the County Surveyor explain his plans. Such was the intense opposition that an action committee comprising the local CPRE, the Goring and Streatley Amenity Association, Bradfield RDC and six local parish councils was formed. It was decided to mount a campaign

against against BCC's plans. After much discussion a letter of protest was sent to Mr Cooley, Clerk to the Council. This was signed by the Chairman of the Berkshire Parish Councils Association and six other parish councils and stated in forthright terms that the A329 plans were simply not acceptable. On 11 September SPC learned that some preparatory work had started on the Streatley Hills section. At the parish meeting on 2 November it reiterated that a crossing of the High Street would destroy the village and the amenities of the Goring Gap and again requested that through traffic, especially heavy lorries should be diverted away from the area.

In January 1968 the Council wrote again to the Highways and Bridges Committee setting out their views on the BCC plans as so far announced. A letter was also sent to the Ministry of Transport requesting that consideration be given to improving the road between Dorchester and Reading. In May the first detailed proposals for the Streatley By-pass were published. These were:

The CHALK ROUTE: 2.39 miles long costing £1.3m. Initially favoured by the County Surveyor, this involved building a new road behind the Youth Hostel, crossing the B4009 just above the Old School.

The TUNNEL ROUTE: 2.38 miles costing £1.6m. Strongly backed by the Highways and Bridges Committee, it kept nearer to the River Thames. It passed midway between the house known as Southfields and the existing Reading Road, then crossing the High Street in a tunnel some 108 yards east of The Bull crossroads. It continued past Townsend Farmhouse and joined the Wallingford Road by the entrance to Cleeve Court. Just before Streatley Farmhouse there was to be a clover leaf junction providing a link road to the A417 to Wantage. The dual carriageway would then continue around the west side of Moulsoford past Fairmile Hospital and on to Crowmarsh via a new bridge across the Thames. At the Streatley Hills end there would be slip roads giving access to and from The Bull, B4009 and the High Street.

On 2 July the *Reading Evening Post* reported that BCC would approve the final line for the by-pass and direct the County Surveyor to protect it from future development. Two weeks later County Councillor Daniel Carr told the Goring and Streatley Amenity Association that BCC had unanimously approved the 'tunnel route' although a recent traffic survey had suggested that a single carriageway would be adequate and that this point had been raised at their meeting. Mr Carr also said that the County Surveyor had pressed for the line of the new road to follow the chalk route but that this had been turned down by the Highways and Bridges Committee.

In February 1969, at a meeting of the CPRE with representatives from both Oxfordshire and Berkshire CCs, it was agreed that heavy vehicles should be diverted to the Reading industrial areas by means of the A34 and the M4, once the latter was built. In the same month it was reported to the SPC meeting that houses owned by Mrs Scott and Mr Vyvians might have to be demolished if plans for the dual carriageway went ahead. At a Special Parish Meeting held in the Morrell Room on 29 April the Chairman of the County Planning Committee said 'growing traffic volumes on the A329 would require a Streatley by-pass'. Judge Mais said the Chalk Route should still be put forward as he still much preferred this

solution. Mr WH Stevenson, Chairman of the Goring and Streatley Amenity Association, subsequently wrote to the Oxfordshire and Berkshire CCs, Reading Council, Bradfield RDC and six parish councils about the dangers of the by-pass plans. At the Amenity Association meeting on 18 July Judge Mais said 'the clover leaf junctions by Streatley Farm would take up to 10 acres of land'. He also reminded members that no public enquiry could take place until compulsory purchase orders had been applied for. Major Rance said that support for the opposition should be sought from John Astor, their local MP. They should also approach Richard Marsh, Minister of Transport. Previously Minister of Power he had agreed the under grounding of electricity cables through the Goring Gap and was aware of damaging environment issues. Daniel Carr said that the BCC had rubber stamped the 'tunnel route' although it had accepted that a start was unlikely for up to 10 years. Disappointment was expressed by some members that their MP had not been present at the meeting of the County Council. Mr Stevenson reminded the meeting that Pangbourne had now agreed that a single carriageway would be adequate. Judge Mais said they must express their total opposition to the dual carriageway through, over or under the High Street and oppose its construction in every way possible.

*Walnut Tree Cottage,
Streatley High Street
[GSLHS collection]*

At a special meeting with the Highways and Bridges Committee on 19 June the two routes were again discussed. It was established that the 'tunnel route' would pass under Limeswell Cottage and Little Yarnton and outbuildings and part of the garden belonging to Walnut Tree Cottage might have to be demolished



but Little Yarnton could possibly be spared. It was also agreed that there was no need for lavish over and underpasses at Streatley Farm and that the by-pass itself should be reduced to a single carriageway. The issue of a third route was raised. This was called 'the south route', 3.78 miles in length it would run over The Downs through Basildon, Westridge, Upper Warren Farm, Uphill Bottom, Starveal Farm, by-passing Moulsoford and re-joining the A329 at the Cholsey railway bridge. This proposal gained little support as it would have cost £3.5m. A fourth plan prepared by a Mr Noel Monroe, a retired mining engineer living in Streatley was also briefly discussed but rejected because it would have required a new river bridge below the existing Whitchurch Toll Bridge.

On 28 January 1970 Judge Mais wrote to Anthony Crossland, MP, Secretary of State for Local Government, setting out the reasons for SPC's total opposition to BCC's plans for the A329. The Minister in his reply said 'further action would be delayed until after the General Election on 18 June. In a subsequent letter dated 13 April Mr Crossland said 'no plans had been approved for the A329 by the Ministry of Transport. The position was governed by the present statutory allocation of responsibilities between the Ministry of Transport and the Secretary of State for Local Government and the Local Authorities'.



Wallingford Road, Streatley, with Bull crossroads in the distance [GSLHS collection]

In January 1971 it was announced that the completion of the M4 to the Theale Interchange was expected by the end of the year. The Ministry of Transport, now incorporated within the Department of the Environment, confirmed that the A329 improvement proposals would embrace a single carriageway only. SPC on 29 March agreed to ask the County Surveyor to say that traffic leaving the Theale Interchange should not be directed to Oxford via the A340 or A329.

At the beginning of 1972 BCC was preparing detailed estimates for the A329 Pangbourne/Lower Basildon section at a cost of £2.5m. These would also include details of future improvements for the Streatley/Cholsey section and the Streatley diversions. The County Council also released a forward forecast timing plan for the period 1971-75. This included provision for improvements to the A329/A417 Wallingford/Wantage junction in Streatley. It also confirmed that the Lower Basildon to Streatley section was also to be a single carriageway. In the forecast for the period 1976-1980 curiously the A329 was to remain as a dual carriageway. A letter from the Department of the Environment dated 28 March confirmed that the Pangbourne to Lower Basildon by-pass had been added to their Principal Road Preparation List at an estimated cost of £3.1m at June 1970 prices. Also

that the Wallingford East/West by-pass would be carried out jointly by the Oxfordshire and Berkshire CCs. These decisions would allow the planning of individual road schemes to be carried forward with government support, i.e. 75% of the cost to be met by government grant. On 25 July Major Rance said that Bradfield RDC had written to Lord Sandford stating that the Thames Amenity Forum and the Oxfordshire and Berkshire Branch of the CPRE were firmly against the A329 by-pass proposals.

In September SPC received a letter from the Department of the Environment which concluded 'it would seem reasonable to protect the Streatley Tunnel route but to re-assess the situation at such time in the future when the planned improvements to the A34 and the A4074 are complete. Also to determine whether traffic predictions have been confirmed and whether a scheme of the magnitude now proposed would be justified. A summary of our conclusions is enclosed'. On 29 November a Bradfield RDC Notice confirmed that the Highways and Bridges Committee and the County Planning Committee had agreed that the line of the A329 through Streatley would be continued and that the new road was now to be a 24ft single carriageway. BCC is to continue with plans for the Pangbourne and Wallingford by-passes.

On 1 February 1973 EW Davies, the Berkshire County Surveyor, summarised proposals and issues still to be settled by BCC. These included moving traffic out of the Thames Valley and onto the A34, linking the A329 to the M4 at Theale rather than to the Reading/Pangbourne Road, protecting Tidmarsh by means of a by-pass and modifying the line to protect Purley. Any final proposals should follow the line of the railway wherever possible. A traffic survey would take place in September to analyse traffic flows in the Reading, Oxford and Newbury areas. A decision would be reached by 1974 on the final details of the by-pass with grant application and tender procedure in late 1976. Subject to grant approval, construction would start early in 1977 with completion in 1979. Finally, access roads for heavy lorries using the M4, A329, A417 and A340 from beyond Streatley through Pangbourne to Theale and the M4 junction had still to be confirmed.

In September the Goring and Streatley Amenity Association made representations to the Oxfordshire and Berkshire CCs to reduce the size and speed of heavy lorries carrying materials from the Theale area to the M40 which was now under construction. Both councils replied that 'they were unwilling to impose further restrictions owing to a lack of suitable alternative routes. Operations would, in any case, cease by the end of the year'.

On 7 February 1974 the last meeting of the BCC Advisory Committee took place followed four weeks later by that of the Highways and Bridges Committee. April 1975 SPC was told by the BCC that construction of the A329 Streatley by-pass would again be delayed owing to cuts in the Council's road budgets and also at national level through the Department of the Environment.

In retrospect the threat of a major dual carriageway running through the heart of Streatley, that seemed very real in the late 1960s, ultimately fell victim to the age old problem of funding. In addition the sustained and vigorous campaign of opposition to the plans advanced by

Berkshire County Council, by Streatley Parish Council, the Goring and Streatley Amenity Association, the CPRE, Bradfield RDC and six other local parish councils had their effect, particularly in their ability to marshal strong local support. Finally rising interest rates, which touched 12% in the early 70s and led to a 15% cut in the Ministry of Transport's budgets for major road improvement projects finally led to the A329 by-pass plans being delayed by 10 years and an acknowledgement from both county authorities that these might never be built. The demise of BCC in the 1974 local government re-organisation, its replacement by three unitary authorities and the passing of responsibility for the A329 northwards from Moulsoford to OCC saw a stronger case emerge for the Wallingford by-passes and the improvement of the Reading to Crowmarsh Road. Plans for a dual carriageway through the Thames Valley and especially through the Goring Gap had been overtaken by other priorities.

Michael Brodie

Sources

Berkshire County Council Minute Books 1960 - 1975

Berkshire County Council Highways & Bridges Meeting Reports 1960 – 1975

Streatley Parish Council Minutes 1960 - 1974

Goring & Streatley Amenity Association records

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Reading Evening Post

Acknowledgements

I am particularly indebted to Berkshire Record Office and locally to David Boyd, Alan Jones, David Rattue and George Jamieson, with special thanks to Edward Golton, ex member of the CPRE and a Bradfield Rural District Councillor.



Plans for the Streatley by-pass including the 'tunnel route' (Berkshire Record Office)



Section of the Streatley by-pass plan showing the tunnel (in red) under the High Street [Mike Brodie]

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Designed and printed by Goring Press Ltd

Tel: 01491 872555