Improvements around Camberwell Green

In the last issue of CQ Nigel Haigh described how in 1976 Southwark Council, the GLC, the developer EPIC and the Camberwell Society (that together formed the Camberwell Green Working Party) had jointly agreed on the Society’s compromise road scheme that would have benefits for the Green and was less damaging than others put forward by the GLC. This was known as “Road Option 7”. He now continues the story.

In 1979 the GLC had unexpectedly sought to retain Daneville Road as a major traffic route, which delayed plans for the supermarket, but then changed its mind. A new GLC, elected in 1981, reviewed all road schemes in London but Option 7 was one of the few it did not scrap. It then submitted a planning application for Option 7 and an Inquiry was set for 1984.

At a public meeting called by the Society in April 1983 the Vice-Chair of the GLC Transport Committee outlined the benefits of Option 7 but warned that objections raised by the D’Eynsford Tenant’s Association had to be taken into account. Although the D’Eynsford estate had been built on the assumption that Kippton Road would be turned into a one-way through road, tenants were never told this when they moved in. Then in December 1983 Southwark Council withdrew its support for Option 7 “due to the adverse effects of the proposal on the residents of the D’Eynsford Estate” and did not appear at the inquiry either as supporter or opponent.

Since many of the environmental improvements associated with Option 7 were the responsibility of the Council its absence was felt. The Society appeared as supporters of Option 7 in principle but as opponents of aspects of the scheme including the application to demolish the Father Red Cap. But before the Inspector had issued his decision the GLC, which was soon to be abolished, also abandoned Option 7. Not surprisingly the Inspector then recommended rejection of the application.

A new Working Party and a new traffic management scheme
The Council now established an expanded working party which proposed a new scheme in the summer of 1984, in many ways similar to what exists today. It involved taking bigger slices off the west and south sides of the Green compared with Option 7. The Council’s traffic engineer told the working party, a view shared by the GLC engineer, that although there would, in the short term, be more congestion locally and longer delays, in the longer term traffic would settle into a similar pattern to the present.

The Society, although still holding that Option 7 provided the best environmental solution, accordingly issued a statement acquiescing and saying that it would not press for Option 7 to be reintroduced into the Mid-South Southwark Local Plan. It noted that improvements long sought by the Society, particularly the road closures to the north and east of the Green and in Daneville Road, were included. It reserved the right to comment on proposals to deal with overflow traffic in side roads, an issue that was later to cause much trouble.

In November 1984 the Council made two modifications to its draft Local Plan: the north side of the Green was to stay open on an experimental basis, and Daneville Road was to be closed but only on an experimental basis.

The new scheme considered at the Local Plan Inquiry
The Society made three points: a) the need permanently to close the north side of the Green, b) the need permanently to close Daneville Road, and c) the need for measures to deal with overflow traffic in side roads occasioned by the scheme.

The Society argued that the slices taken off the southern and western sides of the Green should be compensated by a northward extension of the Green made possible by closing the road. The Society also warned that the scheme could result in rat-running, in particular through Benhill Road and Camberwell Grove, and proposed that wording be added to the Plan to emphasise the need for “appropriate traffic management measures to discourage through traffic in sensitive side streets”.

In agreeing with the Society on the road to the north of the Green the Inspector expressed himself forcibly:

“I am… unable to understand the almost sudden abandonment, albeit on an experimental basis, of the imaginative and important concept to exclude traffic from two sides of the Green. This key part of the scheme would offer an opportunity to compensate for the loss of the land on the south and west flanks, to integrate the Green with the Father Red Cap Public House, to provide a more attractive setting for the Law Courts, and to make the Green more pleasant and accessible to the local residents. The evidence of need put forward at the inquiry to keep the northern road open is inconclusive and far from convincing. In these circumstances therefore I propose to recommend to the Council to close this length for an experimental period.”

The Inspector recommended closing Daneville Road to through traffic for an experimental period, and although he stopped short of making specific recommendations about the side roads likely to be affected he emphasised the “undisputed need to discourage through traffic in Camberwell Grove”. He recommended monitoring the effects of the new scheme and that further local traffic management measures should be introduced within 12 months.

The Council accepted all the Inspector’s recommendations – except for closing the road to the north of the Green – and decided to proceed with the scheme. But the traffic management measures in side streets took very much longer than the 12 months called for.

Consequences of the new scheme
When the scheme came into effect in 1987 motorists began to find ingenious ways to avoid the now more congested central crossing. Effects far and wide were reported at
an emotional public meeting organised by the Society in September 1988 including in Camberwell Grove, Flodden Road, Grove Lane, Benhill Road, Edmund Street, Warner Road, Camberwell Station Road, Grove Park. It is not possible to record all these here, but what happened in Camberwell Grove – the worst affected – led to proposals to reopen Daneville Road, which helps to explain its present state.

Before 1987 southbound traffic used both Grove Lane and Camberwell Grove as a way of avoiding Denmark Hill. The new scheme, by making Grove Lane one-way northwards at its northern end, solved that problem in Grove Lane but increased it in Camberwell Grove. (Grove Lane had also been a northbound rat run until a banana shaped traffic island prevented entry at the junction with Champion Park.)

Although the Society had long argued for restrictions in Camberwell Grove and foresaw that the new scheme would intensify the problem, intensification was worse than anticipated (a peak flow of over 1,000 vehicles an hour according to a resident’s survey). There followed proposals for speed humps and throttles, for a traffic island at the junction with Camberwell Church Street and, finally, for a closure – initially at a point south of the junction with Grove Park. The idea of closure was presented by a deputation to the Council in March 1988 with a petition from 400 Camberwell Grove residents.

The deputation also suggested Daneville Road be reopened to take Brixton bound traffic which would have involved reversing the one-way flow at the north end of Grove Lane, thus allowing it to take some of the southbound traffic using the Grove. The Society supported experimental closure of the Grove but not the reopening of Daneville Road. The Council initially approved temporary closure of the Grove, but then reversed its decision.

A third Camberwell Green Working Party (expanded to include the police, ambulance and fire services, and London Transport) was then asked to look at both short- and long-term solutions over a wide area.

After 10 contentious meetings in a little over a year it proposed a four-year plan of traffic management measures including speed humps, mini roundabouts and width restrictions, and the reopening of Daneville Road. The proposals were approved by the Council, but in 1990 for reasons of cost, much of the plan, including road opening, was set aside.

The speed humps however eventually went ahead and succeeded in reducing both speed and flow in the Grove and elsewhere. One reason why it took so long to introduce speed humps was that the government’s mandatory specifications initially made humps prohibitively expensive as they had to extend to the kerbs so requiring drains to be moved.

The question whether to reopen Daneville Road was contentious and not just within the Society. The Society’s policy from the days of Road Option 7 was that it should be closed to through traffic so that the Selborne houses were not separated from the central site and that through traffic should be confined to main roads. When the overflow effects of this scheme were felt there were those who argued for the reopening of Daneville Road, while others were opposed. These conflicting views can be seen in this extract from a letter to the Council from the Society’s representative on the working party (Newsletter 81 -Nov. 1988):

“Having regard to the traffic volume and danger which existed before last October in Grove Lane south of its junction with Daneville Road there was general agreement that no measures should be taken that would again channel through traffic onto this stretch... Our members did not, however, find it possible to reach a consensus on the stretch of Grove Lane north of the Daneville Road junction, or on the possible re-opening of Daneville Road (whether for local traffic only or for through traffic from Church Street), in the absence of full information on three matters…”

Daneville Road never was reopened. Ten years later a scheme to enlarge the supermarket, which never materialised, involved a two-storey car park extending onto the closed section of Daneville Road, leaving only a footpath (illustrated in CQ 128 September 2000). More recently, on a proposal of the Grove Lane Resident’s Association, the Council planted a row of trees along the middle of its closed length. So a quarter century after the closure we have the surreal sight of a row of trees in the middle of a road.

The next, and final, instalment will describe how the “central” or “EPIC site”, including the church, shops and housing evolved from the 1970s onwards.