

# ROADBLOCK

## HOW PEOPLE POWER IS WRECKING THE ROADS PROGRAMME

**Roadblock is dedicated to all the campaigners in the 'anti-roads movement'**

"Protesting about new roads has become that rarest of British phenomena, a truly populist movement drawing supporters from all walks of life."

*The Economist, 19th February 1994.*

The past decade has seen a revolution in transport thinking in Britain - brought about by protests against road-building on a scale unmatched anywhere else in Europe. In 1985, the Department of Transport felt confident that it could build a road wherever it wanted, whenever it wanted. In 1995, its road-building programme is in disarray. The once-mighty Department has been humbled by groups of local people around the country who have risen up in revolt against its destructive road schemes.

A new Secretary of State for Transport has come into office promising a move away from roads as the basis of its transport policy. This is the biggest Government rethink on transport issues since the dawn of mass car ownership four decades earlier. *A transport revolution has begun.*

Roadblock tells the story of what has happened. It looks at how the localised protests against road schemes have come together to form a vibrant, popular movement, transcending class, cultural and political barriers - a movement which has changed the course of Government policy. It highlights some of the individuals and organisations involved. And it attempts to unravel the sometimes complex reasons why this protest movement has been so successful.

Roadblock has been put together by people involved in ALARM UK, one of the main organisations to have taken part in this transport revolution. It is not an attempt to write the history of ALARM UK, or a definitive history of the anti-roads movement, but rather a description of what has happened over the past ten years from our perspective.

It's the story of protest; of how a nationwide movement has brought about a real change in Government policy. A large number of environmental organisations have played different roles in the changes that have taken place:

Well-established environmental organisations like the World Wide Fund For Nature, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust, The Royal Society for Nature Conservation, and, notably, Friends of the Earth, CPRE and Greenpeace Transport 2000 - the national lobby group on transport and environment issues. Groups whose main focus is direct action, such as Earth First!, Reclaim the Streets, and Road Alert! Countless small local "grassroots" groups

Within this wide-ranging network, ALARM UK has had a dual role: to act as a national single-issue lobby group opposing a roads-based transport policy; and to provide an umbrella for the local groups all over the country that have provided the real strength of the movement.

## **OUTSIDE ESTABLISHED STRUCTURES**

Three main aspects of the movement have contributed to its success:

It has operated largely outside established structures and it has not been aligned to any particular political party. This is perhaps because, in the mid-1980s, none of the three principal British parties - the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats - were comfortable with the central demand of the protest movement: to switch resources from road-building to more sustainable modes of transport. Only the Green Party has wholeheartedly embraced this policy of sustainable transport, but whilst many of its members have played important roles in the 'anti-roads movement', it has not become strong enough to be the movement's political voice.

Secondly, the movement started out as, and largely remained, a single-issue protest: against the destructive nature of road- building and in favour of a more sustainable approach to transport policy. By definition, then, this meant operating largely outside the established green pressure groups, whose concerns are broader than just transport - the notable exception being Transport 2000 with its environmental transport focus. Some mainstream environmental organisations, the well-established and wealthy ones like the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Trust, have gradually got more involved in transport matters over the decade. But this has been in response to the emerging protest movement, rather than through having played any significant role in its creation. Other multi-issue mass-membership environmental organisations who have had a history of campaigning on transport issues - such as FOE and CPRE - have provided invaluable background reports and information and a good number of their individual members and local groups have played an important and informed role in the developing protest movement. However, both FOE and CPRE were initially very wary of the type of direct action which became part of the movement in the early 1990s. Greenpeace, with its historical ethos of direct action, has now fully embraced the potential of the anti-roads movement and is playing a lively role within it.

But perhaps 'bottom-up' has been the defining characteristic of the movement. It started with local people's concerns - about a road that was going to destroy their homes or communities or environment. Many people might well have been worried about the great global issues of our time - climate change, air pollution - but what got them protesting was an issue which affected them directly: a road coming their way. They were looking for assistance with that particular problem. This assistance came from people who had fought roads in years gone by, from local green activists, and from publications by the likes of Transport 2000, FOE and Greenpeace which drew on a fine body of radical academic transport thinking. The role of ALARM UK, which came to embrace many of these local communities, was to bring them together and to encourage a new form of radical campaigning.

Over the late eighties and early nineties, hundreds of local groups came together to form a formidable fighting force. This movement created a climate of protest in which numerous bodies - from local authorities to radical green organisations - were able to work to bring about a significant change in national transport policy. In particular, it established a mood of revolt against road-building in the country that enabled the young direct action environmentalists, who were to emerge so spectacularly at Twyford Down in the early 1990s, to play a major role in bringing about change.

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## **Case History No 1:**

### **A40 Longford to M50 Gorsley improvement**

*David Marcer played a key role in the campaign to stop the DoT from building a new road through rural Gloucestershire.*

I live on the edge of north-west Gloucestershire, in Maisemore, a small village on the opposite bank of the Severn from Gloucester. The scheme had been announced in the White Paper "Roads for Prosperity" published in March 1989, but of course no-one in the village was in the habit of reading White Papers so we knew nothing until December 1989. The DoT let us into the secret by sending us a coloured map and an invitation to an exhibition in the village hall.

As someone who had little interest in transport matters, roads, the environmental debate or anything like that, my reaction was of vague indifference because although the road would run reasonably close to the village, I thought that it might reduce the traffic on the A417 outside our door. My daughter, who was sixteen at the time, reacted rather differently. She grabbed the map from me and said "this will go right through the Leadon Valley, you have got to stop it!"

I told her in an adult manner that organisations like the DoT could not be stopped by people like me, but she insisted. I thought for a few moments about the true implications of a four-lane dual carriageway being driven through our peaceful little valley, and for some reason I still do not understand I said to her "all right then, if you insist then I will stop it " And from that moment until March 1994 I refused to acknowledge the possibility of any result than outright victory over the DoT.

This was a totally irrational attitude which could only have been assumed by someone basking in total ignorance, but the next four years taught me more than I had learned in the whole of my life before.

Of course, when you first try to organise a protest campaign you believe that no one has ever done anything like it before and everyone wallows around in complete confusion whilst they reinvent the concept of campaigning. I started by writing letters to our MP and to the DoT (I still believed that democratic processes were fair, open and honest at this point). The replies were bland and meaningless.

A few weeks later the DoT held their exhibition in the village hall. There were elegant pictures of embankments and cuttings with the usual trees and small cars to add to the effect. Some villagers were going around saying that it was mad to build a long embankment across the flood plain, because it would make our regular winter flooding worse. I knew better of course. These were professional engineers and would never make such a basic mistake. Unknown to me, Sydney, who was soon to become a fellow campaigner, had already asked one of the professionals about the flood plain. He received the immortal reply, "flood plain, what flood plain?"

We formed a small protest group under the loose authority of the Parish Council and after three meetings we were able to decide on a name: MORAG - Maisemore Opposes the Road Action Group. If I were to say that we discussed policy, strategy and tactics it would be dignifying our endeavours with the benefit of hindsight. We managed to formulate a few reasons for opposition - the flood threat; environmental intrusion; noise, fumes and light (when you have no street lights you treasure a dark sky at night), the cost of the scheme and the lack of justification.

However, we never completely agreed on policy. The realists wanted to aim for an achievable target like moving the route as far away from the village as possible, whereas the idealists wanted to go for broke with total opposition. The realists told the idealists that no road scheme had ever been stopped before and the idealists said that was true but tried to justify their mad ideas all the same.

As an idealist, I began by thinking that my policy of uncompromising, outright opposition was extreme and high risk, and I was very much aware that by refusing to compromise or discuss alternatives we risked losing small, but beneficial modifications to the route. This was pointed out to me frequently, but gradually I began to realise that outright opposition was the only morally and logically sustainable policy: morally because we had no right to campaign for the road to be moved

to someone else's back yard; logically because if we compromised by discussing details we would have undermined our argument that the road was not justified.

Without an agreed policy, strategy was difficult to formulate. We managed to agree that our only chance was to stop the road before a Public Inquiry. We had been told by people who knew much better than us that protest is useless at that stage and anyway we had not the remotest chance of raising the money to fight an Inquiry. We also agreed that delay could help as well. It is perhaps difficult to remember how gung-ho the road-builders still were only a few years ago, but we told ourselves that something might happen, perhaps even a change of government at the election that was then due in one or two years time.

One of our campaign themes was political (with, of course, a small p). We used every election that came up and tried to make the road a high profile issue. At the general election we asked each of the three candidates for statements on their position and published them. The Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates even attended some of our demonstrations.

We also decided to target the County Council as the highway authority. We pestered officers in the County Surveyor's Department with questions about the road, its purpose, how it tied with the County's strategy, why the County's officers were working with the Department of Transport to destroy parts of the county. I believe that we shook the officers just a little out of their complacent attitude that more roads are good for you. We had meetings with and made presentations to the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups. The change in the balance of power that resulted from the loss of Conservative members in 1993 made our task easier and by the end of that year we had persuaded Councillors to set up a policy panel which invited contributions from all interested parties.

By now, lots of groups were involved in the campaign: CPRE, another group called CARE at Newent further up the road and CURB, a protest coordinating body, plus the various Parish Councils. We made sure that every one of these groups was represented at the presentation. On the other side were groups like the RHA and Freight Transport Association and a couple of Parish Councils who would "benefit" from the road, but we were seasoned campaigners by now and knew our briefs backwards. We won hands down and the Council voted to oppose the road. Councillors had never opposed a road before and as they did so against the advice of the officers, so they thought themselves very brave.

As the campaign progressed we began to believe that victory was possible and that delays would benefit us more and more, especially as the cost of the scheme kept on rising.

Then in March 1994 the DoT admitted defeat. We had been phoning around for information; I had left messages with several local journalists to ring me as soon as the press release came through, but a fellow campaigner heard first and rang me. Curiously, a sense of anticlimax made it the lowest high spot of my life. My wife and I then went for a walk in the Leadon Valley. Although only a few hundred yards from our front door, I had only been there infrequently during the campaign

because the threat of its destruction upset me so much. I broke open one of the testbore tubes and pinched a small numbered disc from it. This very small trophy is now on my key ring.

The value to me of the campaign is inestimable. It is a very intense personal feeling and probably immodest as well, but I do feel that in contributing to saving a few square miles of countryside I have done at least one worthwhile thing in my life. The achievement, if such it was, is still something about which I can feel very emotional.

As for the value of the campaign in terms of having an influence on stopping the road, I would be a fool if I were to deny that we had the advantage of an increasingly strong following wind, so we will never know.

On a personal level the campaign has had an enormous effect on me. It is not so much self-belief, but a belief that nothing is impossible if I decide to do it and go about it the right way. A small number of ordinary people, with dedication, hard work, study and application can stop government, or any other force for that matter, dead in its tracks.

The lessons I learnt from the campaign is that they, whoever they are, are no cleverer than you and often their complacency means that they act in an extremely stupid way. Many of the people you think will know more about the subject that you turn out to be rather ill-informed; if you get involved in a campaign watch out - it will not be long before you find yourself in a room full of experts all of whom know less than you about the subject under discussion. This can be quite a shock if you are not prepared for it.

You must face up to the fact that you are in a battle, and the only hope of victory lies in using the few weapons that you have at your disposal to the greatest effect. The other side will use every trick that they have learned over many years. The cards are already heavily stacked in their favour, they own the referee and they will not hesitate to lie, misrepresent and cheat. The road-builders are prepared to use overweening power and even force if necessary to destroy something that is precious to you. Although I would never advocate anything other than non-violent physical resistance, the battle cries for the paper-and-talk protester have to be "do unto them what they would do unto you, but in spades" and "no prisoners".

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## **BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTIES**

The movement had its beginnings in the mid-1980s when Margaret Thatcher ruled the nation. Britain, at that time, was full of contradictions. Many people were making fast money in the free-market world of Thatcherism; rates of car and home ownership were rising rapidly But there was

also increasing homelessness, severe unemployment and environmental destruction. Furthermore, government was becoming unresponsive to public opinion and was (deliberately) running down public services - health, education and transport.

It is probably too early to assess with any certainty what role the particular conditions of Thatcher's Britain played in the formation - and subsequent growth - of the British anti-roads movement. But some things are clear. Britain has relatively poor public transport provision compared with the majority of other European countries, and particularly those of Northern Europe. And in the early 1980s the Thatcher Government set out, literally, to alter the shape of Britain. This was to be achieved through the positive encouragement of out-of-town retail and recreational developments, along with business parks and the largest road-building programme the country had ever seen. It was all to be based on what Thatcher called "the great car economy".

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that ordinary people rose up in protest against the reshaping of their familiar surroundings. The gleaming new piazzas, that were seen by the upwardly mobile as progress, were regarded by the established middle-classes of the shire counties as unwanted development which threatened England's 'green and pleasant land'. These concerned middle-classes could not turn to either of the other two main parties for any real assistance, for, while both Labour and the Liberal Democrats favoured better public transport, in the mid-1980s, neither was clearly articulating opposition to unwanted development. It was perhaps logical, then, that Middle England became part of a protest movement that operated outside established political structures.

Equally excluded from establishment politics were the growing number of people who were dismayed at what they perceived as the national - and indeed global destruction of the natural environment. Their 'deep green' concerns were not taken on board by the major political parties; and certainly not by the groupings on the far left that had attracted many radicals of earlier generations. The relatively unstructured 'anti-roads' movement that was emerging in the mid-1980s was to become, a few years later, a natural vehicle of protest for the green children of Thatcher.

By the eighties, the transport policies of all the major political parties had been dominated for over thirty years by the need to cater for the car. The massive road schemes proposed at this time would have meant yet further destruction of things people valued - their homes, towns, communities and countryside. In unprecedented numbers, people began to say "no". This attitude formed the foundation of a nationwide campaign that within a decade has brought about a dramatic change in transport thinking. The Government's plans to reshape the country around the car have been irrevocably damaged.

## **LONDON - THE FIRST BATTLEGROUND**

London was the first eighties battleground of what was to become known as the 'anti-roads movement'. It emerged in response to the largest single road-building programme ever proposed for

the capital. The main road plans for the remainder of the country were not to emerge until 1989. But London is the essential starting point for the Roadblock story because it was the protest in London that was to set the trend for the campaigns that shook the nation in the first half of the 1990s. It is therefore worth spending time looking at London in some detail.

The road proposals for London were called The London Road Assessment Studies. They were first devised by the Department of Transport (DoT) in the early 1980s as a way of easing the serious traffic congestion on the capital's roads. The DoT planned to speed up both orbital and radial vehicle journeys. The radial journeys were to be dealt with by widening narrow sections of main roads or by building 'bypasses' around congested areas. Orbital car travel was to be made easier by the construction of an 'Inner M25'. It is thought that around £12 - £20 billion had been set aside for the work.

The early Assessment Studies reports were released in 1988. They were far from the final proposals. They merely indicated the different options for the proposed roads. But their release prompted a huge outcry throughout London as residents became aware of the road-building schemes that were planned to carve through their communities. Thousands of residents flocked to Town Halls across the capital and massive local campaigns developed from Barnes to Hackney and Clapham to Haringey. At the same time, the national lobby group Transport 2000, under its new director Stephen Joseph, who was to become a key figure in the transport revolution, called a meeting to set up a campaign to fight the Assessment Studies. Many local groups, realising that they could not win their campaigns alone, came to that meeting. ALARM was born. In less than a year, ALARM had become the umbrella body for over 150 London-based groups (including local FOE and cycling groups).

Two factors are responsible for the early growth of the movement in London. Firstly, unlike many other parts of Britain London had a history of radical protest against road-building: in the 1970s, the 'Homes not Roads' Campaign, led by the London Amenity and Transport Association, had prevented an earlier attempt to build an inner motorway box and the fifteen year old battle to stop the widening of the Archway Road in North London had opened many eyes to the dubious techniques the DoT can use as it attempts to get its way. The second factor concerned the willingness of people to defend their homes. Thousands of houses would have been demolished if the schemes had gone ahead. The basic motive behind the rapid formation of most of the local groups was the desire of people to protect their homes and local environments from the ravages of road-building. So ALARM had two strands: a few radicalised people who understood how the DoT operated; plus thousands upon thousands of inexperienced campaigners who were determined to fight for their homes and communities.

## **LONDON - STRATEGY AND OBJECTIVES**

From the outset, ALARM had firm objectives and a clear strategy. John Stewart, who ultimately came to chair ALARM, explains: "ALARM was clearly focused from the very beginning. It was a transport organisation whose objective was to stop all the road schemes in the Assessment Studies and to promote sustainable alternatives. It had no other objectives, no political affiliations, no constitution and only one rule: each group had to oppose all roads in the Assessment Studies, not just those in their own back yard - only then would ALARM be able to argue that road-building was not the way forward for London and devise positive transport alternatives. Furthermore, that way the DoT would not be able to divide and rule."

Margot Sreberny, a leading figure in ALARM, added, "We had a clear strategy from the start - to persuade the politicians to drop all the road schemes as a result of the individual and collective pressure exerted by the ALARM groups. Only when you are so sure of your strategy can you be certain that you will not be blown off course. "

## Case History No 2:

### Norwich

*Denise Carlo played a leading role in fighting a series of road schemes in East Anglia, a largely rural region where the road lobby is at its strongest. One of the most damaging of these schemes was Norfolk County Council's plan to complete a Inner Ring Road for Norwich - one of England's finest, and most historic, cities.*

“The writing was on the wall for the third phase of the Norwich Inner Relief Road (IRR3) back in 1988. Norfolk County Council, defensive and bunker-minded, had failed to see the signs: public disillusionment over urban road-building and government alarm over global warming. Community groups and individuals joined forces at the inaugural meeting of the Norwich Road Action Group (NRAG) in 1988. We believed that the road could be defeated and we succeeded.

On paper, the four-lane highway roller-coasted through Norwich: marching across the historic heart; tunnelling under a school playground for one thousand children; squeezing through a densely populated district where many elderly people lived; slamming across the ancient north-south route parallel to the waterfront, its two parts reunited by a pedestrian underpass; leaping over the river and railway line on a giant suspension bridge, the central pylons higher than the floodlights at Norwich City football ground.

As a former student of landscape history, I recognised the devastating effect the scheme would have on the ancient topography and so it became my ambition as NRAG secretary to work for its defeat.

Fighting IRR3 involved a wider agenda. Phase 3 formed the lynchpin in the Norwich Area Transport Strategy. Norfolk County Council arrogantly assumed that IRR3 would be built. Four major road proposals relied on its completion. NRAG were determined to knock out IRR3 and re-orientate the roads-biased strategy for Norwich.

What were the pressure points? First target: Norfolk County Council. However, officers and councillors refused to discuss their controversial project with opponents. "We have never heard of the Road Action Group" said the County Surveyor and Chair of Planning when our members tried to present them with a letter.

We switched our target. We concentrated our efforts on the next tier of local government - Norwich City Council. If the City could be persuaded to oppose the road they would act as a lever on the County. For four years, we cajoled City officers and councillors, identifying the road's supporters, our anti-road allies and the waverers.

We mobilised public opinion with regular leafletting and a high press profile. The public put pressure on councillors particularly at election times. Following their planning application, Norfolk County Council received one thousand letters of objection and one letter of support.

Public opposition, growing internal doubts and a change in the climate of opinion on environmental issues, finally prompted the City Planning Committee at the eleventh hour to oppose the published route. This set the bureaucratic wheels in motion. The City drummed up support from English Heritage, the Royal Fine Art Commission, the Broads Authority and the Chamber of Commerce. Six months later when the Inquiry opened, Norfolk County Council were virtually isolated. Generally speaking, campaigners should avoid a Public Inquiry. In our case, however, we were desperate for a hearing as a way of broadening the decision making process away from the County Council. Objections from the City, English Heritage and the public, persuaded the Minister to call in the planning application.

If NRAG were relying on the City to produce a radical transport alternative, we were to be disappointed. Their consultants, Colin Buchanan and Partners, came up with an uninspiring idea for completing Norwich's outer ring road. NRAG scraped money together to hire green transport consultants, Metropolitan Transport Research Unit (MTRU). It had become clear to us that better public transport alone would not solve local transport problems. If we were to demonstrate any credibility, we had to produce a workable alternative based on a method of restraining traffic. MTRU had a project: city centre rush hour car permits as tested in Milan. With financial support from Transport 2000, MTRU's non road-building option took shape. NRAG obtained a written assurance from the Minister that we could present our proposal at a Public Inquiry. Mark Sullivan, NRAG's professional advocate, skilfully steered us through the strain of a 42 day hearing.

Over the years, NRAG's greatest challenges had centred less on the road and more on resolving differences of opinion over tactics within our group. The blackest moment came when the City

Council courted members to support an outer ring road solution. For a short time it seemed possible that NRAG might break up, but we kept our nerve.

We were unprepared for the tone of Inspector Whalley's report in March 1993. In discrete civil service language, he lambasted the IRR3; the outer ring road option he described as a "temporary and costly answer"; NRAG's option he viewed as "pointing the way". Summing up, the Inspector concluded that traffic restraint appears "inevitable and desirable". The Minister upheld the Inspector's conclusions on IRR3 and its short-term effect on traffic relief. Objectors were overjoyed.

As predicted, the Norwich Transport Strategy collapsed, but NRAG members voted to carry on campaigning for a radical transport agenda. Norfolk County Council, under new political control, have begun to listen and consult more widely. All parties have learnt the importance of cooperation."

Some broad lessons from our campaign:

1. Success ultimately depends upon building up a wide constituency of support especially at the local level where votes count.
  2. Use the expertise of your members, supporters and sympathetic professionals. Keep them informed so that they can take action.
  3. Use the media and create a fuss. Campaigning relies upon publicity.
  4. Learn how the road-planning system works and exploit the opportunities for bringing pressure to bear.
  5. Be prepared for internal divisions within your group: keep to a well-defined no road-building goal so that your purpose is clear to all.
  6. Remember bureaucracies and established political forces are not monoliths; it is possible to exploit divisions among them and even cultivate your own sources of information there.
  7. Recognise that as a campaigning group you can respond more quickly and flexibly to events than officials.
  8. Campaign with passion - that line on a map threatens something that is precious to you.
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But it was the campaigning techniques that set ALARM apart. ALARM adopted a new kind of approach in its campaigning. An approval which was ultimately to result in a historic victory in 1990 when Cecil Parkinson, then the Secretary of State for Transport, withdrew every road proposal in the Road Assessment Studies. Up until then, most people opposing road schemes had done so within the accepted structures - structures devised by the Department of Transport. The DoT would put its route options out for public consultation and people would be urged to tick a box to indicate which route they favoured. Then came the Public Inquiry, where protesters were urged to make polite, well- reasoned arguments outlining why they objected. Most did. Almost all Public Inquiries were lost. ALARM's strategy was to win long before Public Inquiries, even before the official Public Consultation period. In other words, ALARM set out to create its own framework of protest, dismissing the DoT's structures as merely techniques designed to get its plans through with the minimum of fuss. ALARM's approach deliberately set out to liberate people from meek adherence to the DoT, to empower them, to enable them to set their own agenda and to put the Department and its officials on the defensive. It set out to create such a mass protest movement that the Road Assessment Studies would become politically untenable.

The ALARM campaign was rooted in local groups. ALARM did some London-wide media work, but its main function was to provide the local groups with the weapons that they needed to campaign effectively in their own areas: an understanding of the wiles of the Department of Transport so they would not be duped; transport information so that they could make out a coherent case against road-building being the answer to London's transport problems; and advice on how to make use of the media.

## **BUILDING UP LOCAL GROUPS**

As building up the groups was so crucial to ALARM's way of working - and to its ultimate success in defeating the Assessment Studies - it is worth explaining in some detail how it was done. First and foremost, it was not easy. This was no seamless march of super campaigners on the way to a famous victory, but a mixed group of people fighting to win through struggle, argument and personality differences, learning as they went along, and working very, very hard. ALARM was not funded. It employed nobody. The groups raised their own money. The central activities were funded by the groups giving a small proportion of their money and with some financial assistance from a few London-wide bodies, particularly Friends of the Earth, who permitted the excellent Rupert Harwood to spend nearly all his time working on the campaign.

ALARM met about every two weeks. These were open meetings, to which most groups usually sent one or two people. ALARM planned central events and agreed its alternative ideas for transport in London as contained in 'The Blueprint for Transport' (produced by Haringey Council). Two working sub- groups were set up: one on information; the other on stunts and publicity. The information was distributed to local groups in the form of easy to-use, short and snappy Briefing

Sheets, well- focused on the sort of questions the groups were asking about transport alternatives or about how the DoT operated.

Jonathan Bray, a founder of ALARM UK, said, "A prime aim of ALARM was to counter the argument that London's transport problems could be solved by building more roads. ALARM compiled and distributed thousands of Briefing Sheets which explained that new roads would generate traffic and outlined, in broad terms, the sort of public transport, walking and cycling solutions that would work. ALARM always saw itself primarily as a transport organisation. Indeed, many of the ideas we were putting forward in the late 1980s are now being taken up by Government."

ALARM advised its groups not worry too much about responding in detail to official documents, but instead to organise their own meetings where the general public could be warned in advance of the sort of propaganda the DoT would use and learn of coherent alternative transport solutions.

By the time that the DoT held its own official consultation meetings, its officials were often made to look quite ridiculous by defiant, but well-informed, protesters. Right across London, the DoT's sleight of hand was exposed. A classic case occurred at a packed meeting in well-heeled Dulwich. The man from the Department was explaining, using pretty pictures from France, that the people of Dulwich would benefit from a widened South Circular Road as the residential roads would be traffic-calmed. But the official had reckoned without a member of the audience who knew that, while the DoT would pay for the destructive widening of the main road, there was no money guaranteed for the traffic- calming. One squirming bureaucrat went strangely silent.

Part of the DoT's sales technique was the terminology it employed. To counter this, ALARM even produced a Briefing Sheet explaining the value of groups creating their own language. The DoT's road 'improvements' became ALARM's road 'alterations'. The 'Western Environmental Improvement Route' became the 'Earls Court Bypass'.

ALARM was deliberately structured in a decentralised way. It ensured that the DoT had no one person with which it "could do business". The DoT had great difficulty in pinning down an organisation that had no visible head; instead scores of different people kept popping up all over London.

## **MAKING A MEDIA SPLASH**

Through the publicity subgroup, ALARM also assisted local groups with media work. ALARM did not campaign in local areas; nor deal with the local press. Sensibly, that was the responsibility of the local groups. They were, however, having some difficulty getting anything beyond local coverage. Gina Harkell, who organised many of ALARM's London-wide stunts, said, "By making

stunts all-London events, press coverage moved up a gear. London-wide TV and the national newspapers covered events and the anti-roads movement got a foot-hold in the media. "

ALARM devoted a lot of energy to its eye-catching stunts. It worked on the basis that a photograph in a national paper is worth a thousand words of carefully written text sent to a junior bureaucrat at the Department of Transport; that officialdom is trained to deal with detailed responses - which is why it likes Public Inquiries; that bureaucrats have great difficulty in responding to stunts where their carefully regulated world has been disturbed and they no longer are in control of events.

The stunts served a number of purposes: then, highlighted the campaign by using a technique - eye-catching pictures - that the media would go for; they spoke to the people of London over the heads of the bureaucrats; they brought together the ALARM groups; and, above all, they enabled ALARM to set a lively, well- publicised, humorous agenda that kept the DoT on the defensive.

But ALARM was not all daring stunts and fancy language. ALARM would not have achieved lasting success if its protest had not been rooted in London's communities. This was no campaign of trendy metropolitan activists or deep-green utopians. Tens of thousands of ordinary Londoners were integral to it. One MP alone received 17,000 letters opposing the Assessment Studies. This all provided the climate where local councils, MPs, and business organisations could come out and oppose the road-building proposals.

ALARM's achievement was to persuade these thousands of Londoners, many of whom started out from an essentially 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) position, that road-building was not the solution for any part of London and to campaign pro-actively against the Department of Transport; to convince them not to put their faith in accepted structures, but to put pressure on the politicians to scrap the plans.

Two months before the London local elections in May 1990, Cecil Parkinson withdrew all the road proposals. The London Road Assessment Studies were dead. Killed off by a new kind of protest. London had been ready for that sort of campaign. A year later, ALARM was to test the temperature in the rest of the country.

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### **Case history 3:**

#### **Twyford Down**

*The M3 is the motorway link between London and the major port of Southampton. Over the last few decades, the route was progressively upgraded to motorway standard with the exception of one short gap, close to Winchester in Hampshire. Although this area was extremely ecologically sensitive, the Department of Transport ignored low-cost options to improve the existing route in favour of at first, a scheme through water-meadows close to Winchester, and then a route through Twyford Down. In 1992, after a series of Public Inquiries and failed legal cases, the bulldozers moved in, provoking a campaign of non-violent direct action. This resulted in the imprisonment of ten people for defying a High Court Injunction imposed by the DoT, in addition, seventy-six people are being jointly sued by the Department for delays and damages totalling £1.9 million.*

***David Croker and Chris Gillham** were leading lights in the campaign to save Twyford Down, right from the days of Public Inquiries through to supporting the last, heroic efforts of young people to stop the bulldozers. David Croker, for thirteen years a Tory Councillor, came to chair the joint Action Group against the scheme and later the Twyford Down Association; Chris Gillham was a member of both these organisations and with others started up the Friends of Twyford Down in 1992 when the result of the General Election appeared to remove any last hope that the Government would stop work on the Down. Here they both give accounts of this momentous campaign.*

**David Croker:** "Although it is still too early to give a dispassionate analysis of the Twyford Down campaign there is a need to look at some significant events. The original scheme, approved after a short Inquiry in 1971, was for a road through the water-meadows along the line of the Itchen Valley. It was opposed by a broad coalition of landowners, including the powerful Winchester College and many conservation and amenity groups. Early "direct action" in the form of Inquiry disruption, following the intervention of anti-roads campaigner John Tyme, led to the second Side Roads Inquiry of 1976 being turned into a full-scale re-examination of the need for the scheme. In 1980, the Inspector found against the scheme on environmental grounds and the DoT promised a reassessment of alternatives. That reassessment led to the Twyford Down scheme, made possible by the College offering to sell the Down, which it had been given in trust to protect, in order to move the road away from the water-meadows.

The Twyford Down scheme had an easy ride at the 1985 Inquiry, due to support from the County and District Councils and the absence of organised opposition. From this low-point, a re-activated Joint Action Group ramped up a campaign which converted the District Council and secured the reopening of the Inquiry in 1987, at which a fully worked-up "tunnel alternative" was put forward.

Despite huge local support, the tunnel proposal was defeated on the grounds of cost and delay. The decision was challenged, first in the High Court at a cost of £100,000, and then with the European Commission (EC) over the failure of Government to implement the environmental assessment legislation. Preliminary construction work on the Down started whilst the EC was reviewing the case; a programme of rallies and marches organised by the Twyford Down Association raised public awareness and got widespread interest in the broadsheet press and on TV. The scheme became an issue in the 1992 General Election when the strongest advocate of the scheme, the then

Roads Minister Christopher Chope, lost his seat. However the result of the election and John Major's Maastricht deal with the EC cleared the way for the scheme to be built.

It is important to note that this was a local campaign until work was threatened - there was no simultaneous anti-road campaign at a national level from which to draw support. Once demonstrations started, people came from all parts and continued to come throughout the direct action phase. The media exposure of the last three years has galvanised the national anti-road campaign, to the extent that the name of the place is synonymous with environmental disaster. Even the DoT says that it does not want "another Twyford Down".

Did we fail? Perhaps a Twyford Down was necessary to rouse public opinion. Perhaps we needed, as a warning, an example of how far the Department of Transport were prepared to go, and as an inspiration, an example of what the public could do. Twyford Down - the last three-mile gap in the motorway from Southampton to London - also stands as an example of the dangers of ignoring the corridor effect, of the need to examine strategic schemes in their entirety. By the mistakes they made, it has led national environmental groups to recognise that they need to get involved in local schemes. And perhaps the drawing of a few brave politicians from the main opposition parties to demonstrations on Twyford Down has helped to bring about the more positive anti-road policies of those parties.

Today we would be able to stop what happened to Twyford Down. As it is, we are left with a ruined landscape, which we must continue to hold up as an example wherever else we fight a campaign. There must be no repeat. Let Twyford Down be the death throes of a discredited transport system."

**Chris Gillham:** "Half of the western promontory of the South Downs has been taken away and dumped across the wide, gentle valley of the Itchen, with its bright chalk streams; the scar of it is shocking; the noise of it invades places of once tranquil loveliness; gone forever are the ancient grassed trackways of the Dongas, a dramatic yet spiritually calming landscape of old turf, and a feeling of forgotten people and their doings. I am still one of those being sued by the DoT; I have spent a lot of money; my family life has been unsettled by the threats over it. I even broke my arm, foolishly, pointlessly on Twyford Down. I can hardly bear to look at the place and find myself taking detours to avoid it. And I am grateful.

What is there to be grateful about? There is certainly consolation in knowing that Twyford Down has set in train a process that promises change. But the reason I am grateful is that Twyford Down has changed my life and my way of thinking, and given me a feeling of self worth that I never had before. It has brought me a new companionship, a sense of trust in people and a feeling of community. And all of this with a sharp edge of excitement.

I came from a background of concerned but respectable and restrained involvement. I spent years in formal committees of preservation groups, not achieving very much. Here is the justification, whenever it is needed, for non-violent direct action. The system allowed us to spend decades in

argument, and huge sums of money, making an intellectually unshakeable case, only for the system to brush it all aside. When you hear the brazen words "democratic process" and "rule of law", reply quietly with "Twyford Down".

There was always talk in Winchester that people would stop the bulldozers if they ever came, but I never believed in the possibility of such things. I would probably not have been disappointed that Winchester walked away from Twyford Down at the end, because I would have given up too, had it not been for the faithfulness of the Dongas Tribe and its refusal to accept the cause as lost. I went along with them firstly from admiration and then because they taught me hope, and finally because they made me believe that I could, after all those years, do something to make a difference.

"Twyford Rising" was an expression of faith - we talked of stopping the scheme, even after the wreck of the Dongas. Perhaps we were literally wrong, but the faith was justified in other ways. As the direct action went on, the idea that something was being born took hold. The Dongas Tribe spoke of the awakening of the Dragon. I cannot better that image or fail to believe in the truth of it."

## **PROTEST GOES NATIONWIDE**

"The question is simple," said Rupert Harwood, one of the founders of ALARM UK, "can we reproduce the ALARM campaign across the country? If so, the Government's National Roads Programme would be in severe trouble. " He was speaking in 1991 to Jonathan Bray, Gina Harkell and John Stewart. Together, round a kitchen table, they formed ALARM UK.

Each person had played an important role in ALARM. Now they set out to employ the strategy they had used in London to take on something much bigger - the £23 billion National Roads Programme. The DoT had unveiled it in 1989 with bravado, boasting that it was the biggest road-building programme undertaken in Britain 'since the Romans'.

The DoT had not been put off by what happened in London. It put its defeat over the Assessment Studies down to London being a special case. Nationally, it intended to spend £13 billion over ten years to substantially 'upgrade' the country's road system. This was later revised upwards to £23 billion. There were two main reasons for this massive proposed expenditure: the government was concerned that the country's road infrastructure would not meet the demands of a Single European Market; and it also looked with alarm at the way, traffic was predicted to grow - between 83% and 142% by the year 2025. The scale of the programme was awesome. Huge swathes of the motorway and A-road network were to be widened and rebuilt. The country was to be transformed, with the motorway network widened to ten, twelve or even fourteen lanes. New motorway boxes were proposed for regions like the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, plus new quasi-motorways like the South Coast Expressway and the Home Counties East-West route. According to English

Nature, 161 Sites of Special Scientific Interest were threatened (SSSIs represent the UK's best areas for flora, fauna & geology), while English Heritage calculated that over 800 important archeological sites could be affected. A survey of the South East found that over 370 wildlife sites were threatened by, national or local road schemes.

For the powerful road lobby, the 1989 roads programme represented their finest hour. With such a vast increase in road- building, rocketing car use (during the 1980s, traffic doubled on the motorway network) and declining public transport, the future looked bleak from the point of view of campaigners. On the plus-side, the scale of the roads programme was such that the scale of potential opposition was equally vast, especially when the road-planning process was so skewed against objectors that it was capable of radicalising the most conventional of citizens.

Around that kitchen table, ALARM UK devised its strategy. Essentially, it followed the London pattern to provide: a central, umbrella organisation which supplied local groups with information on transport, environmental and campaigning matters, which staged occasional nationwide stunts (including a 'Stop That Road Week') and which held conferences where the groups could meet. ALARM UK groups would be autonomous. ALARM UK has never had a constitution, just a set of guiding principles. The idea was never to build up ALARM UK for its own sake, but simply to establish a movement to create a climate of protest which would overcome the National Roads Programme and so pave the way for real investment in more sustainable forms of transport.

## **ALARM UK's MODE OF OPERATION**

It is worthwhile spelling out in some more detail how ALARM UK operates. It is not a carefully structured organisation involving committees and subcommittees poring over official documents and issuing position papers and policy documents on the great environmental topics of our day like global warming and atmospheric pollution. Rather, as road schemes affect a random cross-section of society, it aims to be a place where ordinary people, often with nowhere else to go, can seek practical advice on how to stop their road scheme. Fundamental to ALARM UK's way of working is the fact that it attempts to provide groups with assistance relevant to their situation. People's initial concern nearly always revolves around their particular road scheme; generally it does not involve wanting to 'green' Britain, far less solve the environmental problems facing the world.

ALARM UK has produced a series of Briefing Sheets aimed at the concerns of the local groups and designed to enable them to campaign effectively in their own areas. These Briefing Sheets cover two general areas: campaigning- the techniques adopted in London are recommended; and transport information - sufficient facts and figures to enable local groups to argue the case against their road schemes in transport terms and to begin to develop realistic "transport" solutions. The local groups have thus become the engine room of ALARM UK. They own it. The central Organisation exists to service, assist and inform groups of ordinary people around the country. ALARM UK would be nothing but an empty without its grassroots members.

*ALARM UK's advice has been to encourage groups to win before the The Public Inquiry - for decades, putting faith in the Public Inquiry System was the sure road to defeat. The advice still stands, but by 1995 even the Public Inquiry Inspectors are beginning to sense the change of mood. In the 1990s, objectors, often assisted by the able Keith Buchan (of MTRU Consultancy) have won Public Inquiries at Hereford, Ealing and Norwich. This is, possibly, The ultimate irony.*

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## **How To WIN**

Many local road campaigns followed a similar pattern. A few local people would become aware, perhaps through the local paper or via a DoT Public Consultation document, that a major road was planned for their area. The local establishment (the council, business and trade unions, MPs and often the local paper itself) would all support the proposal because of the "traffic relief and economic benefits it would bring to the area". At first the local campaigners would be overawed by the forces arrayed behind the road proposal. Having got in touch with ALARM UK (often via a more well-known environmental group), ALARM UK would offer support ("yes, you can win"), a pack of Briefing Sheets and any other assistance needed. Often the first step in getting a local campaign up and running would be a public meeting (ALARM UK may have suggested, or provided speakers). The nervous organisers would often be surprised by the turn-out, and the willingness of those in the audience to get involved in the campaign. Following ALARM UK's advice, campaigners would then begin to fight a political (with a small "p") campaign. A campaign to make the road so politically embarrassing that local politicians would be forced to oppose the road, which would ultimately lead to the Government axing the scheme. By lobbying councillors, MPs, and MEPS, gradually the campaign would begin to "turn" the politicians. These politicians might not agree with the campaigners, but they knew they had to support them or lose their seats. As the local campaigners grew in confidence they would put on exciting stunts and events (like marking out the path of the road on the landscape, or getting mock battles between bowler-hatted civil servants and iron age warriors on the site of threatened hill forts) until the campaign started to dominate the local press. With the help of reports and briefing sheets from Transport 2000, Friends of the Earth, CPRE and ALARM UK as well as local experts, the campaign would also fight the road proposers on their own territory. They would question whether the new road really would bring prosperity to their area, whether it would really relieve local traffic problems. They would also set out their own non road-building alternative to the scheme. As the campaign developed, ALARM UK would always be there with useful contacts, information and, crucially, moral support, as campaigners faced the peaks and troughs which are inevitable when any diverse group of people get together to try to make common cause against a common threat. And when the great day of victory came, ALARM UK tried to ensure that those who wanted to carry on campaigning could find a role helping others (be it through writing Briefing Sheets or through speaking at meetings).

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## Case history 4:

### Oxleas Wood

*The East London River Crossing was one of the most controversial sections of a planned inner ring road for London. It would have cut through suburban Plumstead and one of London's few remaining fragments of ancient woodland - Oxleas Wood. **Jonathan Bray** convened a strategy group which brought together national and local campaigns to stop the road.*

“Whenever I used to visit Oxleas Wood I would visualise the proposed road cutting through it. It's hard to believe that the woods are now safe. But safe they almost certainly are!

My involvement in the campaign against the East London River Crossing began in earnest in the late eighties. By this time the road had been scheduled for construction for many years and had already been approved by the longest Public Inquiry ever held into a road scheme. That inquiry had lasted 194 days; the transcripts of the proceedings contained 9.5 million words!

Local people, in the form of People Against the River Crossing (PARC) and Greenwich & Lewisham FOE, were fighting a determined and exhausting battle against a scheme which would not only cut a swathe through 8,000 year old Oxleas Woods but would also take out several hundred houses in the quiet and pleasant suburb of Plumstead. But with approval in principle granted, and with the Government, developers and some socialist local authorities strongly supporting the scheme, the odds against stopping it were getting bigger all the time. To achieve victory, a concerted strategy was needed to make Oxleas Wood a big issue locally and give it wider significance - a strategy to make it a symbol of the environmental damage that the road programme was causing and a rallying point for the environment movement. If that could be done, then, given Oxleas Wood's proximity to Westminster, it might force the Government to back down rather than risk confrontation with a united community and environment movement, in its own "back yard".

Like all the best campaigns we fought on every level. There were letter-writing stalls at the popular Greenwich market, politicians were systematically lobbied and a well-presented public transport alternative was drawn-up. We organised an "Adopt-a- Tree" scheme; the aim here was to get every tree in Oxleas Wood adopted. As well as bringing in funds and publicity, it would give supporters a real stake in the campaign. And if the worst came to the worst we could invite tree adopters to turn up to defend their tree.

In order to make Oxleas a "line in the sand" for the environment movement, we got some of the large environmental non-government organisations (for example the Wildlife Trusts and World

Wide Fund for Nature) to take part in an Oxleas Strategy Group. This helped lock them into a campaign that was ultimately run by local people, but which made the best use of the resources of the national campaigns.

A couple of legal lines of last resort helped propel the campaign into the national news. The Government had failed to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment for the scheme, as required by European Community law. The heroic European Commissioner for the Environment, Carlo Ripa di Meana, took up this complaint causing Prime Minister Major to hit the roof and interrupt a Commonwealth conference to condemn the EC's action. The complaint was never seen through by the EC, but the publicity was invaluable, as was that which resulted from a High Court case where the "Oxleas 9" (nine local people) put their assets on the line to take the Department of Transport to court over their failure to provide adequate land in exchange for the damage to Oxleas woods. The case was lost, but Oxleas had caught the public imagination and the pressure on the government was intensifying.

Meanwhile, campaigners were preparing for the worst. A "Beat the Bulldozer" pledge was launched, with the aim of getting 10,000 people to pledge to be there if the bulldozers went in. With the TV pictures of direct action at Twyford Down fresh in their minds, as well as the vivid pictures we had painted of what would happen if they violated Oxleas Wood, the Government backed down.

For me the Oxleas campaign had meant hours of hard work in meetings held in draughty halls on dark, rainy nights trying to get the best campaign that I could. For hundreds of local people it had been years of struggle. Was it worth it? Definitely. Oxleas was a turning point. We'd shown how people power could stop roads, a lesson that was quickly learnt right across the country. We'd shown that the environment movement, when it's focused and working in harmony with local communities, could win. And of course the peace and beauty of Oxleas Wood has been preserved.

*Jonathan Bray, founder and convenor of the Oxleas strategy group*

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It requires another publication, written by people further removed from the events of the last ten years, to assess the true contribution ALARM UK has made to the transport revolution that is taking place in Britain. But it appears that the loose structure of ALARM UK has played a significant role in moulding together isolated road protests into a nationwide revolt against road-building. Obviously protest groups have grown up that have been outside ALARM UK, but the 300 groups that are now affiliated incorporates the bulk of the grassroots opposition to the road-building programme. It is this vibrant grassroots movement which has created the climate that has made the DoT so vulnerable to attack from all quarters.

The other important factor in all this has been the close working relationship between Transport 2000, ALARM UK and, from 1993, the direct action group, Road Alert! This has produced a movement that can make a strong intellectual case for sustainable transport policies; is radical and informed at grass- roots level; and has incorporated direct action as integral to it.

## **REVOLT AGAINST ROAD-BUILDING**

A year after its formation in 1991, over one hundred groups had joined ALARM UK. This symbolised the unease that was developing around the country over road-building. By then, road-builders had suffered isolated, but significant, defeats outside London - quite independently of ALARM UK. A campaign led by Birmingham FOE, where local people had been mobilised early and effectively, had overturned plans by Birmingham City Council for major road schemes in the south of the city: an important victory close to the heart of the country's motor- manufacturing industry. And in South West England, a lively campaign by the local group, PANEL, led to the abandonment of the Exeter Northern Bypass.

Surveys began to show that, while most people were as devoted as ever to their car, growing numbers of people were opposed to further major road-building. This was particularly the case in the prosperous South East of Britain where a general feeling was emerging that the smart towns and villages of the Home Counties were being ruined by unwanted development. There were protests against superstores, and the expansion of airports, and, above all, against the building of new roads. Articulate campaigns were mounted against the expansion of the M25 and the construction of a new superhighway through the well-heeled towns of Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

Many of these anti-roads campaigners were pillars of the local establishment. They were also members of established and establishment environmental organisations like the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust or the Council for the Protection of Rural England. Their members provided an impetus for these organisations to get involved in campaigns against road-building schemes.

## **EARLY SUCCESSES**

The early successes against the DoT came outside the South East - Birmingham, Preston, Yorkshire, Woodstock, Exeter. The importance of these campaigns cannot be overestimated. Ordinary groups of people, fighting to save their communities from the ravages of road- building, had taken on the Department of Transport ... and had won. In both Preston and Yorkshire, the campaigners fought classic campaigns along the lines of ALARM in London and had road schemes - each worth over £100 million - abandoned. It is no exaggeration to say that, quietly and unobtrusively, history was being made. Never before had the mighty Department of Transport been shaken in this way. These victories were followed by numerous others across the length and breadth

of Britain. The basic picture was the same - people who had never campaigned before had taken on a Government department . . . and won. For any government this would be a serious situation: a major plank of its transport policy - road-building - was becoming untenable.

“Ordinary groups of people - had taken on the DoT - and had won. Never before had the mighty DoT been shaken in this way.”

## **THE SUMMER OF '93**

“The way was open for campaigners around the country to fight to win.”

With hindsight, the Summer of 1993 was a turning point. Anti- road campaigns were happening right across the country, but most of the famous victories - such as Yorkshire and Preston - were still to happen. The events of the Summer of '93 shook the DoT to its very core and paved the way for what was to follow.

Two place names sum up what happened that Summer: 'Twyford Down' and 'Oxleas Wood'.

At Twyford Down, the anger at the destruction of a precious landscape spilled over into direct action. This ancient chalk hill was situated directly in the line of fire of a frustrated Department of Transport, who for many years had been attempting to construct the so-called "missing link" of the M3 between London and Southampton. Here, the drama of people lying in front of bulldozers high up on a lonely hillside brought the road protest movement into every home in the land... and hugely embarrassed a Government already concerned about the growing revolt against road-building across the country.

Meanwhile, in a remote corner of South East London, the 'Oxleas Wood' campaign was coming to a dramatic conclusion. For the best part of a decade, local people had fought to stop the East London River Crossing. This road, so strategically important to the Department of Transport, would have demolished over 250 homes and cut through the 8,000 year- old Oxleas Wood. The anti-roads movement had made 'Oxleas Wood' its "line in the sand", the one it was determined to win. And, in that remarkable Summer of '93, it did. The final straw for the Government was the fear that the embarrassing scenes of Twyford Down would be repeated in the suburbs of the nation's capital. The fact that the Department of Transport was prepared to drop one of its most important road schemes meant that the way was open for campaigners around the country to fight to win.

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## Case history 5:

### M11

*The M11 Link road was designed to take the M11 East Anglia to London motorway further into inner London. Though short in length (less than 4 miles), the damage was to be colossal, as it would have to be routed right through the Victorian suburbs of Wanstead, Leytonstone and Leyton, entailing the demolition of 350 homes. After many years of often rowdy, Public Inquiries, the Government got planning permission. However, by this time the road was an anachronism, as it was clear it would just encourage more car commuting into central London. Those local people who hadn't already moved out of the blighted areas in the road's path joined forces with young environmental activists to mount the most sustained campaign of non-violent direct action against a road scheme that the country has ever seen. **Phil McLeish** was one of those environmental activists.*

“I got involved in the M11 campaign around March '94 at the height of Operation Roadblock - the proactive direct action phase of the campaign. From mid-March through to mid-April we had people coming in from all over London - the country even - all doing their bit to help stop the road being built. That was a manic time: droves of mud-coated people I didn't know always coming and going; wonderful communal meals from John The Cook; three phones all permanently busy; lots of places to get to know, all weird and wonderful names - Leytonstonia, Euphoria... not so much a community movement as a movement community. The campaign hadn't always been that big. Although there had been local opposition to the road for a decade or so, most of the local residents had abandoned hope, until a handful of Twyford veterans turned up in September '93. Direct action remained a fairly specialist activity for the first couple of months and while some locals may have sympathised with what was happening, few of them felt it to be "their" campaign. But on November 6th, all this changed. A 250 year old sweet chestnut tree on George Green, Wanstead, had been ominously fenced off. This tree lived on common land, land which had survived the Enclosures Act, land which local residents had been led to believe would be preserved intact, since the road would be in a "tunnel". Having gathered for a "tree dressing" ceremony, schoolchildren, pensioners, respectable (and less respectable) Wanstead locals now found their way barred. What happened next, neither security guards, the police, local residents or even the organisers had expected. Together, everyone pushed down the fences, reclaimed the land and rescued the tree. With 70 year old women now cheerfully committing "criminal damage", any division between activist and resident dissolved. The campaign to save the tree became an urgent local issue; by the time this tree was finally cut down in December, media interest had turned the Link road into a national issue.

At first I found it quite weird to live life in front of cameras, videos, journalists, sixth formers doing research, and all the rest, but quite quickly you get blase about it, and it becomes normal. We liked to think of the media as mere reporters, but in fact they profoundly changed the course of the campaign. At first our phone tree was made up almost exclusively of local residents along with a

few other people from the wider London area. This changed after the eviction of Wanstonia - five large houses in Wanstead right in the path of the road which were declared an 'Independent Free Area' & defended to the last during February '94. By the time of the eviction of Claremont Road in December '94, our supporters were scattered from Southampton to Newcastle. Our TV celebrity status meant that people had heard of us and as a result we had a permanent influx of visitors and supporters. In fact, it often felt like we had more supporters than we knew what to do with. Given this, there was less of a need for us to enthuse the local population, and we came to rely more and more on the young eco-activists excited and inspired by our media images: people being airlifted off roofs by their ankles, bodies silhouetted against the skyline, high up on top of cranes, sitting on the transport Minister's roof, climbing up crown courts, Parliament even... The campaign grew and established itself, but we never again felt as rooted in the local community as we did during the defence of that tree.

Operation Roadblock could never have happened without the media. We did our best to network the event but we would never have managed to get the numbers we did were it not for all the publicity around the Chestnut tree and the Wanstonia eviction. If the three axes of all direct action campaigns are community rootedness, media success and economic disruption, then here we were focusing on the third. We planned to organise a massive rota of daily direct action to make work on the road physically impossible. As a feat of Organisation it was certainly impressive. Eventually, though, numbers started dwindling, and we ended Roadblock after a month. We never again had the energy for another offensive like that. In part, I think we had lost faith in our ability to actually stop the road. We'd thrown at them the biggest sustained bout of daily environmental direct action in British history and it hadn't worked. Subtly, unconsciously, we became a movement of spectacular symbolic resistance rather than a campaign to stop a local motorway.

In Wanstead we were campaigning to defend the (old) commons, the call was a conservative one: leave our Green as it is. Most of our publicity, much of our talk, was around the M11 Link and its stupidity. As things began to center around the defence of Claremont Road we were much less constrained when it came to defining the meaning of what we were defending. We could have focused more explicitly on housing and homelessness, but as it happens the battle was pitched much more on a cultural level. We defended Claremont as ongoing performance art, as an experiment in communal living, and as a (car) free space. One crucially important context for this was the Criminal justice Bill. "Defending, diversity and dissent" was one of the slogans of that summer: this was nearer to the feel of Claremont than "homes not roads". But the shift also had psychological reasons. After the early phase of the campaign where we were always running about, spontaneously doing actions and enthusing people, there was a felt collective need for us to better control and define our own space. The campaign was settling down, institutionalising itself. And so people set to work. The street was painted and filled with psychedelic sculpture-barricades, above them the nets, treehouses, ariel walkways and towers went up; inside the houses, bunkers and lock-ons and tunnels were hidden in tons of rubble.

The eviction of Claremont Road, when it finally happened, was wonderful. It was the longest eviction in post-war British history. Along with the other two campaign high points it was

downplayed by the media. But it was the most extreme and intense week which I have ever experienced. After all the waiting and preparing, it was a complete cathartic release. Hundreds of hours of labour instantly transmuted to experience and rubble. As an end, it was perfect.

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## **NEW PROTEST GENERATION**

*A crucial element in the success of the 'anti-roads movement' has been its ability to back up its protests with sound transport arguments. Radical academics of the calibre of John Adams, John Whitelegg, Stephen Plowden and others have provided the theory and the research. Pressure groups, led by Transport 2000, have produced reports which have cogently applied this research to present-day Britain. And the likes of ALARM UK and Friends of the Earth have acted as active channels for the ideas to reach the local groups campaigning at grassroots level.*

But the Summer of '93 was important in another respect as well. Twyford Down brought into the anti-roads movement a new type of protester - young, mobile, committed environmentalists. These were the people who threw themselves in front of the bulldozers and 'locked on' to the diggers and cement mixers. The group who camped on Twyford Down called themselves the Dongas Tribe, after the medieval trackways crisscrossing the Down. Their efforts to protect the land were to provide inspiration to a new generation of protesters. To the embarrassment of the Government, these "deep-green" people won the respect and affection of the middle-classes of the Home Counties, who identified with their fight against inappropriate development and landscape destruction. What The Economist was to term 'the classless protest' was beginning to emerge.

Emma Must, who was to receive a major international award for the role she played in the protest movement, first got involved at Twyford Down: "I was working in the local library. Each day as I travelled to work by train, I witnessed the beginnings of the destruction of Twyford Down - a landscape that had been etched on my mind since childhood. I simply couldn't stand back and do nothing. Many others felt the same, and we determined to try to halt the devastation in whatever peaceful ways we could - by lying in front of the bulldozers, locking onto massive machines and networking frantically to alert as many people as possible to the horror of what was happening."

## **GREEN UPRISING**

There has been much debate over why direct action sprang up so forcefully at this time around the issue of road-building. There is probably no single answer.

There were hundreds of young people, environmentally aware, dissatisfied with the 'go-for-growth' ethos of the 1980s, who were affronted by the way in which Britain's cities and countryside were being remorselessly eaten into to cater for the motor vehicle. The horror of putting a road through Twyford Down, overlooking the ancient city of Winchester, part of the rolling Hampshire countryside, and the site of an iron-age village, a bronze-age burial site and medieval trackways, encapsulated all the anger and frustration of so many young people who felt their world was being sacrificed on the altar of materialism.

Twyford Down was the catalyst which unleashed a torrent of creative protest that carried over into other road protests and, by the mid-1990s, is energising a range of campaigns on green issues like animal welfare and land reform.

Also, prior to Twyford Down, radical direct action organisations had emerged in Britain. Groups such as Earth First! and Reclaim the Streets had made contact with ALARM UK and a number of joint actions had been organised around the country.

The direct action movement asked many questions of the large, established environmental organisations. Many of these organisations were slow to embrace the new movement, but there are signs in the mid-1990s that some of them are adapting to take account of this new form of protest. Further than this, though, the shock waves that are reverberating from direct action are stimulating new thinking, with growing emphasis on local campaigning and co-operation.

## **ROAD ALERT!**

The national direct action group, Road Alert!, which was to become a sister organisation of ALARM UK, sprang out of the Twyford Down protests. People like Rebecca Lush and Emma Must, who had both gone to jail rather than give in over Twyford Down, had come to realise that "it was not a case of one road through one hill, but potentially a thousand roads through a thousand hills by the early years of the 21st century." With others, they set up Road Alert! to specifically concentrate on the direct action side of anti-roads campaigning. Rebecca Lush said, "Many people have been inspired by the protests that have sprung up since Twyford and have wanted to defend their land too. Road Alert! exists to help these people by passing on protest skills and helping others to get involved." Road Alert! has attracted support from hundreds of young people around the country. Tim Allman, another of its founders, explained the appeal: "There were a lot of people who didn't like what was happening around them, but who didn't see what they could do that would make much difference. Direct action changed all that. It empowers people. It makes them feel that they, as individuals, can make things happen."

The close working relationship between Road Alert! and ALARM UK has ensured that, in Britain, the direct activists have not been seen as a fringe minority, but as an integral part of the anti-roads

movement. Interestingly, there have been few of the splits and schisms that have crippled so many protest movements over the years.

## GROUND BREAKING CONFERENCES

This unlikely alliance of direct action campaigners and Home Counties stalwarts was in evidence at ALARM UK's first National Conference in Birmingham in the early months of 1993. At that stage the Twyford Down protest was still to reach its dramatic climax, the Oxleas Wood climbdown was six months away, and the victories at Preston and in Yorkshire were still to come. But there were clear signs that the campaigning techniques first adopted in London, together with the emerging drama of Twyford Down, supported by sound intellectual arguments put forward by the likes of Transport 2000, were beginning to mould together a formidable movement.

*Corridor Alliances* A sure sign of the growing strength and maturity of the anti-roads movement is the way local groups have banded together over the last few years to fight road construction along specific corridors. The A36 Corridor Alliance, formed in October 1993, consists of over thirty groups each opposing a particular scheme along the A36/46 between Southampton and Bristol. SCAR (South Coast Against Road-building), started in April 1994, is made up of nearly forty groups opposing DoT plans to construct a 230 mile superhighway from the Channel Tunnel to the West Country. Similar alliances are being set up along both the A1(M) and the Felixstowe to Holyhead Euroroute. By developing this additional tier of campaigning, groups are now effectively challenging the DoT's piecemeal approach to constructing strategic routes.

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### Case history 6:

#### M1-M62

*The Calder Valley in West Yorkshire was threatened by a new motorway linking the M1 and the M62. The people of this region of hilltop farms and industrial towns united against a scheme which would have transformed the distinctive character of this corner of northern England. Charles Elstone of the local campaign, CRAG, picks up the story.*

“Being an active member of the M1 -M62 campaign was frightening, frustrating, thrilling, depressing and fun. I was frightened when we learnt from other road campaigners how much work we had to do; frustrated by the off-hand attitude of the DoT; thrilled by the hard work of so many people and by our TV programme; depressed when I fell out with the others. But what fun... the DoT said they would not write to our Chairman any more, so we put him in the stocks and gagged

him (this got coverage in all the local papers and on the TV)... one village would be totally surrounded by three motorways, so we called it "The Bermuda Triangle no-one gets out alive. "

The M1-M62 Link was a new Motorway linking junction 25 on the M62 to either junction 38 or 39 on the M1. The alternatives were the Purple Route over hills and open countryside, or the Yellow Route down the Calder valley through mainly urban areas. The Link was proposed in February 1992 and cancelled in October 1993.

I started as a NIMBY – the yellow Route was at the bottom of my garden - but very soon I changed my mind. I went to a meeting five miles away where it was agreed to fight the whole idea of a Link and to try to stop Purple and Yellow factions forming. This became our strategy and both it and the slogan SINK THE LINK were adopted by all the groups being set up by local communities along both routes.

The DoT, by ignoring some places as venues for their exhibition and by issuing a biased questionnaire, caused a lot of resentment which led to a self-sustaining momentum. The local groups soon wanted to coordinate their individual campaigns and formed CRAG (Combined Road Action Groups). After four months, we had persuaded our two local councils, three local MPs (two Labour, one Conservative) and MEP all to oppose the Link. A little while later, we presented a twenty thousand signature petition to Parliament and went to Downing Street with our MPs. Within twelve months we had completed our own questionnaire covering six thousand households which showed only 6% to be in favour of the Link; and the TV programme about us was shown on Channel 4.

I think we were able to keep up this momentum because each group had one or two activists and this meant that CRAG never had less than twenty strongly committed people. From the start we recognised the importance of the local press, radio and TV and we learnt how to write a Press Release. We were lucky to be in an area where each town and village had a Summer Fete and there was always a Sink the Link stall. We caught the public's imagination and got hundreds of people writing to their local councillors and MPs.

I will never forget my time on the M1-M62 campaign, the new friendships forged, the skills and energy people brought to the task, the unlikely combinations of people with different politics and ideals who found that not only could they work together but that they could learn from each other. I still find it difficult to pinpoint why we achieved so much, but near the top of the list must be having so many really active members and having a snappy slogan like Sink the Link which became recognised throughout West Yorkshire. But maybe it is Mrs Thatcher who should be thanked most because many of our activists were unemployed, early retirees or redundant and were able to give all of their time to fighting the campaign.”

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## Case history 7:

### M25

"Yesterday's announcement that the Government is dropping plans to widen part of the M25 to 14 lanes marks the end of a transport policy that stretches back to the early days of motoring."

*Christian Wolmar, The Independent, 4.4.95*

The M25 is London's bypass. It is a massive motorway, eight lanes wide in places, encircling the capital, completed in 1986. It was designed to take long- distance and freight traffic away from London and the prosperous commuter towns on its outskirts.

But, in 1989, barely three years after the last section had been opened, came the bombshell: the Department was proposing to widen sections of the M25 to 14 lanes. The well-heeled citizens of Surrey, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire rose up in revolt. They had been promised that the new motorway would spell the end to their traffic problems, allowing their smart towns and villages to return to the peaceful days of old.

The success of their campaign to stop the widening of the M25 is full of instructive lessons. First and foremost, it was a campaign rooted in the local communities. It is frequently the case that governments can ignore pressure groups or professional agitators. But they dare not dismiss the united voice of thousands of voters. And this was a people's revolt happening in the Conservative heartlands - the wealthy, influential middle-classes of Middle England on the march.

The local councils and constituency MPs, the latter all Conservative, could not afford to ignore these people. Runnymede Council drew up a thoroughly professional alternative to the Government's widening proposals. Friends of the Earth and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) provided useful information on environmental issues and campaigning techniques. Surrey CPRE performed a crucial coordinating role.

Rarely can a government withstand this sort of well- informed, passionate protest coming from people whose votes it treasures. It was not surprising, therefore, that a month before Local Government Elections in the areas concerned, the Government announced its intention to drop its original widening proposals.

The campaign had played it right. Its main target was to use the weight of public opinion to change the minds of politicians rather than concentrate all its efforts on the Public Inquiry.

Thus, the dropping of the M25 made another huge hole in the Department of Transport's Roads Programme. In Christian Wolmar's words, "If it is impossible to justify such a widening of the

busiest motorway in the country because of the resulting environmental damage, how many other road schemes are equally vulnerable?"

*The Independent* 4.4.95

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The Conference reflected the nature of ALARM UK. It was all about enabling local groups to meet each other, to campaign more effectively and to marshal the transport arguments more efficiently. Neither global nor constitutional issues featured on the agenda. To take votes or pass resolutions would have been quite irrelevant. The Conference was deliberately and carefully structured to meet the requirements of the local groups. The speakers were largely from member organisations outlining their campaigns. The workshops were focused on practical campaigning and applied transport matters. There was ample opportunity during the day for campaigners to meet each other often for the first time.

By the second ALARM UK Conference, only 18 months later, the changes that had taken place had been dramatic. Numerous groups, including a good number of the 250 ALARM UK groups then in existence, had successfully challenged the Department of Transport. The Government had dropped one third of its National Roads Programme in a Roads Review it felt obliged to undertake. And direct action protests had sprung up in over ten further places, most notably in East London against the hugely controversial MI I Link Road.

## **THE "URBAN TWYFORD DOWN"**

The Government had feared direct action in defence of the historic Oxleas Wood in South East London, but it was taken aback that the protest against the M11, a motorway being built in an unfashionable part of East London, resulted in the longest campaign of direct action against a road in British history. For over eighteen months, pictures were flashed around the world of masses of people - old and young, conventional and alternative - taking on the bulldozers in an awe-inspiring defence of homes, urban green spaces and communities.

## **DoT IN DIFFICULTIES**

The Department of Transport, once virtually unassailable, was in severe difficulties. Something had to crack.. The DoT was failing to respond to the well-researched intellectual criticism its policies were receiving not only from Transport 2000 and its increasingly well-respected Director, Stephen Joseph, but also from major industrial and economic interests. In August 1994, the

Transport Secretary John MacGregor - a man quite unable to cope with the developing situation - was replaced.

Moreover, the turmoil created by the anti-roads movement had created the right environment for other forces to undermine the Roads Programme. The Department of the Environment, worried about Britain's inability to meet the targets for reducing emissions levels agreed at the Rio Summit, became increasingly critical of the DoT. The Treasury, concerned as ever to reduce public spending, was able to earmark roads as a progressively easier target for making savings. The Department of Transport no longer felt confident enough to shun its expert critics; radical transport academics and consultants like Dr Phil Goodwin and Keith Buchan have been invited to join official bodies. Neither could the Department afford to ignore two momentous reports published in late 1994. The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, comprising some of Britain's top scientists, called for a halving of the Roads Programme and real investment in alternative transport modes. A report from SACTRA (The Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment) produced evidence that, generally, far from solving problems, new roads simply generate more traffic. And, finally, both the main opposition parties have adopted policies which promise a significant move away from road-building.

By 1995, it has become clear that a change is underway at the Department of Transport. Though there are still numerous battles left to be fought, a new Secretary of State, Dr Brian Mawhinney, has signalled a strategic move away from road- building. Crucially, the Department has abandoned any plans to build enough roads to accommodate the potential growth in traffic levels. Steven Norris, Mawhinney's progressive deputy and a man long convinced of the need for sensible investment in alternative modes, has become more prominent.

None of this means that road-building is a thing of the past, but all political parties are looking to scale it down considerably and are looking at other ways of dealing with the country's transport problems. This is a world away from boasting about the largest road-building programme 'since the Romans'. A transport revolution is taking place. Back in 1990, it was clear that London had been ready to respond to a radical way of campaigning against road-building. Just five years later, it is has become equally clear that this sort of dynamic campaigning across the country is bringing about a fundamental shift in the nation's transport policy.

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## **ALARM UK**

1995

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