

THE WATCHDOGS OF ST IVES

Last month. Elizabeth Cann discussed the question of planners and people and championed the cause of the much-abused preservation societies. In this article W. L. Harrison, secretary of the St. Ives Civic Society, tells why it was formed and how, at a time when so many protests are inclined to be of a violent nature, the society tackled its biggest problem to date - the siting of the proposed new by-pass - with dignity. There was no banner waving and no disruption of the community. The objection was made peacefully and legally, but at the same time, forcefully.

Bridge House gone, Cromwell's Barn gone, Hemingford Mill gone, more losses on the way and on top of that the threat of a new road across the Hemingford Meadow; nobody liked it and nobody was doing anything about it. This was how matters stood in July 1968 when a group of people got together in St. Ives and decided to form a Civic Society.

They had had a hint of official encouragement because in 1967 the Civic Amenities Act had been passed and a Ministry Circular which drew the attention of Councils to the Act said:

"Good public relations will be an essential part of the operation, and local authorities will want to consider how they can best set about enlisting public support for their conservation policies. Collaboration with local civic societies may be particularly helpful in this connection."

I regret that I cannot claim to be one of the founder members; I did not come into the picture until August when the originators were scouting round for a secretary (anyone thinking of taking on a similar job should first equip himself with a thick skin or a sense of humour - the latter is recommended). There was a welcoming editorial in the "Hunts Post" and our inaugural meeting was held at the end of September; it was opened by the Mayor of St. Ives, supported by the Mayoress; about 150 people turned up and over 100 joined the Society which was duly created during the course of the evening.

The principle speaker, himself an architect, an archaeologist and a former St. Ivian spoke on "The Threat to St. Ives". The town was threatened. in a number of ways and a road across the Hemingford Meadow was only one of several but the meeting clearly felt that it was the most immediate and it was agreed to call a meeting of the society as soon as possible.

As one looks back after the doldrums of 1969, 1970 and 1971 it seems that in the last three months of 1968 everything happened with incredible speed. On October 21st the assistant editor of the "Architectural Review" and the author of an article on St. Ives in its October issue both spoke to the society. Among the illustrations to the article was an "artist's impression" of what The Waits would look like when the western route was built; it was certainly a bit of a horror-comic. The committee never took the article very seriously; it was clearly unaware that the closing of the railway from St. Ives to March had opened up new possibilities; it took the alternative new road through what was almost certain to be a conservation area; it demolished Cromwell Terrace which has since been put on the Statutory List; and the secretary noted with disquiet that it would rob him completely of the view which made his house pleasant to live in. Unfortunately the article gave enormous offence to the County Council and has continued to do so.

In the same month a small Group was formed to study the possibility of an alternative route for the much needed relief road; it included two engineers and two architects and the County Planning Officer and the County Surveyor kindly agreed to meet the group on October 31st to explain the western plan, which had not then been studied in detail Or costed.

The eastern route, they said, had been carefully considered and found impracticable; it was out of the question. We were not so sure and decided to write to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, as it then was, giving the broad grounds on which we thought consideration of an eastern route was justified.

There was no slackening of the pace in November. The Council for British Archaeology which had listed St. Ives as one of the 232 historic towns of England called a meeting in London at Burlington House at which a number of national and local amenity societies were present. Our society was represented by our chairman and myself but we took little part in the discussion.

The County Planning Officer put the case for the western route but those present were not convinced and the meeting decided to write to the Ministry and to the County Council urging that an alternative route be considered.

On November 13th the County Planning Officer kindly spared an evening to speak to the society. He complained at some length that he had been misrepresented, that someone was determined to stir up controversy, that completely false information had been put before the public; and he then went on to explain the merits of the western route.

Three days later Lord Rennet, then Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, wrote to us:

"I agree that it would be desirable for the Department to review this whole matter with the County Council and the St. Ives Borough Council; and the two authorities are being invited to take part in a meeting for this purpose. I will, of course, keep you informed of the outcome."

This letter encouraged us greatly; it meant that Lord Kennet himself had looked at the problem and had decided that we had made a prima facie case.

Meanwhile our study group continued its work and its report was considered by the full committee on November 22nd. The committee decided that a full copy of the report must be sent to every member of the society and this was done.

The hot pace continued in December and a meeting of the society to discuss the routes was held on the 2nd: We wanted to hold a formal debate but no member of the society offered to speak for the western route even as Devil's Advocate.

We therefore sent out a questionnaire to every member — the number had now risen to 159 — and waited for the signed replies. Eighteen did not reply, one did not know, four voted for a western route and 136 for an eastern.

We had more copies of our report printed, with a diagram added, and a copy was sent to Lord Kennet with details of the poll. We sent copies individually to every member of the County Council and every member of the Borough Council; copies were also sent to the Civic Trust, the County Council, the Borough Council, the Rural District Council and the Clerks of the Parish. Councils of Fenstanton and the Hemingfords. Later the Chamber of Commerce helped us by kindly sending out copies with its own annual report.

On December 16th we again met the County Planning Officer and the County Surveyor and though little came of it we got the impression that an eastern route was not completely out of the question. The same evening the Borough Council held a special meeting at which our chairman, himself a Borough Councillor, moved that an eastern route be considered. The motion was lost, 10 to 4.

The following day representatives of the Ministries of Transport and of Housing and Local Government met representatives of the County and 13orough Councils and the County Council was requested to study and cost both routes and report its findings to the Ministries.

The following June the County Council produced its report on both routes; its Roads and Bridges Committee voted for the western route 8 to 2; its planning committee was unanimous in its support of the western route and on the 29th July the County Council accepted without comment the reports of these two committees. We appeared to be somewhat friendless.

As it happened, however, help was on the way; at the end of November the St. Ives Rural District Council decided to oppose the western route and press for an eastern alternative. We now had what hitherto we had lacked — the general support of a statutory body. I may mention here that it was just before this that we had our first consultation with our solicitors.

In a famous story by Conan Doyle there is the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.

"The dog did nothing in the night-time.'

"That was the curious incident' remarked Sherlock Holmes."

It was very much on the cards that the minister, after he had studied the report on the two routes, would write to tell us that our eastern route was now in his wastepaper basket; but no such letter ever came. Instead we waited in the dark until the beginning of 1972 when the Department of the Environment called for a public inquiry. Meanwhile all the blame for the town's growing traffic troubles was fastened on us.

Ahead of us now was the problem of costs. We had decided long before that if it came to an inquiry we must have professional help and thank goodness we did. In April we sent out an appeal for funds to members of the society — at that time it seemed possible that £400 on top of what we had already might just see us through.

Instantly a little darn seemed to burst and the money poured in from members and others, a heart-warming response; by the third day it was clear that we should overshoot the target and the only question was "By how much?" and this was just as well because though the balance in the bank was mounting so were the likely costs.

Our counsel said we must bring in a firm of planning consultants and consulting engineers and we agreed. Money continued to flow in and by the end of September we had over £1,000 in the bank; still it came - we were given nearly £200 during the course of the inquiry. We shall need more.

Objections to the western route had to be lodged by the end of March and our solicitors lodged ours on our behalf. It was 'arranged that the inquiry should take place in October and we then found that our counsel could not appear for us because of a clash of dates.

No sooner was this problem solved than another blew up. Our consultant came down to St. Ives to see the place for himself but within a few days he was ordered by his medical people to take a complete rest; fortunately for us a colleague agreed to take over.

About the same time our own chairman agreed to give evidence on amenity at the inquiry. We had now got our team together.

During the week beginning the 13th September the County Council opened an exhibition to the public, giving information about the western route and about two eastern routes not recommended by the council. Our counsel and our solicitor visited the exhibition but practically no copies of anything were to be had there and it was not until October 2nd that consultant and solicitor obtained the truly formidable pile of maps, plans, reports, diagrams and statistics they needed.

There was thus just a fortnight to read it, analyse it and build up our case and for one black moment counsel, consultant and solicitor doubted if it were possible in the time. Then they decided that with an all-out effort they could just bring it off; and they did so. To all of them we are deeply grateful — it was a near thing.

Of the inquiry itself I must say nothing here except that it began on October 18th, St. Luke's Day, and St. Luke was clearly on our side; for more than a week the town, the river and the meadow lay under the gentle sunshine of one of the loveliest of his Little Summers.