

The Western Bypass

By John Rollins

Late 1990's Aldcliffe under threat.

In 1998 the unique position of Aldcliffe as a small residential community in a peaceful rural environment on the edge of Lancaster was threatened by the proposal to build a Lancaster western bypass. The proposed road would link the M6 south of Lancaster to Heysham by building an illuminated dual carriageway from the M6 junction 33 at Hampson Green along the Lune estuary to bridge the river in Lancaster. The road included an elevated section over Railway Crossing Lane in Aldcliffe that would bring this road within 200 meters of West Lodge and the houses on Craiglands Court.

Craiglands Court residents formed a pressure group to fight this proposal. Both the Lancaster City Council and the Lancashire County Council, who were the Highways Authority, supported the proposal for the western bypass. A number of environmental groups lodged objections and the residents of Stodday also formed a pressure group to oppose the road. The environmental groups sought to persuade all opponents of the road to form a 'joint groups against the western bypass' which the residents of Stodday joined. Craiglands Court residents decided not to join, as this group was dominated by environmentalists who's position was to oppose all roads. An alternative route to provide a Heysham M6 link from north of Lancaster at junction 34 had been in the local plan since the 1950s but was strongly opposed by politicians representing Morecambe. Craiglands Court residents took the view that the only way to successfully oppose the western route was to emphasize the advantages the northern route gave over the western route.

In October 1998 a public inquiry was called in Lancaster Town Hall. The county council engaged a barrister to support their case for the western route and ensured that their highway engineers were present throughout the hearing to respond to points raised by objectors. The objectors, most of whom were in full-time jobs, had to find the time to attend the inquiry and for their own research and preparation. Most objectors opposed the road on environmental grounds, only the Liberal Party and Craiglands Court residents argued for the alternative northern route. A detailed comparative report prepared by the county council showed that the northern route had significant advantages, it would carry 50 per cent more traffic between Heysham and the M6 than the western route, it would take 25 per cent more traffic off urban roads from the district as a whole, it was significantly less environmentally damaging and was considerably less expensive, it was also shorter than the western route. This information had been ignored by both Councils who advocated the western route claiming advantages for Lancaster, the Luneside industrial estate and the opportunity to develop the land in the river estuary south of Lancaster.

In June 2000 the inspector presented his report to the City Council. He found against the western bypass and recommended that further investigations be taken of a comparison

between this route and the northern route. Aldcliffe resident's relief was short lived as the council, who were not obliged to except the inquiry recommendations, reduced the western route to a single carriageway, made minor alterations to its path and pressed ahead with their intention to build. The county council selected the Lancaster western bypass as their priority for Lancashire.

Aldcliffe residents responded strongly by forming the Aldcliffe residents' Association and by building a public campaign against this proposal. Some 150 formal objections were raised against this proposal and were submitted to the Local Authority. The Association continuously lobbied the decision makers and those who could influence the decision. In particular the Government Office North-west who had responsibility for structuring planning and highways and advised the Government Minister were presented with the detailed arguments raised by Aldcliffe residents. Eventually the Government Office North-west advised the County Council that their proposals were unlikely to be supported by the government unless they undertook a further detailed environmental survey to compare the two routes and were able to prove the western route to be justified. On the 6th December 2001 the County Council decided to commission the survey. This resulted in a further 2 years of investigation and review before the new report was made public.

Published in August 2004 the report proved to be a showstopper for the western route raising many points against it. Amongst other things it found that two European protected species, the Great Crested Newt and some rare bats were present on the route and their habitat would be severely damaged by the construction of the western bypass. The County Council sought counsel's opinion from the barrister they had engaged for the public inquiry. She advised them that it would be perverse to continue pressing for the western route in the light of this report. On the 2nd September 2004 the Council therefore decided to build the northern route.

This brought an end to the threat to Aldcliffe. The long campaign had been successful and Aldcliffe could remain a peaceful residential community. A proposal to award the Great Crested Newt 'Aldcliffe resident of the Year' recognition was not taken seriously.