

The pre-history of LTNs – the 1985 road closures and their effects

In 1985 Oxford City Council still retained some roads and traffic powers although ultimate decisions were the responsibility of the County. Prompted primarily by activists in the Divinity Road Residents Association (where 3 councillors lived), the City Council planned a year's experiment closing all the roads north of Cowley Road to prevent 'rat-running' through traffic¹. The County, then unsupportive of the idea, forced a reduction to 3 months. The closures, physical gates with padlocks, were installed on 1 January 1985 and removed at the end of March. The euphemisms 'Low Traffic Neighbourhood' and 'traffic filters' had not then been invented – road closures were called just that, and the obstructions were simply 'barriers'.

I have lived in East Oxford, in what is now St.Mary's ward, since buying our house in Hurst St in 1979. In 1985 my wife and I were sharing the running of a bookshop at 34 Cowley Rd near The Plain. Hence the present LTN plans for east Oxford seem scarily like Groundhog Day – we have seen it all before.

Despite ample advance warning from many locals of the traffic chaos that would result², the experiment went ahead. Already by mid-January there were complaints in the press³ about traffic congestion at the Plain, and longer journey times. I recall traffic solid for much of the day in Cowley Rd outside our shop, making it hard to cross the road and discouraging customers from coming to East Oxford. A friend, then a CPS prosecutor, recalls problems driving to work along Iffley Rd and through The Plain. Hollow Way was the other main pinch point for congestion.

While petitions in favour were collected from cyclists, much larger protests against were organised in the form of public meetings, cars asked to hoot if they wanted roads re-opened, and eventually a 'open our roads' candidate standing at the the local elections. The County Council, sceptical from the beginning, decided that, given the traffic chaos, road closures were not the way forward, but that traffic calming measures could be introduced. This led eventually (after another failed attempt to close Divinity Rd in the 1990s) to the vicious (and now illegal) speed humps in Magdalen Rd and Howard St designed to discourage through traffic, and chicanes in Divinity Rd.

Traffic did not 'evaporate' in the 1985 experiment, it was simply displaced into routes that were still open. The official report concluded "the amount of traffic in the city as a whole remained unchanged" but "many of the trips that would have been made across East Oxford [i.e. through the closed streets] were transferred to The Plain (or Dawson St), Hollow Way and the ring road". Disruption extended well beyond East Oxford as many drivers avoided the area altogether: "Oxford-wide the effects were most noticeable along the Banbury and Woodstock Roads, Rose Hill and the eastern and southern sections of the ring road, all of which experienced an increase in traffic". 2-way turning movements between St.Clements and Cowley Rd or Iffley Rd via the Plain or Dawson St tripled from 3204 to 10062/day (i.e. displaced from crossings further out), and increased by 21% (10732 to 12969 in Hollow Way). Overall traffic flows along St.Clements, Cowley Rd and Iffley Rd at The Plain (including movements over Magdalen Bridge) increased by

1 The roads closed were Jeune St, Rectory Rd, Cross St (at Morrell Ave.), Divinity Rd, Southfield Rd, Marsh Rd, Junction Rd, with Salegate Lane made one-way away from Hollow Way; Dawson St was left open (subsequently permanently closed). This was Part 2 of the traffic plan, Union St, East Avenue and Collins St had been closed off earlier as Part 1. Full details are in the *Report of the City Engineer and Director of Recreation and Director of Planning, Estates & Architecture to [the] Highways & Traffic Committee, 13 November 1985 [on the] East Oxford – Experimental Road Closures: Report of Survey*.

2 see *Oxford Times* article by Chris Gray 14.12.1985 and letter from myself 21.12.1985.

3 see *Oxford Times* article by Peter McIntyre 11.1.1985

27%, 11% and 3% respectively, 47548 to 55616. Average traffic queues backed up along Iffley Rd in the morning peak rose from 22 to 78, nearly doubling the travel time from Marston St to The Plain. Inward journeys on Cowley Rd differed little in the morning peak (according to the report, not my perception!), but increased significantly off-peak and in the evening rush-hour, with unprecedented inward queues of 31 (1700-1800 hrs.). The Oxford Bus Company (this was prior to Stagecoach's presence) reported "some late running in the peak periods" along Cowley and Iffley Roads. Surveys showed 93% of households reported longer journey times for all kinds of journeys, though there is some inconsistency in the data depending on the question asked – in another question 77-78% of car/taxi/van drivers reported longer journeys, and 58% of bus users. A large majority of respondents (68-84%) reported traffic increases in St.Clements, Cowley Rd, Iffley Rd and Morrell Avenue, rising to 97% for Hollow Way. Residents in all immediately affected areas except Divinity Rd, were 49-58% against the scheme (28-44% in favour); only in the Divinity Rd area was there a majority (62%) in favour. Not much change there in 36 years !

Businesses uniformly reported increased journey times for staff and deliveries, and 91% opposed the closures (80%) or wanted changes (11%), only 2% supporting. All business types, except estate agents, reported reduced trading and profitability.

The ambulance service reckoned 6 man-hours per day were lost through extra time on the road, Divinity Rd being a major route to and from the hospitals, used 40 times a day. Target response times were 'perilously close to being outside the laid down limits' during the experiment. Consultants and staff at the Warneford Hospital, near the top of Divinity Road, were particularly unhappy about the closures⁴.

As a motorised character in Jim Needle's *Oxford Star* cartoon 'Murphy's Law' noted on 4 April 1985:

"y'know, the more I drive in Oxford, the more I'm convinced that the road planning is done by some clown who's never driven a motor vehicle in his life"

the next panel showing a stereotypical clown on a ropey horse with a placard advertising "Beware – road planner at work".

The *Oxford Times*'s editorial on 1 March 1985 headed 'Blind alleys' complained that

"Oxford has been famous for many things over the years, and infamous for a few, but when the history of the latter part of this century is compiled, the city may find itself being singled out for the tragi-comic attempts to solve the 'Oxford Traffic Problem'. It will be celebrated not least for its traffic experiments. Scarcely a year goes by when the city council is not involved in a scheme of some sort, most of them, it has to be said with laudable intentions, but often more appropriate to a city in Cloudcuckooland...",

going on to excoriate the closure scheme and its negative effects.

The present plans close more than twice as many roads as in 1985; the resulting gridlock, wasted time, extra pollution, and misery for residents in radial roads will be that much worse. This is inevitable and totally predictable, with ample past evidence to prove it; there is thus no need to do the 'experiment' – it has already been done. I appeal to the new brooms running the county not to emulate the clowns of the past, and cancel these LTNs before more of Oxford is driven crazy while going about their normal business.

Anthony Cheke, July 2021

4 letter from Consultant Psychiatrist Keith Hawton to the Iffley Road Residents Association (a group campaigning against the closures) 22.1.1985