

Will borough be drowned in concrete?

Bridging the Great Divide

"Homes Before Roads", an environmental battle cry of the 60s, led to the birth of a political party to fight the Greater London Council elections - adopting the slogan as its appellation and rubric.

Brainchild of an eccentric Chiswick campaigner, the late Derek Beecham, nephew of Sir Thomas, the movement was sparked by proposals to encircle London with three motorway rings.

The plan appalled most Richmond upon Thames and Hounslow residents as it would have savaged sections of Kew and Chiswick. Yet, although HBR fielded candidates in the majority of London boroughs, it did not win a single seat.

The intention, however, was not power but publicity, and their remonstrations rang out loud and clear. Many Tories who were

behind the madcap scheme lost their heads.

The anti roads message soon got through to all politicians - national and local - and only the outer ring, now the M25 - saw the light of day in its entirety.

A tiny section of proposed Ringway One (which became known as Westway) was built, slicing through Shepherd's Bush to join up with the Marylebone Road, demonstrating the kind of devastation that would have been brought to the capital.

In the 70s Greater London was desperate for more living space as so much was being swallowed up for commercial development - particularly for offices.

The fear then was that Richmond, with its glorious Regency heritage would face Croydonisation and be peppered with concrete towers. The planners faced many dilemmas trying to keep hungry developers at bay.

The pressure eased when the office bubble burst and things have changed dramatically in the last couple of decades. Ironically, the danger now is not that too few homes are being built but too many!

This may be hard to comprehend when demand is at an all time high and more and more people aspire to having a tangible stake in a society where property owning is the key to affluence.

Yet if the balance tips too far, infrastructure can collapse and schools, hospitals and open spaces become overloaded, destroying the very attractions that make this patch so popular.

A good example can be seen at the Lower Richmond and Mortlake Roads - a stretch of the A316 leading to the M3 and where the Government's policy of encouraging infilling urban development and use of brownfield sites is proceeding apace.

New apartments are being built on every tiny empty corner and high density accommodation is popping up with perturbing rapidity. An old goods yard is now a house estate, a petrol filling station recently closed and looks set for similar treatment.

Shops, a school, (latterly warehouse) have vanished, to be replaced with flats and small houses. Even the Sainsbury supermarket, standing where the old gasometers once stood, put in a bid to build residential floors above its single storey store.

None of this in itself is a bad thing and the trickle down can be beneficial to all. But the burgeoning of the South East means that Richmond upon Thames property prices rival Kensington, Mayfair and Hampstead - the highest in the country.

And the pressure to find land on which to

build soars.

This has been fuelled by expansion of Heathrow and the flourishing city institutions which are a powerful magnet. Sadly, the Government is reluctant to find a counter balance and challenge market forces by finding ways of creating real jobs where heavy industries have collapsed and investment is vitally needed.

Homes are indeed more important than roads and should have a priority over offices and supermarkets. But the current trend which is sucking everyone south needs to be curbed.

Ways must be found of boosting resources in the deprived wasteland before the social consequences of the Great Divide really come home to roost and the unique character of leafy suburbs like Richmond, Twickenham, Isleworth and Chiswick are lost for ever.