

Ysenda Maxtone Graham

Oxford's LTN farce

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Last week's cheering news that the High Court has deemed Lambeth Council's imposition of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood on West Dulwich 'unlawful', because they failed to take consultations with locals into sufficient account, has given a glimmer of hope to the benighted residents of Cowley in Oxford. In that once liveable outskirts, gridlock on the main roads caused by the imposition of the Cowley LTN has closed down previously thriving small businesses, so that, far from being the utopian '15-minute city' dreamed up by councillors, residents can no longer walk to a printer, a post office or the Co-op. Driving to central Oxford takes ages, and it costs up to £17 to park on a meter for two hours. The buses are slow, expensive and unreliable. You wait twenty minutes, only to be stuck in a traffic jam.

It's known as 'Gant's Gridlock', after Councillor Andrew Gant, Oxfordshire County Council's Lib Dem Cabinet Minister for Transport Management. Gant is fanatic-in-chief when it comes to sustained efforts to find new ways of clamping down on anyone in Oxford getting from A to B by car. I was at Cambridge with him

in the early 1980s, when he was a perfectly harmless member of St John's College Choir. He's a music lecturer at St Peter's, and has written some quite good books on choral music. But today's choral musicians trying to get to Christ Church for evensong from the outskirts, or from nearby villages, curse him every time they embark on the journey.

The awful thing is, it's about to get even worse. You might think Oxford's residents would be yearning for the road closure currently cutting West Oxford off from Central Oxford to end. The 'Berlin Wall', as it's known, is the chaotic mess of not-nearly-finished railway- and roadworks currently closing off Botley Road, and obliging anyone going to the station from the other side of it, or back again, to walk through a graffiti-ridden 'Tunnel of Doom' – totally unsuitable for the elderly and infirm. Thenewly announced planned date of completion for the works is August 2026, but that will need to be seen to be believed. The scandalous over-running of these works is a fiasco for which everyone involved (Network Rail, the Highways Agency and the County Council) is taking the Prince Harry approach to a crisis: it's everyone's fault but mine.

But as soon as Botley Road does reopen, the Council is promising to bring into

force the trial period (which has been on hold while those works have been going on) of its

next ingenious programme of private-car-journey strangulation.

Yes, it will be an immense relief for those living on the other side of the Botley Road railway tracks that they will at last be able to get to the station by bus again, without having to walk under the Tunnel of Doom.

Baroness Deech, with whom I chatted in the House of Lords last week, and who suffers from arthritis, longs for the reopening, but knows it'll be too late to save lots of small businesses, who have lost half their revenue do to years

of inaccessibility. The closure of the Botley Road has affected her

commuting life so badly that she has considered resigning as a peer. 'The whole thing has been punitive in a way that they don't understand.' By 'they', she means the faceless people sitting at their screens, who never visit the place, and impose these measures with no accountability.

But with that longed-for regained freedom, when Botley Road reopens, will come a fresh hell: six 'traffic filters' to be placed at major entry points and crossroads across the city, where drivers will be photographed and fined if they go through them. The proposal is that Oxford residents will be allowed to go through these filters 100 times per year, and residents of Oxfordshire 25 times per year. If you're from out of the county, you'll never be allowed to drive through them. The idea that a camera will calibrate exactly how many times you drive from your part of the city

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to another partother to have tea with an old school friend is the new surveillance dystopia awaiting Oxford's inhabitants.

Any of us who now dare to hope, after the West Dulwich ruling, that Oxfordshire County Council might back down rather than double down on their war on private cars needed only to listen to Councillor Pete Sudbury on Saturday's *Today* programme to be reminded of the commitment of these powerful people to their ideology. 'We do need to consult properly,' he conceded, 'but a consultation is not a referendum, and we need to look at what the facts on the ground are.' In other words, be selective when it comes to listening to the opinions of others.

Air quality has improved, he insists. (Although anyone breathing in on Oxford Road, Cowley, or Cowley Road, Oxford, on weekday afternoons might strongly disagree.) And 'When you improve walking and cycling, footfall in shops goes up rather than down.' (Tell that to the ex-owners of Oxford's closed small businesses.) 'With 20,000 new homes being built around Oxford,' Sudbury said, 'the do-nothing option is simply that the whole place seizes up with cars. You have to do traffic filters and workplace parking levies that really tip the balance away from the private car and towards public transport and active travel.'

He quietly slipped in a mention of 'workplace parking levies' there. Yes, the Council is planning to impose these, too, which would make daily life harder for schoolteachers, doctors and nurses. On top of that, they plan to extend the currently small Zero Emissions Zone to a much larger swathe of the city, so petrol and diesel cars will have to pay a charge to drive anywhere near the centre.

Is central Oxford really nicer without cars in it? Far from it. Broad Street, 'the Broad', used to be one of the most elegant wide streets in southern Britain, where you could park for an hour and nip into Blackwell's. It's now car-free, but the cars have been replaced by weird cuboid blocks made of cheap timber, plonked down at jaunty angles like scatter cushions, on which tourists sit and gorge on fast food all day. Removing cars has not had the effect of turning Broad Street into the Piazza Navona.

Baroness Deech's husband John, a partner at the law firm Blake Morgan, has been engaged to fight the traffic-filters plan, she tells me. The campaign to put a stop to it can only get going when Botley Road reopens and the order for the traffic filters comes officially into force. 'Then, we can go for the judicial review.' The High Court's ruling on West Dulwich – for which we must thank the steadfast West Dulwich Action Group who took the case to court – may have tilted things a tiny bit in favour of the needs of residents, over the ideology of councillors.

WRITTEN BY

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