

THE HIGH WYCOMBE SOCIETY

newsletter

SPECIAL RYE EDITION

1965-2015

2015 IS THE Golden Anniversary of a significant event in the history of High Wycombe. Fifty years ago, a group of residents presented a 'case' on behalf of the citizens of High Wycombe to a Joint Committee of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. At stake was the fate of a part of The Rye, land which had been an open space since time immemorial. The petitioners could not afford legal representation and were thus obliged to present the case themselves. The hearing would last three days and would make legal history. Its outcome would oblige both High Wycombe Borough Council and Buckinghamshire County Council to change their plans, but, most importantly, it would preserve The Rye for future generations. To understand what it was all about it is necessary to look at some of the background leading up to the events of 1964-65.

In 1950 High Wycombe had a major traffic problem. There was no M40 for those wishing to avoid the town and the 'London Fishguard Trunk Road' (as the A40 was known) was inadequate in many ways. A consultant by the name of Mr Chitty was invited to draw up plans for a solution to the problem. The 'Chitty Plans' included an inner relief road in High Wycombe (including what we know today as 'the flyover'). The plans were the subject of a public inquiry held in Slough in 1952 and received ministerial approval in 1954.

Meanwhile in 1953, the demolition of the Hayward's cottage on the edge of the Rye was a portent of things to come.



*The Hayward's Cottage Photo SWOP ref: RHW:08129
Courtesy of Wycombe Library.*

In 1960, the planned road improvements and related plans for the town development were exhibited in the library, at a public meeting and on local TV, but it was not until March 1961 when a 'supplemental town map' was published that there was any hint of the scale of likely opposition. Two organisations were particularly vocal: the local branch of the Chamber of Commerce and the High Wycombe Arts Association, each with their own agendas. 140 objections led to an announcement in November of another public inquiry.

This second public inquiry was held in May 1962 in High Wycombe. It was expected that the Girls Educational Company Ltd, the proprietors of Wycombe Abbey School, would oppose the scheme as they stood to lose significant school amenities but they did not object. Speculation arose about what might have been negotiated behind closed doors. On 1st June 1962 the Bucks Free Press relayed the news that Wycombe Abbey School might leave the town.

A month later, a letter to the Bucks Free Press raised the alarm about the potential fate of The Rye. It suggested a Society might be formed to protect it. The letter was signed by five residents of the town: K Blakesley, J P Clarke, J Cottrell, A Newell and R K B Roe. Four of them lived on the London Road opposite The Rye.

Then things went quiet for a very long time.

...caring about our town: past, present and future

Registered Charity No. 257897

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On 31st January 1964, news broke that the minister had approved the plan for the road. He had overruled the inspector whose view of the evidence at the public inquiry was that the scheme should not go ahead. The scene was set for the Rye Protection Society to come into being.

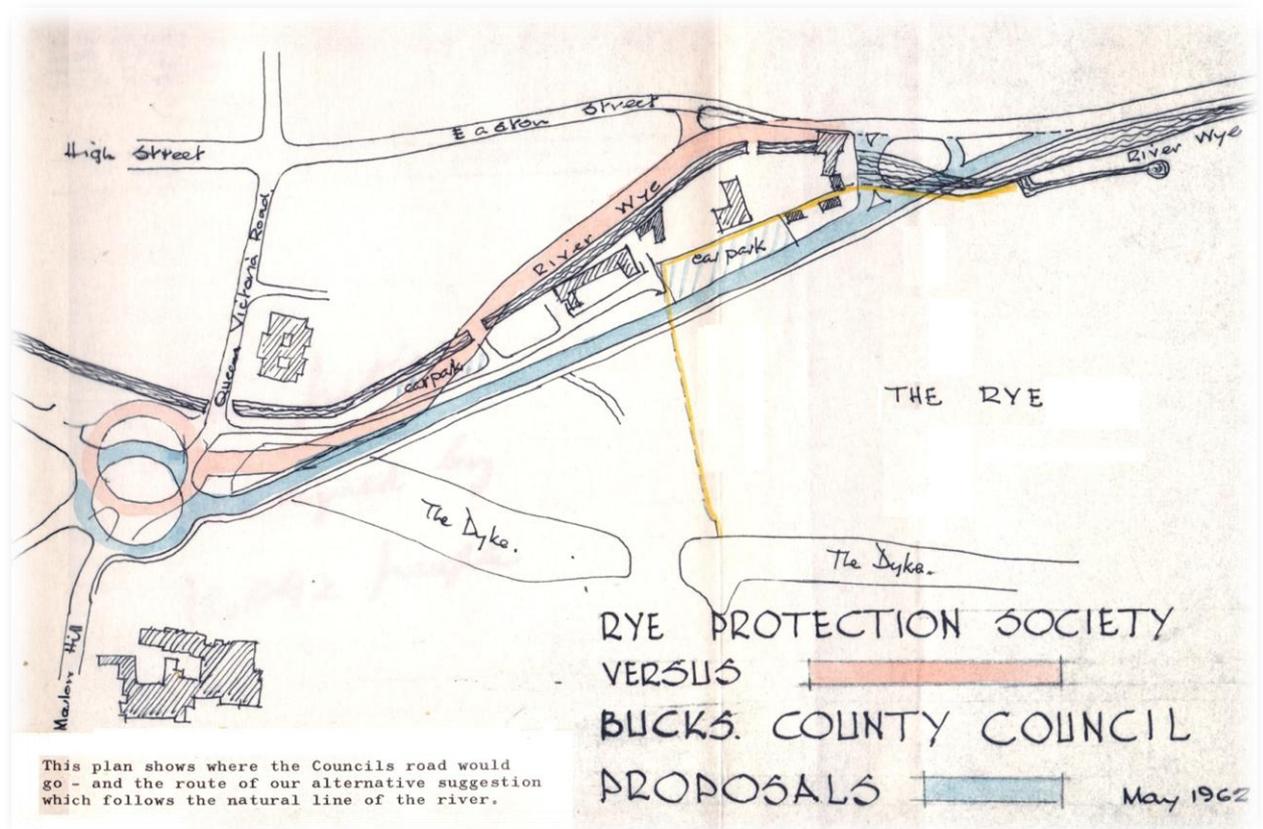
We know from an account left by Derek Woods, a founder member of the RPS, and also from minutes deposited at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies by another founder member, Mr Steevens, that the Society was very busy during its initial weeks of operation. Without the advantages of the internet we take for granted today, research work and publicity both required a lot of leg work. Visits were made to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the Charity Commission, the British Museum Newspaper Library and the House of Lords Library. Research to determine the best course of action was undertaken using historical and legal books and referencing Acts of Parliament. On 12th March 1964 the RPS lodged their 'Statement of Case and Objection' with the Minister of Housing and Local Government who at that time was Keith Joseph. They also already had an outline proposal for an alternative route for the inner relief road (below).

Within a month of their formation, the RPS had amassed over 3000 signatures on a petition and had started putting placards around the town demanding 'Hands off our heritage since

Norman Times!' They enlisted help from a number of organisations including the Commons Open Spaces and Footpaths Society (COSFPS - now known as the Open Spaces Society). Jack Scruton, the energetic Hon. Secretary of the RPS, wrote to COSFPS in emotive terms: 'We are engaged in a life and death struggle to preserve what we consider is probably the finest open space belonging to a town in the south of England ... which will soon to be invaded by a road!'

RPS members found justification for their cause in the First Ledger book of High Wycombe, which in 1518 under a title 'Defense de la Rye' records that the Burgesses and Comyners were to 'maintain and kepe there comyn pasture called the Rye in Lyke maner and forme as hit hathe be accustomed for to be kepte in tyme paste or better.' They studied the detailed clauses of the 1927 and 1946 Chepping Wycombe Corporation Acts and found that 'as from 1st January 1928 the Rye mead' land which had been acquired for the purpose of 'cricket, football and other recreations' was to be retained by the Corporation 'for all time for the purposes aforesaid.' And they found support in the more poetic writing of Alison Uttley who said in her guide to Buckinghamshire, published in 1950, that 'High Wycombe has certain inestimable boons, and one of these is the Rye' which she called a 'priceless possession for all time'.

Map used in Rye Protection Society booklet.





SWOP Photo ref. BFP:01768 courtesy of the Bucks Free Press shows children with paper boats by the paddling pool in 1963, with Pann Mill and the Coach and Horses pub where RPS members met in the background.

In contrast to the frenetic activity of the RPS, for the local councils, it was business as usual. In a long letter dated 9th April 1964 the Town Clerk of the Borough of High Wycombe confirmed to COSFPS that a section of the relief road would 'pass along part of the northern boundary of the Rye from Queen Victoria Rd to a point east of Pann Mill', but there was a calm confidence in his assertion that 'the land required for the road would not to any great extent restrict or interfere with the use of the Rye'.

On 1st June 1964 the expected 'appropriation order' for the land that would be needed for the road development was published. It ordered the compulsory purchase of 'that piece or strip of land some portion of which is covered by water forming the bed of the River Wye or Wick forming part of the open space known as Dyke Meadow and the Rye High Wycombe extending from Wendover Way at a point 80 yards or thereabouts east of Queen Victoria Road in an easterly direction to a point 200 yards or thereabouts east of Pann Mill London Road and having an area of 2.4 acres or thereabouts.'

COSFPS promptly objected in writing. Their letter was referenced by solicitors acting on behalf of the RPS in drawing up their formal grounds for objection. In these it was stated that for the avoidance of doubt, if the order were to be confirmed, it was their understanding that the order would still be subject to special parliamentary procedure.

Meanwhile, in September the RPS petition which had now acquired over 11000 signatures was

presented to the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of High Wycombe Borough Council asking them to refrain from building on the Rye. It was front page news in the Bucks Free Press on 11th September 1964. The Mayor Mr Davidson was pictured receiving the petition from Jack Scruton, Mrs Rolfe and Mr J Cottrell. It had also attracted the attention of the National press – a short article of approx 5 column inches appeared in The Times. Locally, however, the validity of the petition itself was attacked on the basis that not all the signatories were on the electoral roll; some were under-age, and some lived outside the borough boundary.

Country Life magazine in an article entitled 'Coming through the Rye?' mentioned the support of the Penn Country Branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) and wished the Wycombe Rye Protection Society success in 'withstanding the petty tyranny of misguided officialdom!'

A booklet produced by the RPS around this time, perhaps to help raise funds for legal costs, acknowledged the support of COSFPS and CPRE and messages of support received from Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists' Trust, the National Trust, the Town and Country Planning Association and the Civic Trust.

The (third) public inquiry was held in October 1964, a couple of weeks after the General Election which brought Harold Wilson to power. This time the RPS was represented by Counsel, Mr R Bell, who called Jack Scruton, Mr K Severn (civil engineer) and Mr R Roe (architect); High Wycombe Arts Association and nine local residents also participated. The Girls Education Company was represented by a Chartered Surveyor called Mr Raffety who did not support the RPS case. His primary concern was to defend the reputation of Wycombe Abbey school against any allegations of improper conduct. Written objections (in support of the RPS cause) were also obtained from the John Hampden Society and a further ten residents of the town.



The BFP included a picture of the Rye on the front page - SWOP ref. BFP04119 courtesy of the Bucks Free Press.

The inspector's report was published in February 1965. As expected, he recommended that the minister confirm the order appropriating part of the Rye. The minister (who by then was Richard Crossman) duly did so on 9th March. But, it was ruled that as no land could be offered in exchange, the order would be subject to Special Parliamentary Procedure.

Records show that on 1st April 1965 John Scruton, acting on behalf of the High Wycombe Rye Protection Society, deposited a petition in parliament, a seven page document signed by the Chairman and Secretary of the RPS, Mr Roe and Mr Scruton respectively – Hansard shows later that month, on 26th April, John Hall, MP for Wycombe, raised a motion requesting the appropriation order be annulled, with an amendment from Ronald Bell, MP for South Buckinghamshire, enabling the petitioners to be heard by a Joint Committee.

On 1st-3rd June 1965, the Joint Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons met to consider the Petition of General Objection to the High Wycombe (Inner Relief Road) Appropriation Order, 1964. The committee which assembled to hear the case comprised: (a young) Earl of Kinnoull; Lord Allerton; Baroness Emmet of Amberley (who had just been elevated to a life peerage, previously MP for East Grinstead); Sir Myer Galpern (in the chair) – at that time MP for Glasgow Shettleston, later to become Deputy Speaker in the House of Commons and subsequently elevated to the peerage as Baron Galpern; Mr Will Owen (MP for Morpeth) and Mr David Walder (MP for High Peak at that time).

Mr John Scruton (known to all as 'Jack') appeared as agent for the petitioners and called as his witnesses: Mrs Thompson, a mother from Rectory Ave; Mr Barrett, a television engineer and resident from Tyler's Green; Mr Stevens, a builder and long-time resident of Wycombe; Mr Roe, Architect; and Mr W H Williams (representing COSFPS and also authorised to speak for CPRE).

Mr L Davies appeared as counsel for the minister of Housing and Local Government and called as his witnesses: Mr Richards, Borough

Engineer; Mr Andrews, Parks Superintendent; Mr Dean, Chief Architect of the Central Area Redevelopment scheme; and Mr Norman Fowler, Town Clerk and Solicitor to the Council.

After hearing all the evidence, the Committee proposed to pay an informal visit to High Wycombe before reaching their decision. All were invited back on 16th June 1965 to hear the outcome. The chairman's announcement that the committee had resolved that 'the Order be not approved' was a terse statement as required by procedure. There were to be no quotable quotes, no victorious speeches, and, if there were any celebrations, the form they took has long been forgotten.

The Borough and County Councils appear to have been stunned by the outcome. They sent a deputation to the minister, Richard Crossman. Only a parliamentary public bill could have overridden the decision. They were disappointed in the response.

Correspondence in the BFP turned to counting the costs. There had already been some compulsory purchases made which would now not be needed; and if an alternative route for the road were to be adopted then other purchases would be needed. Ambitious plans for the centre of the town could face delays with the prospect of losing government grants if work could not proceed on the planned timescale. In short, the town plans were thrown into disarray.

A lot had changed since Mr Chitty first made his suggestion of an inner relief road. An outer bypass destined to become the M40 was already in construction offering at least some hope on the horizon of a future reduction in through-traffic. The next few years would see large areas of High Wycombe transformed by new developments, including a new fire station, the Octagon shopping centre, and a new hospital building. The inner relief road was built but did not encroach upon the Rye. The now seasoned campaigners kept a watchful eye on developments. Many of them including Jack Scruton and Mr Roe went on to form the High Wycombe Society.

Fifty years on, the High Wycombe Society still maintains its vigilance over The Rye today.



This Special Newsletter Edition is an abridged version of three articles by Jackie Kay, originally published in the Nostalgia columns of the Bucks Free Press.