

## Vital rapid transit route to docklands threatened



*The LDDC's preferred route for a rapid transit route is a disused railway viaduct (shown with white lines) in front of St Anne's, Limehouse, but it would be demolished and replaced with a new road if GLC plans go ahead.*

Next week the new Labour GLC will be announcing its verdict on road schemes currently planned for the capital, including an expensive and environmentally disastrous scheme left by the previous administration, which threatens vital plans for rapid transit in docklands.

Within four or five years London's docklands could have a brand new British-built light rapid transit system of its own, linked to the London underground. The £400 million Jubilee line project was shelved because of its vast cost, but the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) believes that a decent public transport link is essential for the development of the area. After months of discussions with manufacturers, British Rail and London Transport, the LDDC planners estimate that, for as little as £50 million, a route could be built to the Isle of Dogs and, for an extra £75 million, spurs could be extended to Greenwich and Beckton, (see map). The LDDC would be prepared to put up roughly half the cost.

Several alternative routes are being worked on but the most promising, favoured by London Transport, runs from Tower Bridge along 2½ miles of railway track, part of which is a disused viaduct. No land acquisition or demolition would be needed.

Unfortunately, the last ½ mile of this viaduct is threatened by demolition for a

four-lane dual carriageway planned by the GLC. This road, known as the Docklands Northern Relief Road, received the final go-ahead (subject to a public enquiry) from the previous Tory GLC administration. But the choice of route has met considerable criticism because both its cost and its environmental impact are far greater than was originally supposed. 'The planning has gone out of phase', says LDDC Transport Planner Howard Potter. 'We see it as more important to keep the rail options open.'

At £74 million, the Northern Relief Road is the most expensive single scheme in the GLC's highway programme. If the cost goes on escalating at the present rate it could reach over £200 million by the time it is completed in 1989. Estimates for construction costs alone have more than doubled since June 1978, and are still described by the GLC Controller of Finance as 'provisional only and could increase further'. Since costs of some demolition, rebuilding of lost homes, landscaping of associated roads and relocation of businesses are excluded from the figures, the real cost to the public will be higher still.

The purpose of spending all this money is to boost the regeneration of docklands by replacing the existing A13 between Canning Town and Stepney with a new two mile stretch of dual carriageway a few hundred yards to the south.

The most controversial part of the road is the section proposed through the heart of Limehouse. Although only about one-third of the whole project, this section accounts for over half the costs. To build it, at least 350 homes would have to be demolished (some of them built less than four years ago), and 520 more insulated from sound at a cost of £340 000. Planners admit that hundreds more, not entitled to protective measures, 'will suffer considerably during construction'. Many industrial premises would have to be demolished, displacing 10 firms and 550 jobs. If built along this route, nine structures listed as being of special architectural or historic interest would be demolished.

The road would pass 15ft from the Limehouse Public Library, 43ft from the Catholic Church of Our Lady Immaculate, and 25ft from the Convent of Vincent de Paul, and slice off part of the monastic retreat of the Royal Foundation of St Katherine, a grade II\* listed building with outstanding gardens. It would rise in an ugly concrete box to a height of 30ft along one side of the Outstanding Conservation Area around St Anne's, Limehouse, an internationally celebrated church by Nicholas Hawksmoor. And, once built, carbon monoxide and lead pollution from the road is expected to exceed council guideline levels, and smoke levels to exceed EEC limits.

*Is this road necessary?*

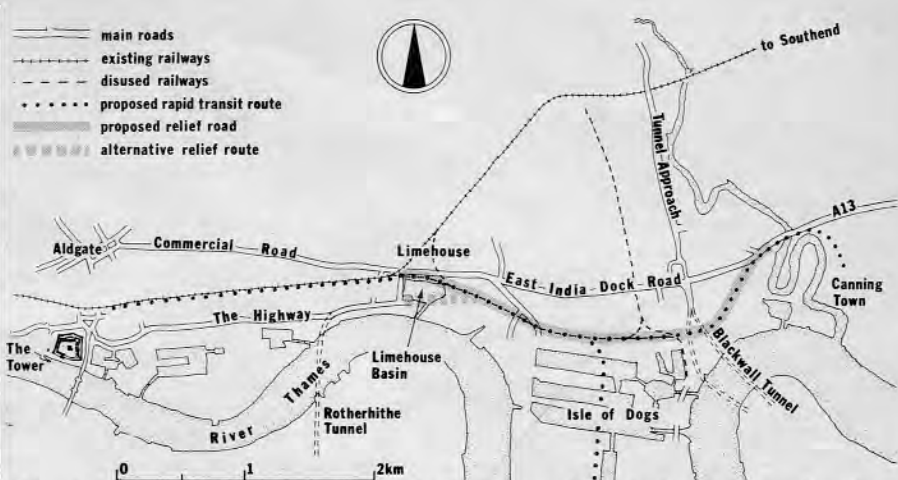
Critics, including members of the Limehouse and Ratcliffe Road Action Group, argue that the Northern Relief Road, or at least parts of it, are unnecessary. Sufficient extra capacity could be achieved, they say, by streamlining the existing roads (painting yellow lines, removing traffic lights, providing bus lay-bys and making junction improvements).

There is, they claim, little evidence that new roads are a significant factor in regenerating run-down areas, and the tens of millions of pounds saved could be put to better use. There can, in any case, be no real benefit in increasing the overall capacity since traffic will merely pile up further west. They argue that the scheme fails in its own terms: there will be no extra traffic lanes because both the existing main road and several parallel roads are to be closed to all traffic except buses.

Even if a new road were justified, it is increasingly hard to find any justification for this route, chosen by Tower Hamlets Council and the GLC in the face of public opposition. In 1979, the public was invited to choose between three options: the widening of existing roads, a new road along the line of the London and Blackwall Railway, or a new southern route between the Limehouse Basin and the River Thames. A total of 57 per cent favoured the southern route but less than 20 per cent favoured either of the other two. And a GLC officer's report at the time clearly stated that the route along the railway is worst in almost every respect. The southern route is better for rail and bus users, better for local traffic, better for pedestrians and cyclists, better for local shops and pubs, better for historic buildings and better visually. It would subject fewer dwellings and public buildings to noise, cause less disruption to traffic during construction, and involve the loss of 285 fewer homes and 240 fewer jobs. Furthermore, it would not be any more expensive nor would it be less effective for through traffic.

Nor was the Department of Transport enthusiastic about the project; in 1979 it commented that 'it is questionable if the traffic-based justification for the adoption of option 3 (the option chosen) is sufficient alone to ensure a high priority for this scheme'.

The main justification for the GLC's decision to ignore both the public and its own officer's report was the assumption that the southern route would harm the 'development potential' of the Limehouse Basin—a little-used dock where two canals meet the Thames. Yet the southern route would do infinitely less harm to the dock's development than that chosen by the GLC. Now that British Waterways, owners of the basin, no longer intends to use it for heavy freight shipping, the GLC engineers' argument that it would not be possible to construct a tunnel under the southern route deep enough for large boats is of little relevance. By contrast, the route chosen by the GLC would effectively prevent any development on the north



Plan showing the LDDC's rapid route and the GLC proposed road, both of which are planned on the line of the railway in Limehouse.



- 1 Stepney East station. 2 Royal Foundation of St Katherine.
- 3 Rotherhithe Tunnel approach. 4 Regent's Canal. 5 Vincent de Paul convent. 6 Our Lady Immaculate church.
- 7 Limehouse Library.

Detailed map showing the most controversial section of the road proposed by the GLC.

side of the basin (one-fifth of the available land), would hinder access to the east and west sides, and would isolate any new development from the surrounding hinterland. Noise and intrusion would significantly reduce both the amenity and the financial value of what otherwise promises to be one of dockland's most attractive development sites.

Many officers working on the road privately admit that it is a mistake, as do many councillors. The Docklands Forum, the Joint Docklands Action Group and the local ward Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties have all urged that the decision be

reconsidered. But protestors are told that they will be able to present their case at the public enquiry, which always seems to be scheduled for one year in the future. It is now due 'sometime in 1982'.

Yet every day that passes makes it less likely that the public enquiry will be other than a rubber stamp. All new development along the chosen route has been halted, with the familiar signs of blight setting in. Leases are renewed only on a short-term basis. Decanting of some tenants is about to start and morale is low. The GLC has already allocated £3 million for property purchase and has carried out one act of blatant 'prior demolition' at Ratcliffe House. After purchasing the property from the owners on the basis that the road was going ahead, it was left to rot—so justifying a GLC spokesperson's claim that it 'had to come down because it was unsafe'.

At the same time, despite assurances that the public enquiry will consider alternative routes, the LDDC's rapid transit route is jeopardised and the public's chosen route for the new road is not even being safeguarded. One of the stated aims of the new Labour GLC administration is to reassert the GLC as a strategic planning authority. Perhaps it could start by sorting out the Northern Relief Road; by scrapping it altogether, by selecting the southern route which is so clearly the least objectionable.

NICK WATES



Victorian gothic cottage in the grounds of the Royal Foundation of St Katherine which would be demolished if the new road is built.