

Slides

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**Hindhead -
Playing Second
Fiddle**

A3 Hindhead: Playing Second Fiddle

(HA - Highways Agency, NT - National Trust)

Introduction

I'm going to talk about the recent Hindhead public inquiry just a few miles south of here and try to show why it raises issues that are of relevance in other places too. And why it still makes me very angry.

Just out of interest, would you like to stick your hand in the air if you've ever personally seen a public inquiry in action before? And how many people have actually found themselves in the position of speaking at an inquiry?

I've been involved in three public inquiries. Still a beginner. One, a diversion of a bridleway, a group of us won hands down. Another, on two way cycling in this very High Street, we won the Inquiry but have still to win the war, as it were. On Hindhead, the report has yet to be released and I'd hate to second guess it. It was a major inquiry, with complex issues, encyclopaedias of evidence and several battle fronts.

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Maps

First, a bit of background. Hindhead is a village about 10 miles south of here on the main A3 trunk road. It's knocked about by the 27,000 odd vehicles that go through it each day. Just this side of it is the Devil's Punch Bowl and Gibbet Hill, a beautiful piece of landscape rising to 270m (890 ft) - and cut in two by the A3 running high up along its western slope. For about three miles here, the A3 is single carriageway, the only place where it is so from London to Portsmouth. Guess what - there's frequent holdups. So the powers that be came up, after years of proposing various bypass routes, with the idea of a tunnel under the hill. It would take the traffic away from the Punch Bowl and the village, restoring some sense of humanity here. The downside is that the scheme cost is £240m, and the routing of the approach roads would cause significant landscape and habitat damage. The plan included a reasonable width of the redundant bit of A3 left as a route for the non-motorised traffic not permitted in the tunnel.

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Photo sequence

In the period 2001 - 2003 there was pretty good co-operation between the Highways Agency, their contractors, the National Trust and local interest groups. There was dialogue, needs and desires were traded over a whole series of meetings, and in July 2003 the proposed scheme was published together with a public exhibition and a 3-D scale model. This showed the tunnel, it showed a reduced width of the existing road left available for non-motorised traffic and it specifically included cycles. It had the appeal of a widely consulted scheme and many parties at least recognised that it wasn't a bad compromise. Notably one pressure group, known as STOAT - Save The Old A Three - wanted the old road kept open for local motorised traffic.

(black)

And then...

Where it started to go wrong

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National Trust

Nobody expects the National Trust. Actually, that's not quite true. Most of the Punch Bowl area is in the ownership of the National Trust, so quite a few people expected the National Trust to have an interest. Unbelievably at this late stage the local National Trust management changed their approach and declared that either the old bit of A3 disappeared completely, or they were withdrawing their permission and completely scuppering the whole scheme. This is despite that at a national level and from an environmental viewpoint the NT policy is very pro cycling. So three months later in October 2003, with no external discussion, the Highways Agency announced that after all the road would have to go. This was after two or three years of solid discussion and co-operation, and one is forced to conclude that they were leant on rather heavily by the local management of the National Trust. It always had been inevitable from the scale of the whole scheme that there would be a public inquiry, and so we started preparing ourselves for that.

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Postcard

It's worth a bit of perspective at this point. The existing route of the road dates from 1826, when it was built slightly down the slope from the old Portsmouth road to give a steady gradient of no more than 5% to allow horse drawn coaches to be able to manage it. This is coincidentally a very reasonable slope to tackle by cycle. The old road - nowadays a bridleway - was twice as steep as this in places. Wider lanes have been made on the existing road by cutting into the hillside and overhanging the valley, but it's basically that 1826 road. By the end of the 1800s the route had become a popular excursion from London for cyclists. It was the massive increase in motor traffic following the second world war that started to limit the popularity of the route for cycling, with a further jolt of an increase around the mid 1980s, and now you have to be considerably determined to tackle the route by cycle. The road is effectively a motorway by stealth with no adjacent non-motorised user track provided.

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Cartoon 3 bikes

The alternative routes to the A3 are less direct and more undulating, a solution that all cyclists know is implicitly inferior but the truth of which is amazingly difficult to put over to someone that doesn't use a cycle. This was a common theme - the incidence of cycle use has now fallen so low in this country that what is taken for granted in the Netherlands, or Germany, or Switzerland, has to be stated over and over again in the UK.

Other Groups

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Groups

We took a lot of trouble in preparing for the inquiry to work with other non-motorised groups, and I think in retrospect we can be proud of achieving that. After all, simply because we're here today just to reflect on cycle issues doesn't mean that in the course of the next week some of us won't use a car to travel, or buy our food after it's been delivered by lorry, or even ride a motorcycle in a bus lane. My point is that none of us lives in a wheeled vacuum. We worked with the British Horse Society, with Friends of the Earth, with the Ramblers Association and with the Open Spaces Society. Whilst we didn't see completely eye to eye on all issues, I think the effort was invaluable for building understanding.

We also had a good degree of cohesion with other cycle groups. By "we", I have to be precise. This area including Hindhead is administratively the borough of Waverley in the county of Surrey, and each of Surrey's eleven administrative areas has a cycle forum and a local transport director - or at least did until recently. So the case for cycles at the Hindhead inquiry included the Waverley Cycle Forum, and I represented it. This was interesting, as the then local transport director took a line of least resistance and declared that Surrey's formal opinion on the Hindhead scheme was that it should go ahead with elimination of the old road. We saw unabashed pragmatism with no concept of exploring in particular the non-motorised issues in depth. So we had the scene that employees of Surrey on the forum felt they had publicly to dissociate themselves from the line the forum was taking. What they said in private may have been different. From Hampshire, which borders the very south of the area, the East Hampshire Cyclists Forum provided at least equally strong opposition to the poor cycle provision in the plan. Godalming Cycle Campaign were there, and so were Sustrans, who would like to take their national route from London over Hindhead to Portsmouth, Le Havre and on to the Loire. Individual campaigners were there too, and you can look on the cycle campaign website for the full evidence produced. It has to be said that it was disappointing that the CTC felt unable to provide resources to back the campaign as an organisation, and it was left to me with a right to ride hat on to put a joint case with the cycle forum. If ever there was a case for defining cycle access issues, I feel Hindhead was probably it.

The Process

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HA + NT logos

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Map + covers

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Court picture

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Documents

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Quote

I haven't time to bore you by going through the full case, so I'll just bring out one or two things. The Highways Agency were the body charged with making the scheme work, with the National Trust implicitly advising them as nominal landowner. Geographically it separated into what would happen to the old road, and what would happen about the provision of cycle facilities on the stub of A3 left through Hindhead village. The National Trust had the power to influence totally the Highways Agency on the old road section, but the HA clearly had no understanding of cycle issues from the way they dealt with the village section. The whole procedure is a bit like a trial in court, using adversarial methods where one major goal is to discredit the other party. The inspectors sit in judgement, the big organisations employ barristers, witnesses speak, and the legally untrained objector representing themselves or their group can easily feel at a disadvantage. Each side produces a formal document called a "proof of evidence" making their case. With the Highways Agency, this meant that each representative or consultant for a specialist topic produced a document up to several thousand words long. A quick count gives seventeen proofs from the Highways Agency. There were about 29 objectors, each with their own proof. The system called for proofs to be presented three weeks before an objector wished to be heard, in order to give the HA time to produce another document, called a rebuttal, refuting the proof. For someone trying to keep down a full time job as well, this level of documentation is next to impossible to deal with. I'll come back to this in a moment. The objector then had to cope with cross examining the HA witness and in turn being cross examined themselves.

The cycle issue was categorised solely under "recreation" by the HA. One of the better moments was seeing the definition in here of a cyclist, and it's worth quoting. This is it:

"There are three distinct types of cyclist; mountain bikers, family or leisure cyclists and racing cyclists who also sometimes commute to work". Sorry; if you're not there you don't exist. Official.

We had a big debate about the concept of a 'utility cyclist', and clearly made some progress as the HA pretty soon couldn't stop using the term.

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Map + circles

There were the expected arguments about existing crossings of the A3 which were to be eliminated, as the road has become too busy to use them safely. There were few concessions that substitute crossings might be provided. To our surprise, a new underpass was agreed at the southern end for an existing road to link with a bridleway. The major interchange that is the junction between the old and new roads is a double roundabout, and no provision has been made to cross the slip roads safely. There's the concept of a cycle track on the bridge over the new road, but no joined up thinking on how to access it. Parallel cycle routes to the main carriageway are planned, with no concessions for barriers, screening or prevention of accidents caused by misinterpretation of high power cycle headlights. A double mini roundabout is planned in Hindhead village, with cycles routed tortuously around it on shared footpaths. Time and again there is no appreciation of real needs or real safety.

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**HA Horse +
Cyclist**

The HA and NT solution for dealing with the non-motorised traffic travelling round the Punch Bowl with an eliminated road was to route everybody along the existing bridleway - actually the pre 1826 Portsmouth Road. They jumped through all sorts of hoops to show that horses and 30mph cycles could exist inches from each other, that the surface wouldn't break up, that the gradient could be tweaked down another few fractions of a percent, and that there was no suppressed demand at the moment caused by the levels of motor traffic. We hope that common sense arguments, backed up with a specific legal challenge that the proposed solution degrades the provision for cycles, may yet win through.

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**What was it
about**

What was it all about? The inquiry lasted about three and a half months, sitting for typically four days a week. It took a huge amount of time and resources, and a lot of personal commitment from many of the objectors. In my opinion, the question of the elimination of the existing A3 round the Punch Bowl boiled down to a simple question of aesthetics. It was one man's scenic route being another man's tarmac slab. Time and again it was necessary to re-iterate that the road was not the problem; it was the motorised traffic on it. Late in the planning programme, the NT decided they wanted the hillside to revert to nature - whatever that means - and insisted upon it to the HA. The old saying about rattles being thrown out of prams comes to mind. The HA were weak in their knowledge of non-motorised issues, and keeled over. Law and guidance on these issues from the Department for Transport is also weak - but getting better. Those rare individuals at the HA with knowledge of cycle issues need to be given the authority to implement appropriate schemes. Noise and bluster from the STOAT people in particular clouded the issue.

The inquiry's due to report sometime soon, though guesses extend all the way to August, and I'm personally not too hopeful about the cycle issues.

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What can we learn?

What can we learn?

What is there to be learned from this inquiry? Here's a few points to start with:

Cycling is seen as a minority activity with a largely leisure base by many people in authority.

There is virtually no concept by planners of the extent of suppressed demand for cycling. The HA asked us to produce evidence of suppressed demand and were unable to produce it themselves.

Surrey County Council's transport director at the time for Waverley didn't understand the non-motorised transport issues, removed any help other Surrey employees could have given, and made our case more difficult to prove.

There is absolutely no concept that if cycling is to be treated as a viable everyday transport mode then facilities have to be there that allow 15mph average on the flat, with up to 30 mph down hills, to be sustained. Otherwise travelling to fixed deadlines is next to impossible.

There's little understanding of the issues of fitting in equestrians, pedestrians, cyclists, push chairs, wheelchairs and others down a restricted bridleway - or no wish to understand.

Planners have to understand that people need to cycle everywhere, not just on limited long distance routes.

The NT have too much sway over the HA, probably exacerbated by the agency's lack of expertise. I think this may have happened at the Stonehenge inquiry also, as at least one key person was present at both.

There appears to be an inconsistency between local NT policy over cycle access and National policy.

Cycling needs to be seen as a HA core activity, not just one where a so-called consultant is brought in as necessary, which is what happened at Hindhead.

There is no accreditation programme for cycle transport planners.

Cycling needs to be seen as part of a hierarchy of transport, along with pedestrians, cars, equestrians, and others. Each mode has strengths, weaknesses and differing environmental impact.

The adversarial system of public inquiry is very tough on inexperienced campaigners, particularly for a large inquiry.

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What can we learn...?

A public inquiry is essentially a legal process and requires legal representation.

The volume of written stuff at this scale of inquiry is simply too high for any one person with a day job to be able to read entirely. It demands some sort of team working.

Without cycling considered as a full part of the overall transport equation everywhere, there is no hope for establishing an environmentally responsible transport strategy.

The Future

What could we do differently?

I suggest that the CTC is the only organisation with the appropriate focus in this country to be able to build up a core expertise in handling public inquiries with cycling issues, and that it should do so. There is simply no other organisation in the right position. It should be handled as a strategy, with the aim of establishing good practice or case law at one or two inquiries that can be used as models for others. A group of barristers and solicitors who are just nuts about cycling and want it to thrive need to be found. I suspect they're somewhere in CTC's membership already. They would run rings around such inquiries, rather than have inquiries run rings around right to ride reps. We were very angry at Hindhead when we saw what was being done with public money to try to thwart our simple proposals to give more balance to different transport modes.

Unless we can play them at their own game we will always be playing second fiddle.

This leads me on to think that there is actually a revenue opportunity here. Somebody will have to teach a whole bundle of road planners, highway engineers and consultants about cycle planning if anything real is to happen with trunk road provision. I imagine there's a couple of generations who have never learnt cycle issues at college, and who better to teach them than CTC staff - who just happen to be involved in cycle training already. County councillors wanting to understand more about the subject might also be interested - locally we've had such a request just in the last few weeks. Funding streams will have to be found of course, but I suspect there's more than a germ of an idea here. Crucial to this is the establishment of national accreditation - maybe it could be linked to the CTC's bench-marking scheme.

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**Road Planning +
Hindhead logo**

So - to round up. I hope this has given you a flavour of a major public inquiry and a taste of the emotions involved. There are huge amounts I've not even touched upon in this short talk, and I'd like to acknowledge again the tremendous efforts of the team of campaigners who put a whole collection of finely documented arguments together. In looking back, I'm genuinely horrified at the lack of expertise in the people planning major roads - their viewpoint should not just be one of a *task* of road building but of a *goal* of constructing people communication systems, where all users and their communities are brought into the equation.