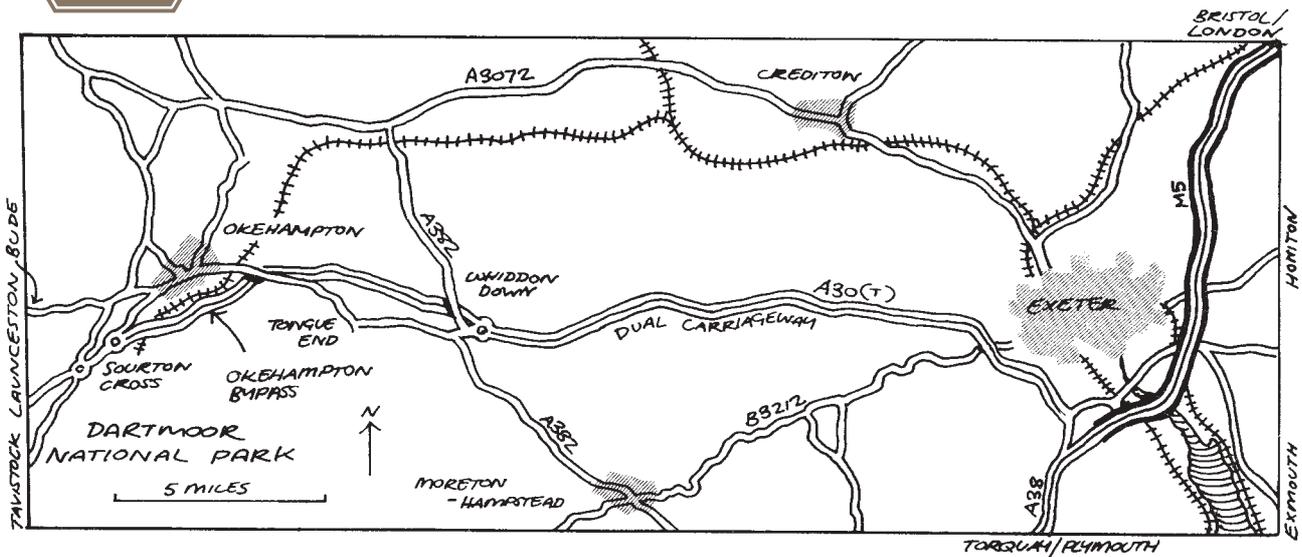


The Okehampton Bypass - a case study in decision making

Dartmoor Factsheet



Okehampton needed a bypass; very few people would dispute this fact. This now expanding Devon town stands just to the north of the northernmost boundary of the Dartmoor National Park, and one of the two main London to Cornwall roads - the A30 - runs through it. Holiday traffic to and from Cornwall during peak holiday times, and heavy goods vehicles all year round, caused serious congestion in the town which in turn caused hazards, noise and inconvenience to local people. The problem was where to build the bypass - to the north of Okehampton through relatively better farmland or to the south through the northern edge of the Dartmoor National Park which, although of less agricultural value, has a significant landscape, ecological, archaeological and recreational value of local and national importance.

The process by which the final route was chosen - through part of the Dartmoor National Park - was complicated and lengthy. During the 22 year period in which this issue existed many factors influenced the decision-making process including:-

- the need to reconcile a land use dilemma - the conservation of landscape and amenity or the retention of land for agriculture;
- changing government policies - some were reviewed and new ones emerged;

- changing priorities - for example, by the mid 1980s the agricultural argument, given general agricultural over-production, and policies supporting the environment, became less significant;
- the need to prevent further delay by reaching a decision quickly.

A northern route for the bypass had been considered in the early 1960s but, in 1966, it was recommended that a southern route, utilising the British Rail Exeter-Okehampton-Plymouth railway line be adopted; obviously this option could only be pursued if the railway closed and, at that time, this would have been a good compromise - little agricultural land would have been taken and the infringement into the National Park would have been minimal. However, in the early 1970s the railway line was revived and remained open between Exeter and Meldon Quarry; a new southern option running parallel to the line was suggested. In August 1976 the Department of the Environment (DoE) announced its 'preferred route', south of Okehampton, south of the railway line and through the edge of the National Park.

This surprised many people because in DoE Circular 4/76 (para 58) Report of the National Park Policies Review Committee, dated 12 January 1976, it is stated that:-

'It is now the policy of Government that investment in trunk roads should be directed to developing routes for long distance traffic which avoid National Parks; and that no new road for long-distance traffic should be constructed through a National Park, or existing road upgraded, unless it has been demonstrated that there is a compelling need which would not be met by any reasonable alternative means.'

Hence, the question of where the road should go became the subject of intense debate. During 1979/80 a Public Inquiry, which lasted 96 days, was held in Okehampton to determine whether the southern route was acceptable. Supporters of the southern route at the Inquiry included the Department of Transport, Devon County Council and a farming lobby, while objectors were the Countryside Commission, Dartmoor National Park Authority as well as national and local amenity bodies. The Inquiry decision was delayed, due to the Inspector's illness, until September 1983 when the Secretaries of State for Transport and the Environment announced their endorsement of the Inspector's recommendation for the southern route. On 30 September 1983 the Dartmoor National Park Committee considered this decision and recorded 'its grave dismay that the Government's commitment to keeping trunk roads outside National Parks should be so easily set aside.'

Some of the land which had to be compulsorily purchased for the construction of the new road was deemed to be public open space (Bluebell Woods and East Hill). This meant that replacement land of similar quality, and being equally advantageous to the public, had to be found to compensate for the land to be lost. But, the Secretaries of State for the Environment and Transport, agreed that the exchange land offered was inadequate. As a result, the matter had to go through another stage – a special parliamentary procedure involving a hearing before a Parliamentary Joint Committee. In 1984 ten national and local organisations, including the Open Spaces Society, the Ramblers' Association and the Dartmoor Preservation Association, submitted their formal petition to Parliament and prepared their case for the Parliamentary Joint Committee.

The Department of Transport challenged the petition but the Chairman of Committees (Lords) and Chairman of Ways and Means (Commons) ruled that the petition should proceed. In November 1984 the Government announced that there would be a debate on a motion from the Okehampton constituency MP that the petition should not be referred to the Joint Committee but that the matter should be determined on the floor of the House. After lobbying by the amenity societies the MP withdrew his motion.

In February 1985 the Joint Committee (three peers and three MPs) considered the case and in April 1985 that Committee concluded that 'the arguments in favour of the southern route do not justify the incursion into the National Park in this case.'

In a sense a stalemate situation was reached. Okehampton still needed its bypass so in July 1985 the Government introduced its intention to deposit a bill later that year reversing the Parliamentary Joint Committee's decision and confirming the route through the National Park. That Bill was considered by the House of Commons in November 1985 and by the House of Lords in December 1985. The southern route was finally confirmed and on 17 December 1985, the *Okehampton Bypass (Confirmation of Orders) Act* was published and construction works commenced 11 months later. Sympathetic landscaping reduced some environmental effects and appropriate tourism signing and promotion helped to alleviate some economic penalties.

The Issues

The debate whether to go to the north or south of Okehampton, during and after the Public Inquiry, focused on many issues and points of detail including:-

1. matters of **principle**;
2. matters related to detail and accuracy of the evidence presented; i.e. matters of **fact**;
3. the question of **public open space exchange land**;
4. the question of **delay** and the effect of this on the local and regional economy.

The main subjects which were taken into account included:-

(a) Statutory (legal) criteria and government policy towards:

- trunk roads
- National Parks
- agriculture

(b) Local policies and proposals;

- Devon County Structure Plan
- Local Plans
- Dartmoor National Park Plan

(c) What constitutes a 'reasonable alternative'? The feasibility and acceptability of a route depended on:-

- landscape impact
- the balance of local opinion
- traffic flows including the existing and potential infrastructure and use; and economic benefits and penalties such as driving time factors
- design standards including safety and landscaping
- the acceptable costs of construction
- landtake and agriculture
- geological implications (topography, geology and hydro-geology - all can effect the assessment of costs)
- archaeological implications
- ecological effects
- recreation effects
- noise and air pollution
- weather conditions
- the effect on properties
- which bypass option would best serve the town and its industry and the local area

For and Against

Supporters and Objectors at the Okehampton

Bypass Public Inquiry 1979-80

Inspector: Charles Stewart Fay MA, Barrister-at-Law

1. Supporters for the southern (proposed) route

- (a) The Department of Transport
- (b) Representations in support of the proposal:-
 - Devon County Council
 - West Devon District (Borough) Council
 - Okehampton Town Council
 - Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council
 - The Go South Group (mainly farmers and the owners of Aggett's Quarry)
 - The Country Landowners' Association
 - Road Haulage Association (a trade association supporting the movement of goods by the shortest possible route)

also

(c) Written representations were made by:-

- National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers
- British Road Federation Ltd
- South Western Organisation for Road Development
- Residents of Brightly Road (on northern alternative; infringement on rights of privacy, quietness, safety, environment and mobility)
- Freight Transport Association
- ECC Quarries Ltd
- Royal Automobile Club
- and the area MP, two local individuals and a farmer who would be affected by the northern route

2. Objectors to the proposed southern route

(a) Countryside Commission, Dartmoor National Park Authority.

(b) Other Objectors including:-

- Dartmoor Preservation Association (DPA)
- Okehampton Bypass Action Group (formed in 1978 and comprised some residents and local tradespeople)
- Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)
- Devon Alliance of Amenity Societies (a federation of Amenity Societies affiliated to the Civic Trust which aims to improve, conserve and protect the urban and rural environment of Devon)
- The Conservation Society (Devon Branch)
- Transport 2000
- Council for National Parks (CNP)
- Dartmoor Tourist Association (DTA)
- West Devon Liberal Association
- The Ramblers' Association (RA) (Devon Area)
- British Horse Society and the Byways and Bridleways Trust (which sought to secure adequate access arrangements for horse riders)
- Lady Sayer (DPA)
- Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society (COS & FPS, now Open Spaces Society (OSS))
- and 24 representations made by individuals living in or near the area

(c) Some 175 written objections were

received including:-

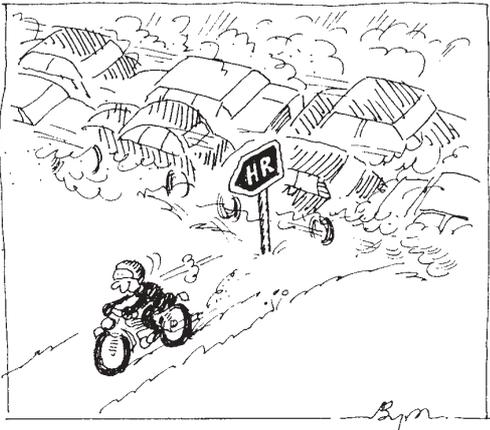
the Dartmoor Rambling Club, Devon Archaeological Society and Devon Committee for Rescue Archaeology, Hatherleigh Parish Council, Devon Trust for Nature Conservation (now Devon Wildlife Trust), Okebridge Motor Services Ltd., Green Route Action Committee and individuals representing the local and national interest.

Before the Bypass

For most through-traffic to and from Cornwall the A30 is a shorter route than the A38 via Plymouth.

In the summer months a system of Holiday Routes (HR) was implemented to divert traffic away from the town centre. One HR connects the M5 at Sampford Peverell and Sourton Down by the way of Tiverton and Crediton. In 1978 a further HR was introduced connecting Whiddon Down and Sourton Down via de Bathe Cross. Under-used, these routes offered little relief to the town.

Dual carriageways have been opened on the A30 between Exeter and Whiddon Down (1970s), Whiddon Down to Tongue End (1987) and as bypasses to Launceston and Bodmin.



Bluebell (Meldon) Woods was a Deed of Gift to Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council by a local resident as a memorial to her daughter who died young. The Deed of Gift covenanted that the public should be allowed a right of access. The Public Inquiry Inspector and the Secretary of State for Transport and the Environment deemed that this area, together with East Hill, was public open space.

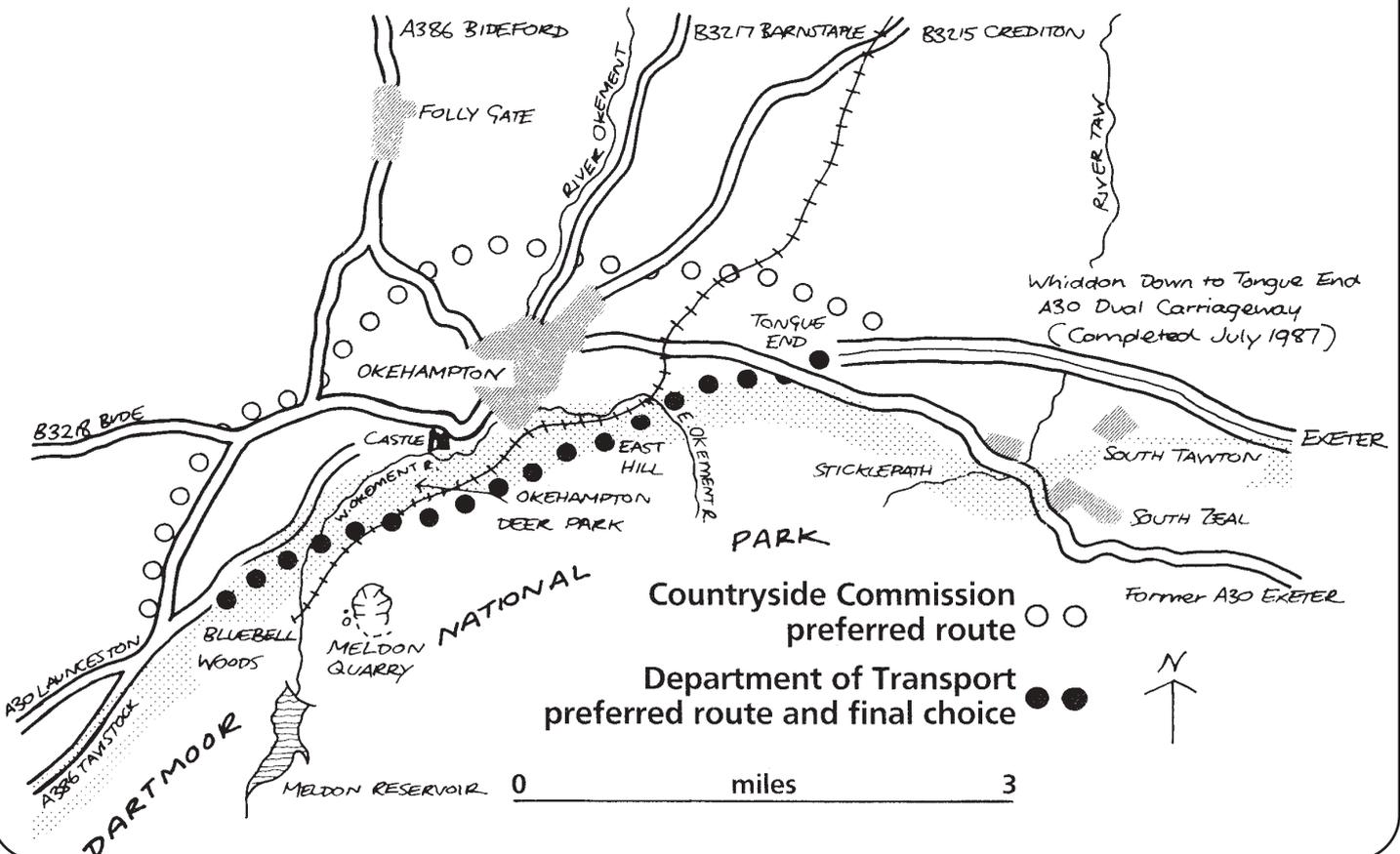
Okehampton Castle, founded between 1068 and 1086, is now under English Heritage Guardianship. The surviving ruins attract over 8,000 visitors a year. The new bypass is visible from it and has infringed upon its medieval setting.

Okehampton Deer Park, once associated with the Castle, dates from 1292 and though disparked by Henry VIII it retained much of its integrity up to the time of the bypass construction. The area comprises a variety of semi-natural habitats for wildlife. The woods of the East and West Okement river valleys are of ecological importance and were protected by Tree Preservation Orders.

Recreation

The countryside to the north of the town is little used for informal recreation - there are few public rights of way and no public open space. To the south the area has considerable recreation use and potential.

Okehampton Bypass: North? South?



Constructing the Bypass

Contractors:

- Mowlem (Civil Engineers)

Agents:

- Devon County Council for client
- Department of Transport

Start Date:

- November 1986

Contract:

- 104 weeks to complete.
- Predicted Cost £16.6m

Length:

- 8.5km (5.3 miles) including 3.5km (2.2 miles) of split level carriageways in a steep cutting.

Earthworks:

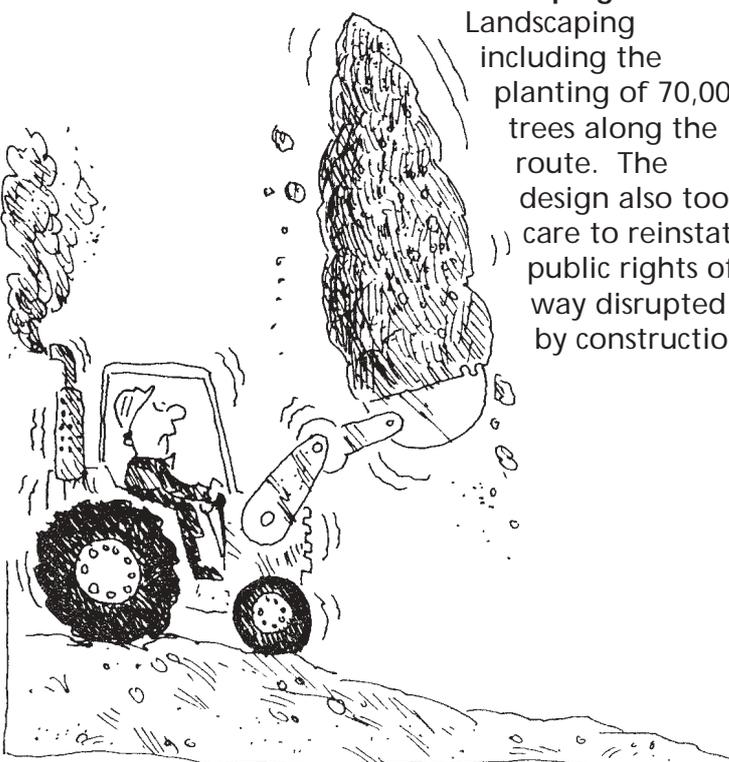
Extensive - some 850,000m³ of excavation needed. Some of the excavated material has been crushed on site and used as an aggregate and capping layer for the new road. Much of it has been used in constructing the embankments required. The remaining spoil - some 150,000m³ - has been tipped outside the National Park.

Structures:

Include a three span bridge and a single span bridge over the East and West Okement Rivers respectively, five road overbridges (including farm access bridge), a single span rail crossing bridge and several footbridges.

Landscaping:

Landscaping including the planting of 70,000 trees along the route. The design also took care to reinstate public rights of way disrupted by construction.

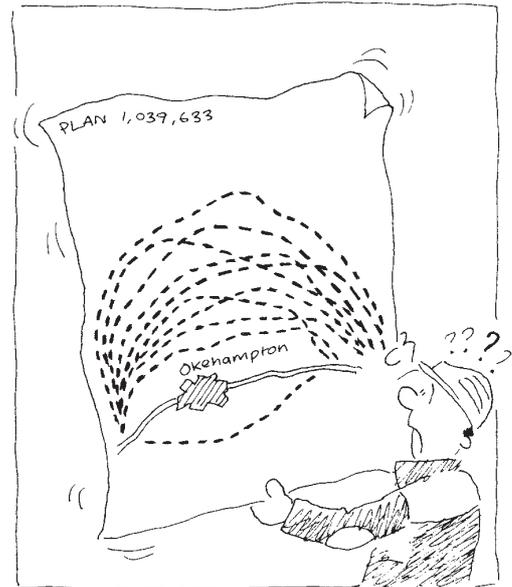


Alternatives

Length of northern route 10.9km

Length of southern route 8.5km

Some ten alternative routes, (some were slight deviations of others) were identified to the north of the town; most of these routes would cross the Okement River at Knowle Bridge.



The Question of Delay

The Department of Transport estimated that if following the Inquiry the proposal for a southern bypass was abandoned, and new proposals brought forward, the construction of a bypass for Okehampton would be delayed by at least 5 years and 7 months.

During public consultation (1975) 1030 completed questionnaires were returned. Of these, 45% expressed a preference for a northern route and 52% for a southern route (which followed closer to the railway line than the route finally chosen).

Total Take of Agricultural Land (ha)

Confirmed Route		Northern Option
-	Grade 3b ¹	-
- 19.5	Grade 3c	34
18.5	Grade 4	24.5
13.0	Grade 5	-
Total 51.0 ha		Total 66.5 ha

¹ Agricultural land Classification:

Grade 1 - very good, Grade 5 - poor

Farms to the south of Okehampton are restricted to the grazing of cattle and sheep by reason of slopes, soil type and exposure. Farms to the north have a wider choice of farming policy and a number of them are dairy or mixed farms. The effects of farm severance by the building of the road would have been more acute for farms to the north of the town.

"Some Things Said"

A. Acts of Parliament

1. Section 11 of the *Countryside Act 1968* imposes upon the Secretaries of State the duty in the exercise of their functions relating to land under any enactment to 'have regard to the desirability of conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside'.

2. Before making the final Line Order for a new road, Section 10(2) of the *Highways Act 1980* requires the Secretary of State for Transport to take into consideration 'the requirements of local and national planning including the requirements of agriculture'. Section 7(2) of the *Highways Act 1959* also imposes on the Secretary of State for Transport the duty to take into consideration the requirements of agriculture.

3. Section 5(1) of the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949* states that National Parks are designated 'for the purpose of preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the areas specified ... and the purpose of promoting their enjoyment by the public'.

Section 5(2) of that Act defines the specified areas as 'those extensive tracts of country... as to which it appears...that by reason of (a) their natural beauty and (b) the opportunities they afford for open air recreation, having regard both to their character and to their position in relation to centres of population, it is especially desirable that the necessary measures shall be taken for the purpose mentioned in Section 5(1).

B. Government Policies and Thinking

1. Circular 4/76 (see page 2)

2. *'Value for money will remain an essential objective in the planning and building of roads ... with the clearer recognition of the wide range of purposes for which roads are to be planned and built and the greater emphasis on their environmental and social effects, the tests of value for money which are applied to the schemes would have to be widened also. It is more necessary now to design sections so as to minimise the damage to communities and the environment, and roads in future will be built more for the environmental than for economic reasons alone. Where, despite the best efforts of engineering design, schemes would still have a damaging effect on communities or the environment, they will not be approved unless they show high economic or other benefit ...'*

(White Paper, Policy for Roads: England 1978, paras 48/49)

3. *Government policy is to ensure that, wherever possible, agricultural land of a higher quality is not taken for development where land of lower quality is available'.*
(White Paper, Food From Our Own Resources 1975, para 16; White Paper, Farming and the Nation 1979, para 18; DoE Circular 75/76 1976 para 3)

4. *The Government recognises 'the claims of amenity and conservation and will take due account of the need to strike a balance between these and farming'.*

(Farming and the Nation, para 18)

5. *'The Government will continue to give a high priority to conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside while equally having regard to the needs of agriculture and forestry and to the economic and social interests of rural areas'. and, 'The Government recognises that in certain special cases the requirements of agricultural production must take second place'.*

(Farming and the Nation, Annex III, paras 13, 15)

6. *The supply of land is limited, and the agricultural area declining. The Government intends to pursue vigorously their policy of protecting agricultural land, particularly land of better quality ...* '
(Farming and the Nation, para 18)

7. *'Where there is a compelling need for some solution to be found to the problem of increased through traffic, or to problems of road safety, in a national park, a determined search should be made for alternatives which do not involve upgrading the existing route or new construction'.*
(Circular 125/77. Roads and Traffic – National Parks)

8. *'It is not always appreciated that the Government is not irrevocably committed to a road proposal at any particular stage. If at any time prior to the placing of the contract for construction changed circumstances suggest that the proposals should be re-examined then a re-examination is made'.*
(Command Paper 7133 1978 Review of Highway Inquiry Procedures)

9. *'... this proposal is an example of the interaction between several different values in society, each one important, and the decision has to be based on a careful weighing of the considerations. It would be a misconception to suppose that there is any single Government policy which can be applied to a problem like this and give an automatic or overriding answer. The essential task is to get to the right decision taking all factors into account'.*
(Secretaries of State for the Environment and Transport; Decision Letter (confirming southern route), 16 September 1983, para 26)

C. Public Inquiry Inspector

1. *'...it is my view that substantial expenditure would be justified in order to construct the bypass on a route which would avoid the National Park, provided that this can reasonably be done. Thus, it would be right in my view to accept a somewhat greater length of road, somewhat greater cost, the taking of somewhat more good agricultural land and some landscape effects in the northern countryside. Such disadvantages and the possible advantages require assessment ...'*

'In assessing whether an alternative is reasonable, I do not think that any one consideration is so weighty as by itself to determine the matter. All relevant considerations must be taken into account. Since there is not an objective means of weighing together the disparate considerations that arise in this case, the assessment is a matter of judgement and cannot avoid being, in part, subjective'.

'In my judgement, the total price that would be paid for avoiding the National Park is too high. That price includes (i) an economic penalty of the order of £5m, attributable in part to the loss of one third or more of the economic benefits that could be conferred by the published route and in part to construction costs exceeding those of the published route by about a quarter; (ii) a severe agricultural penalty; (iii) environmental damage which includes not only damage that may be regarded as balanced by damage on the published route but also damage at Knowle Viaduct which would not be paralleled on the published route, and (iv) the closure of Aggett's Quarry, with the loss of employment that that would entail ...'

(Okehampton Bypass Inspector's Report 1983 para 2767, 2815 and 2816)

A Chronology

- 1963 Bypass proposals first suggested.
- 1964 First Review of County Development Plan contained a bypass proposal to the north of the town.
- 1965 Bluebell (Meldon) Wood given to Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council by Deed of Gift.
- 1966 Landscape Advisory Committee visits the area and recommends that a southern route, utilising BR line to Meldon be adopted.
- 1972 **April**
Countryside Commission favours a northern route; a southern bypass involving the retention of the railway line was likely to be opposed.
- 1972 **14 November**
Dartmoor National Park Committee (DNPC) resolved not to oppose a southern route proposal along the railway line but expressed strong objection to any other route being advocated south of Okehampton.
- 1975 **29 May**
Consultation Document on Okehampton bypass alternatives published by the Department of the Environment (DoE). Three routes considered; two to the north of the town, one to the south but realigned to the south of the railway line.
- 1975 **June/July**
Public consultations on the three routes.
- 1975 **June**
DNPC objects to southern route alternative.
- 1975 **July**
Planning and Transportation Committee of Devon County Council favours southern route; this view endorsed by the County Council.
- 1976 **12 January**
Circular 4/76. Report of the National Parks Policies Review Committee.
- 1976 **August**
DoE announced its 'preferred' route, south of Okehampton and through the National Park.
- 1978 **April**
Draft Orders for the Okehampton Bypass and slip roads published.
- 1978 **30 June**
DNPC objects to Department of Transport's 'preferred' route.
- 1978 **July**
Devon County Council advises the Department of Transport that it preferred the southern route.
- 1978 **5 September**
The Secretaries of State for Transport and the Environment jointly announced that a local Public Inquiry should be held into the Okehampton Bypass proposals.
- 1978 **14 March**
The Countryside Commission formally announces its objection to the Department of Transport's proposed route which would cut through the Dartmoor National Park in contravention of stated Government policy.
- 1979 **1 May 1979 to 4 February 1980**
-80 96 days long local Public Inquiry held at Okehampton.
- 1983 **16 September**
Decision letter. Secretaries of State for Environment and Transport confirm southern route.
- 1983 **30 September**
DNPC records 'its grave dismay over Government's decision'.
- 1983 **November**
Okehampton Bypass Appeal launched: this was to help the Dartmoor Preservation Association (DPA) and later other groups, petition Parliament against the compulsory purchase of public open space at Bluebell Wood and East Hill.
- 1984 **March**
DPA with other organisations jointly present petition to Parliament opposing compulsory purchase orders on public open space. (DPA, RA, the COS & FPS (now OSS) the Council for British Archaeology (CBA), CPRE (Devon Branch), the Conservation Society (Devon Branch), Transport 2000 (Devon Branch), Friends of the Earth (FoE) and the Devon Alliance of Amenity Societies. Other petitions submitted too).
- 1985 **February**
Hearing before Parliamentary Joint Committee begins.
- 1985 **13 April**
Parliamentary Joint Committee concludes that adequate exchange land is not available.
- 26 July**
Last day of Parliamentary Session. The Government introduces its intention to deposit a bill reversing the Parliamentary Joint Committee's decision and confirming the route through the National Park.
- August**
Residents of Okehampton Against the Moorland Route (ROAMR) formed. Okehampton Crisis Committee already in existence (comprised CNP, CPRE, DPA, FoE, OSS, RA, Transport 2000, Youth Hostels Association (YHA).
- 19 November**
Okehampton Bypass (Confirmation of Orders) Bill - for the southern route - introduced in the House of Commons. Supports southern route.
- 5 December**
House of Lords debate (8 hours) on the Okehampton Bypass (Confirmation of Orders) Bill. Supports southern route.
- 17 December**
Okehampton Bypass (Confirmation of Orders) Act published.
- 1986 **May - June**
Central Excavation Unit of English Heritage archaeological survey of proposed road line.
- November**
Construction of the Okehampton Bypass southern route begins.
- 1988 **19 July**
Okehampton Bypass officially opened.

Useful web links for further information:

- Other factsheets:**
- Planning
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/factfile/homepage.html>
- Other publications:**
- *Dartmoor National Park Local Plan First Review 1995 – 2011 (Revised deposit version)*
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/planning/lplan/localplan2.html>

For further information, and a list of other Fact Sheets available, contact the:
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