

YORK CITY COUNCIL'S PROPOSAL TO CONSTRUCT AN INNER RELIEF ROAD ROUND THE CITY

Evidence given by W. A. Eden on behalf of the Ancient Monuments Society on 8 November, 1972, at the Department of the Environment's Public Inquiry.

THE Ancient Monuments Society, which I have the honour to represent at this inquiry, was founded in 1924, and is the only such society in the British Isles which is ecumenical in that its terms of reference are not limited to buildings or other monuments of a particular period or district, or of a particular use or character, such as ecclesiastical, vernacular or industrial; or in any other way saving only the limitation implied in my use of the geographical term "the British Isles". The ancient monument that the Society regards as threatened by the Inner Ring Road, as at present proposed or contemplated, is York itself, for which city, having started my professional career here some forty-five years ago, I retain a lasting affection.

The Ancient Monuments Society objects in the strongest possible terms to the Inner Ring Road *as planned*, and I am here to present their objections to the best of my ability. At the outset, however, I must crave indulgence for my lack of familiarity with the technical terms employed by those who plan roads. My experience of road planning is first that of a road user with not far short of forty years' experience as a car driver and, shall I say, rather more than half as many again as a pedestrian; and second, that of an architect trained in the school of thought that regards the planning of cities as an important part of the art of architecture, and accustomed, therefore, to seeking to establish, in new works, a formal harmony with their older neighbours. It is this harmony of form that I find lacking in the City's present proposals—particularly in the routes recommended for the sectors Lord Mayor's Walk to Marygate River Crossing, Marygate River Crossing to Micklegate Stray and from the proposed Clementhorpe river crossing to Foss Islands Road.

In each of these the form of the new road is alien to its surroundings. Terraces of houses will be truncated, and the backs of others left exposed to the new road, and inadequately screened from it, at least

during the winter months, by the planting of trees; and from the residents who remain, hardly hidden at all. The road would intrude upon Bootham Park, an uncharitable act that would make formal nonsense of the setting of Carr of York's hospital building, and devalue a much greater area than that occupied by the road itself. The same applies to the proposed destruction of the greater part of St. Mary's which, surely, ought to have been designated a conservation area; and to both versions of the proposed crossing of The Mount, which also merits designation as a conservation area. Even the uncensorious Royal Fine Art Commission felt constrained to question the manner in which the proposed new road would cross the River Ouse. Altogether, as it seems to me, the construction of the Inner Ring Road, as planned, would result in the multiplication of the sort of features, known collectively as blight, that are becoming all too familiar bordering the routes of urban motorways in this country.

So far I have had to be destructive. I shall now endeavour to be constructive, and describe a method by which what I take to be the object of the proposed Ring Road may be achieved in a manner that would not only avoid doing violence to the city but, as I believe, would add greatly to its amenities. Again I must ask for forbearance in that, even if I had time to do so, I have not the information at my disposal that would enable me to go into detail. I am encouraged, however, in that in 1967 the then City Engineer prepared a plan for an Inner Ring Road following, for the greater part of its course, the outer circuit of the city walls. I consider this proposal to be right in principle, since the walls themselves have, in the past, acted as a boundary to which streets and buildings, both within and without, have had to conform; with the result that an embryo ring road, following the course indicated by the former City Engineer, already exists. Lord Esher concedes that it would be natural to complete the circuit. It follows, I think, that it would be unnatural *not* to. Its improvement, as an all-purpose road to accommodate a greater volume of traffic than at present, could be accomplished with far less destruction, and at a tithe of the expenditure that would be required for the City's present proposal. Moreover it could provide an opportunity for the enhancement of the city's unique character by displaying the city walls, thus performing two desirable functions, the one practical and the other ornamental. I will deal first with the practical aspect.

In planning roads for the convenience of motorists, there are two classes of user to be catered for—the local people who use them day

by day, and the strangers who use them for the first time. The former know their way by heart: the latter have only their intelligent eyes to guide them. It is a principle of all good planning that, if we cater for the intelligent stranger, and make clear at a glance the way into and about a building or a city, we *ipso facto* cater, barring idiots, for all the rest. The walls of York, if they were made clearly visible for the whole of their length by clearing the space between them and the Ring Road of all buildings, could perform that function, and the Bars, seen from the road, would give due warning of the entrances and therefore of the radial roads leading into and out of the city. These, with Tower Street, Layerthorpe-Peasholme Green and Rougier Street-Leeman Road would present the only necessary crossings or junctions, the last being capable of elimination by the adoption of measures for the management of traffic.

There remain three sectors only where there is no wall, namely (a) along Foss Islands Road from Layerthorpe Bridge to the Red Tower, where in mediaeval times the function of a wall was served by the marshy ground bordering the River Foss; (b) a small sector along Tower Street between Fishergate Tower and the approaches to Skeldergate Bridge; and (c) from Lendal Bridge to Bootham Bar, where the wall has almost entirely disappeared above ground. Along Foss Islands Road, and perhaps also between Fishergate Tower and the approaches to a widened Skeldergate Bridge, the way should be marked by trees planted, not landscape fashion, but in the purposeful manner of the Parisian boulevards.

From Lendal Bridge to Bootham Bar the problem is complicated by the construction, in the nineteenth century, of Lendal Bridge, Museum Street and Duncombe Place, all within the line of the walls or its extension, as an approach from the railway station to the Minster; and of St. Leonard's, in order to form a junction outside the walls with Bootham and Gillygate. The difficulty here is that the Ring Road, as suggested by the former City Engineer, has to make a far from obvious left turn into St. Leonard's, which is scarcely wide enough, whilst the obvious direction lies straight ahead towards the west front of the Minster. Perhaps the closing of Duncombe Place, Minster Yard and Deangate to all north-bound traffic and the widening of Lendal Bridge and Museum Street on the east side would ease the situation; and incidentally expose, at the corner of Blake Street, the bare flank wall of Lord Burlington's Assembly Rooms, which would have to

be appropriately re-faced to adorn what would become a prominent corner site.

A Ring Road such as I have described, visually emphasising as much as possible its relation to the city walls, could not be achieved without sacrifices that might not be acceptable to some whose principal concern lies in the preservation of the individual listed buildings of the city. I respect their point of view, but I must say that, from what I have seen of the mounting traffic problems of this city, it is abundantly clear that some allaying action is absolutely necessary, and I should prefer that any action taken should redound to the greater good of the whole as I see it. I have tried to describe the practical advantages of the measures I have advocated. Not least among these I would, paradoxically, place the attractiveness of the encircling boulevard—for that is almost literally what it would be—that I have tried to describe, contributing as I believe it would to the pleasure as well as to the convenience of those who will have occasion to use it. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that I believe it would be worth doing for its own sake; whilst the adoption of the Consultants' suggestion that the walls should be flood-lit at night would gladden the hearts of thousands.

In fact, the price to be paid in the demolition of listed buildings is remarkably small. In Gillygate five statutorily listed buildings, none of them of over-riding interest, and three on the Supplementary List would have to be sacrificed; and at Monk Bar, one on the Supplementary List. The only listed building in Jewbury is unlikely to be affected. The next and last group are those immediately outside Micklegate Bar, that is to say Nos. 3, 5, 7 and 9 on the south-east side of Blossom Street; No. 2, Nunnery Lane round the corner and, on the north-west side, Nos. 2-10, Blossom Street, all included in the Supplementary List. Thus the greatest loss, according to the Secretary of State's list, would occur in Gillygate which, I must confess, I have always thought since I first knew it in 1927 to be an unattractive street, partly because of its sunlessness during the greater part of the day, and partly because of the proportion of height to width, which contributes to that condition. In these circumstances I am pleased to find myself in accord with the City Council who, in the model on view at this Inquiry, show the east side cleared of buildings. The re-development of the west side as a humanely proportioned unified composition would bring new life to this street at the cost of another four buildings on the Statutory List.

I must add a few penultimate words about the control of traffic on the ring road as I have described it. In my opinion complicated gyratory systems are out of place in a city, and particularly in one like York. They are wasteful of valuable space and encourage the pusher at the expense of the more cautious stranger; and they are the despair of the under-privileged pedestrian, who is frequently sent underground. In my opinion the fairest method of control in an urban setting is by means of traffic lights, i.e. controlled pedestrian crossings at ground level. My experience in London is that subways are avoided by pedestrians whenever possible. They are a positive nuisance to women with prams even when they are provided with ramps, and there is a growing belief that they are dangerous owing to the uses to which they may be put by undesirable characters. Perhaps the unpleasant practice of "mugging" has not yet reached York, and I hope it never will. One way of discouraging it is to withhold all opportunity.

In conclusion I must say that I do not think that the construction of an Inner Ring Road such as I have described would solve all York's traffic problems. The Ancient Monuments Society is convinced that through traffic, having no business in York, should be diverted by means of outer by-passes. It welcomes the inclusion of a southern by-pass in the Secretary of State's programme, and hopes that he may soon be able to see his way to announce a date for the start of work on its northern counterpart. I myself would also like to suggest that the sign-posting of suggested routes which make use of existing suburban roads for light, inter-suburban traffic only, should be undertaken as an interim measure to reduce congestion on the radials. The Society also welcomes proposals, such as those recently adopted, to restrict motor traffic, other than buses and service vehicles, within the walls. Here I am reminded of the classical analogy between a city and a big house, and of a story I heard recently, whether apocryphal or not I cannot tell, to the effect that at Windsor Castle bicycling in the corridors is forbidden to the younger members of the Royal Household. The prohibition does not, however, apply to tricycles.