

ECO-WARRIORS INVADE THE SUTTON COLDFIELD AREA!

by Keith M Jordan

Our story begins in 1980, when proposals for a new motorway in the West Midlands were initially put forward by the Department of Transport.

The original plan had two main aims, namely:-

- 1) To provide relief for the existing M6 between Junction 4 (Coleshill) & Junction 11 (Laney Green), in the form of a Toll Road.
- 2) To provide a distributor road to the north & east of the West Midlands conurbation, linking the M42 with a new Western Orbital Motorway (later scrapped).

The Secretary of State for Transport, in 1986, chose one of the proposals on the table and this was designated as the 'Preferred Route'.

During 1988, Draft Orders were published and an Inquiry was held, which recommended the road should be built. There was only muted opposition at the time, as local people did not believe they had any chance of fighting the proposals. The following year, the Secretary of State for Transport announced that a private sector competition would be held for the concession to design, construct, operate and finance the Toll Road.

The tendering process attracted three bidders and, subsequently, a secret agreement was signed with Midland Expressway Limited in 1991. MEL was owned by Macquarie Bank of Australia, in conjunction with Autostrada of Italy (Construction) & Aker Kvaerner of Norway (Engineering). After numerous amendments to the proposals during 1992, MEL were awarded the concession and a provisional route was announced.

In 1993, further changes took place, as part of the design & environmental assessment process but, eventually, the final route, known as the BNNR, was established and duly published. The ensuing public enquiry into the proposed scheme lasted from June 1994 until October 1995: the longest ever for a road scheme in the UK.

As mentioned earlier, initial public reaction to the scheme was low key but, when it was clear the BNNR was definitely going ahead, a much more concerted campaign developed. An informal coalition, originally set up by West Midlands Friends of the Earth, evolved into the 'Alliance Against the BNNR'. This brought together over 30 different organizations, including environmental groups and residents, along the whole length of the route.

The Alliance lobbied local councils & MPs and the official consultation process resulted in over 10,000 letters of objection. The Alliance also co-ordinated evidence against the BNNR at the public enquiry.

On the 1st May 1998 the Alliance descended upon London, to take the battle against the BNNR to the High Court. Armed with logic, reason & legal arguments they went there to challenge the Government's refusal to release details of the secret agreement with Midland Expressway Limited to construct and operate the proposed M6 Toll. The Alliance had raised a 'fighting fund' of £40,000, to help pay for the legal action.

More than 20 supporters arrived by way of a specially chartered coach. They comprised a cross section of individuals, which included:-

Mr Charles Bradshaw-Smith

Dr. Jack Stuart (79)

Mrs Sandra Bullivant (53)

Mrs Anne Chant (50)

Mr Alan Vaughan (55)

Business consultant and Chairman of the Alliance.

Retired GP.

President of Curdworth Womens Institute.

Self-employed computer specialist.

Retired building surveyor.

After staging a demonstration outside the court, the protestors spent the day listening to the opening of the complex legal case.



Anti-BNRR protestors outside the High Court in London

The Alliance believed the contract with MEL to build and run the motorway contained details of a substantial compensation package for the firm if the Government ever decided to axe the scheme. The group said if this was the case, the Labour Government may have acted illegally in giving the go-ahead. Mr John Howell QC, for the Alliance, told the court that Mr John Prescott, Secretary of State for the Environment, had effectively acted illegally by refusing to divulge details of the agreement. MEL claimed the documents contained commercially sensitive material, which the Government said it was duty bound not to disclose. Mr Howell said, however, that under European Law, the Government did have a duty to disclose the information to the public.

In the event, the Government and MEL were successful in maintaining the commercial confidentiality of key sections of the agreement and, eventually, the spiralling cost of taking the case further, forced the Alliance to pull out.

Whilst all this was taking place, anti-road protestors also became involved. They moved into the area and set up a number of camps along the proposed route. These protestors were known as *Eco-warriors*, many of whom were veterans of the A34 Newbury Bypass demonstrations, which had taken place earlier and had lasted for several years. In the UK, in the 1990's, it was the media which coined the term for these activists. The definition of an Eco-warrior in the dictionary is given as an '*environmental activist that adopts a hands-on effort to save or salvage an area of land or to advance some ecological ideology.*'

The camps were in place for over a year between November 1997 and January 1999, when the last one was cleared by the police under the instruction of the courts

Over the 27 mile route of the M6 Toll, 41 dwellings were demolished. Within the 5.8 mile section between Weeford Island and Holly Lane, Wishaw five properties were affected, namely:-

- Moneymore Cottages.
- Moneymore House.
- Longfield Farmhouse and
- Boundary Cottage.

All lay directly in the path of the relief road. On the 24th February 1998, a demolition request was put forward by the Highways Agency to Lichfield Council.

Subsequently, anti-road protestors moved into the unoccupied, 'Boundary Cottage' on the 9th March, as the campaign against the controversial road scheme intensified. The Eco-warriors, now squatting in the derelict cottage, threatened to take legal action to block plans to demolish the crumbling building. The squat represented the second base for the protestors, who had already made a makeshift tree-top camp at Green Wood copse, off the A38.

The Lichfield District Council Planning Committee met on Monday 16th March to consider the application to demolish the property and, predictably, this was duly approved. By early April, the protestors had already ignored two notices to quit, served upon them by the Highways Agency. The Government then stepped up legal moves by filing a High Court Writ against the protestors, named only as 'Dave, Chris, Richard, Peter and persons unknown'.



Protestors on the roof of 'Boundary Cottage'.



Eco-warrior Steve brings another bucketful of soil to the surface, from one of the tunnels at 'Boundary Cottage'.

The Eco-warriors, however, were determined to fight any move to evict them and said they would have to be dragged, kicking & screaming, from the cottage before they capitulated. They were already making arrangements to barricade themselves in against the anticipated arrival of the bailiffs. Dave, aged 37, said that their “plan was to evade arrest for as long as possible. If that meant chaining themselves to a lump of concrete, digging & tunnelling within the property, or just running across the roof to make it difficult for the bailiffs, then so be it”. Peter, aged 20, a fellow protestor, who was one of the veterans who took direct action against the building of the Newbury by-pass, said during the campaign he “had been arrested at least 15 times”.

Midlands Expressway Limited said it had plans of its own to deal with the Eco-warriors, but it was holding fire until the legal challenge was over.

By mid-April, ‘Boundary Cottage’ had been protected with armour-plated doorways, reinforced with concrete and the squatters were in the process of constructing a chain of tunnels. The protestors said at the time that some of the locals had been brilliant and had been taking supplies to their camp.

Shortly afterwards, however, on the 12th April 1998 tragedy struck, when one of the eco-warriors was found dead in his sleeping bag by fellow environmentalists on the Sunday morning. The protestor was known as ‘Sorted Dave’ and he was immediately hailed as the *‘first martyr of the campaign’*. It was later discovered that he was named David Richards, and was a fugitive from the French Foreign Legion. He had been on the run since deserting his post in South America in 1994.

His sister-in-law, Mrs Kym Richards, told how Mr Richards was stationed in French Guyana guarding an 'Arian' rocket base, when he thought it was "A pretty useless thing to be doing". He then climbed the fence and spent the next 6 weeks fighting his way through the jungle until he reached the capital Georgetown. Once there, he sought the help of the British Embassy. His sister-in-law wired him money for the airfare home and he duly returned to England. The cause of his death was believed to be from a previously unknown heart condition and this became related to inflammation of the arteries and hypothermia. Mrs Richards said "He was a happy-go-lucky sort of chap, who had his principles. Once he decided to do something, he just did it. The campaign was something he believed in passionately".



Eco-warrior David Richards, 'Sorted Dave', who died fighting the BNNR.

The same day, the six remaining Eco-warriors were forced out of the cottage, after being told by the police that they needed access to complete their inquiries into Mr Richard's death.

The squatters were intending to move back into 'Boundary Cottage', as soon as the police had finished. When they returned, however, they found it had been demolished. The protestors were, predictably, furious and eco-warrior Alice, a 21-year old Australian, said "What they have done is shocking and I am completely disgusted at such insensitivity. If anything, it has given us more determination to keep going, as a memorial to Dave".

Mrs Kym Richards also said "This is an insensitive move and doesn't do anything for the memory of Dave, but it doesn't surprise me or his brother Mark. The police asked us to give them a call after we visited the cottage to lay flowers on Tuesday, which suggested they were

waiting for us to leave before they moved in. Once they had got the protestors out of the property, there was no way they were going to let them back in”

A spokesman for the Highways Agency responded by saying “Boundary Cottage was owned by them and it was in a very dangerous condition and was due to be demolished in any event. Having completed their enquiries, the police handed the property back to us. We made a decision, based upon the condition of the building, that safety should come first and we therefore had no choice but to knock it down”.



The scene on Tuesday 14th April 1998. The police had secured the site and contractors were about to arrange for ‘Boundary Cottage’ to be demolished.



Another view of the cottage, shortly after the eco-warriors had vacated the building.



'Boundary Cottage', following its demolition on the Wednesday.



Further view of the demolished cottage.

On the 24th April, campaign supporter, the Rev. David Shawcross, Methodist Minister for Burntwood, organized a memorial service at the main protest camp at Green Wood, next to the Arc Quarry on the A38. About 70 family members and friends gathered to pay tribute. The Minister said “David Richards died fighting what he believed in and he had made a difference by devoting his life to protecting the environment. We have all come here because we have lost a person who was a friend. This is the way in which he wanted to live, moving on when things were done. This is the person we loved.”



Flower tributes on the fencing outside the demolished 'Boundary Cottage', on Wednesday 15th April 1998.

At the end of the service, Mr Richard's brother Mark said "After the cremation, some of his brother's ashes would be scattered at Green Wood and the remainder in the West Country, where he had many friends". The following month, Staffordshire, Warwickshire & West Midlands police forces said they were facing a multi-million pound operation patrolling camps set up by protestors along the proposed route of the motorway. They went on to say that disturbing features were now appearing. Following the demolition of 'Boundary Cottage', evidence had emerged of the way the squatters had fortified the premises, during their time in occupation.

Staffordshire's Chief Constable, Mr John Giffard, said "A fortified underground area had been constructed in the cellar, with a series of lock-on devices into which protestors would have secured themselves to prevent eviction. The findings served to reinforce the genuinely held concern that, before too long, someone, either an eco-campaigner, police officer or a bailiff, would die as a direct result of the reckless actions of the protestors". Mr Giffard went on to say he thought the eco-warriors were currently fortifying two other cottages, together with a stable and outhouses at Moneymore.

In June, Eco-warriors alleged the police were leading a smear campaign against them. It appeared that remarks were made at an earlier press conference when police said they had found booby-traps in the now demolished 'Boundary Cottage'. Speaking at a subsequent press conference, Assistant Chief Constable, Steve Green, said "They had no wish to interfere in a peaceful protest, but the police had a duty to protect life. We cannot stand back and allow people to deliberately construct devices, which could cause harm to themselves and others".

At the same time as the press conference was taking place, 40 officers were serving notices at three protest sites, warning campaigners they would be held criminally liable for any deaths or serious injuries which occurred, due to their activities. Campaigner Briggs later said "We are here to try to save woods, not to cause harm to ourselves or anybody else. We are not terrorists." She also claimed "When the police served the warning notices, they took the names & addresses of members of the public who just happened to be around. They were trying to scare off the support we have."

In the event, over the next few months, adverse publicity started to appear in the newspapers and the fact the protestors were now, very often, likened to terrorists, caused public support

for their actions to gradually wane and the protests and demonstrations slowly got less and less until, by the end of the year, they had virtually stopped altogether.

From that point on, when construction work on the motorway did eventually commence, it continued to be trouble-free, until its completion. No one knows what happened to the campaigners, but it is probable they individually or collectively took up other banners or followed new crusades elsewhere.

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