

# STANSTEAD ABBOTTS BYPASS

OPENED 1987

BY  
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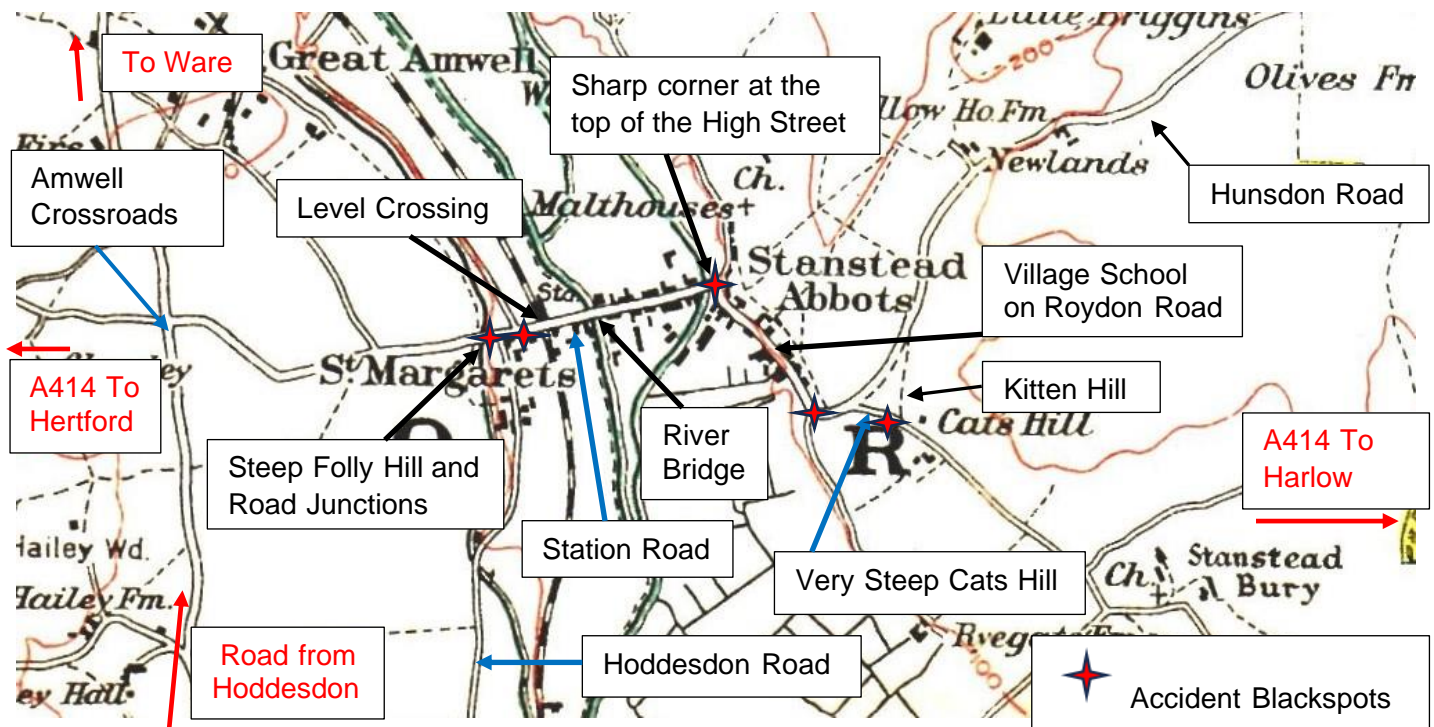
The main road through Stanstead Abbots had been an important east to west road for many centuries, carrying traffic from Essex into Hertfordshire and beyond. For Stanstead Abbots and many similar settlements, the growth of motorised vehicles on the roads after WWII created traffic congestion, noise, exhaust pollution and posed a danger for pedestrians in what had once been quiet village High Streets. By the early 1970s it was estimated that 17,000 vehicles passed daily along the main road through Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets. The majority of this traffic being on long distance journeys, with a considerable proportion being large vans and lorries, including larger articulated lorries which found the sharp corner at the top of the High Street something of a challenge. All vehicles driven through the village encountered a steep hill, a sharp corner, a humped river bridge, various road junctions not to mention the delays caused by the railway level crossing. For villagers using the High Street the environment had increasingly become noisy and attempting to cross the road amid the continuous flow of traffic a decidedly daunting experience. For those living on the High Street and Station Road there were considerable vibrations felt in the homes and shops when heavy traffic passed by. This was made worse due to the underlying peat layer that is present not far below the road surface along much of the road as it crosses the valley floor. By 1975 matters had become unbearable and inhabitants of the village began to demand that the question of a bypass required serious consideration by the authorities.



*This view looking westward was taken during April 1981 from the fields up the slope above the houses in Chapelfields. It shows the level of traffic in the High Street on a normal weekday. The picture was taken shortly after the railway crossing had been reopened to road traffic. The traffic queue had built up over just five minutes of the crossing being closed to reach half way back along Roydon Road. The additional difficulties caused by parked delivery lorries and vans in the High Street can be seen in this view. It would be another six years before the bypass would open diverting the bulk of traffic away from the High Street and Station Road on the other side of the river.*

## SUMMARY OF TRAFFIC ISSUES BEFORE THE BYPASS

By 1975 the problems caused by heavy traffic passing through Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets had reached intolerable levels. The map below gives an overview of the problems for the large number of vehicles which presented a challenge when driving through the two villages on the A414.



As traffic increased through the village during the 1960s and 70s the number of accidents increased as did the difficulty of crossing the road and very noticeably the noise of the traffic during the day became a constant irritation for many locals. Particular accident blackspots were on the steep curved slope of Cat's Hill where lorries in particular seemed vulnerable to leaving the road or indeed on occasions spreading their loads over the road as a consequence of collisions. A particular problem for longer articulated lorries travelling westward was the corner between the High Street and Roydon Road outside the Red Lion. On far too many occasions damage was inflicted on the adjacent old listed buildings, particularly the Red Lion and the small building next door housing Springham's family shop. At the other end of the village in St Margarets the steep Folly Hill posed a problem for eastbound traffic with many collisions taking place at the junction with the Hoddesdon Road. To a lesser extent the junction with Amwell Lane a little closer to the level crossing also saw some less serious collisions occurring. One of the main issues which affected both villagers and road users was the level crossing gates at the railway station. When the crossing was closed to road traffic the volume of traffic on the main road through the village had reached such proportions that long tail backs occurred. This sometimes gave rise to queues of waiting traffic stretching back as far as the crossroads / roundabout at Amwell and well beyond the top of Cat's Hill at the other end of the village.

It is not surprising that repeated requests began to be made for a bypass to be built to take the bulk of the traffic away from the centre of the village. These requests were made even more urgently when local people were hurt and folk became frightened by the volume of traffic particularly when shopping in the High Street. Another real concern increasingly raised was the safety of pedestrians walking along the sometimes-narrow pavements in Roydon road, with traffic moving past constantly just a foot or so away. These fears were heightened when a serious incident involving a child was attributed to the dangers of the large volumes of traffic in the village. The provision of pedestrian crossings both in the High Street and Roydon Road did little to alleviate local concerns. It was very clear that things were destined to continue to grow progressively worse and villagers began to take matters into their own hands. This saw peaceful but determined efforts to make their concerns heard by holding up the traffic at the busiest times. This included crossing and recrossing the road at the pedestrian crossings, thus keeping within the law but perhaps flexing it a little. In time pressure grew on the local authorities to take action to build a bypass.



As the impact on everyday life caused by an ever-growing number of vehicles passing through the village increased the need for action grew. One resident did in fact manage to have his council tax reduced due to having to keep his windows closed to prevent noise and fumes entering his home. But for everybody it became increasingly dangerous to cross the road when shopping in the High Street despite the provision of a pedestrian crossings. For those living close to the road there were increased levels of vibration in the very fabric of their buildings. This effect was exaggerated by the layer of peat not that far below surface along much of the High Street which allowed the ground to shake more freely as the traffic pounded the road surface. Residents of South Street had long complained about such vibrations when Mr Hankins lorries passed up and down from his garage at the end far end of this residential road, now this problem was affecting many more. Despite raising many complaints with the local authorities, the effect the traffic was having on people's lives became increasingly problematic. It seems things came to a head in 1975 by which time villagers were prepared to take a strong stand for a bypass to be built and even resorted to direct action to draw attention to their plight.

In the back of villager's minds was the fact that the local authorities had in the 60s a different and worrying solution to the heavy traffic coping with the narrow slow route through Stanstead and St Margarets. The solution then had been to widen the road through the village with the consequent destruction of many familiar and locally treasured buildings. They were aware of the damage done by the building of the Hertford inner relief road and the one being proposed for Ware. In the village the New River bridge at Folly Hill had been widened and two rows of houses in the High Street had been demolished and rebuilt set well back from the road. The proposed plan for widening the road had envisaged the knocking down of all buildings close to the road on the north side of the High Street. This was not an idea that was felt acceptable at all to those who lived locally. It is therefore not surprising that the push for a bypass to take traffic right away from the centre of the village was the key objective of the campaign to rid the village of the heavy through traffic.



*The above 1969 picture, taken at Catts Hill by John Weeks, the village policeman at the time, shows the aftermath of a collision between two lorries. He relates that Cats Hill was a common location for accidents often caused by cars overtaking slow moving lorries when climbing the hill. In this case the two lorry collision saw the tanker end up close to the edge of the steep drop down to the Hunsdon Road.*

By 1975 traffic surveys showed that about 17,000 traffic movements a day passed along the High Street. Much of the long-distance vehicles were heavy lorries and large vans with a number of extra-long articulated lorries that found the corner outside the Red Lion particularly difficult to negotiate. Two fatal accidents involving local children had occurred which was attributed to the consequences of so much heavy traffic passing through the village. It was in 1975 that the villages started to take direct action by holding up the traffic by continuously crossing the road at the pedestrian crossings.



[Picture by Brian Johnson]

*This 1975 picture taken in Roydon Road shows villagers holding up the traffic by repetitive use of the pedestrian crossing. The police attended mainly to keep the peace and from time to time negotiate a suspension of the demonstration to allow the long queues of traffic to pass through. The banners being carried had punchy messages like “We want a bypass not a death-trap” and “I am too young to die” Some of the banners being carried by children to make the message more poignant. Some three hundred villagers were said to have taken part in these demonstrations.*

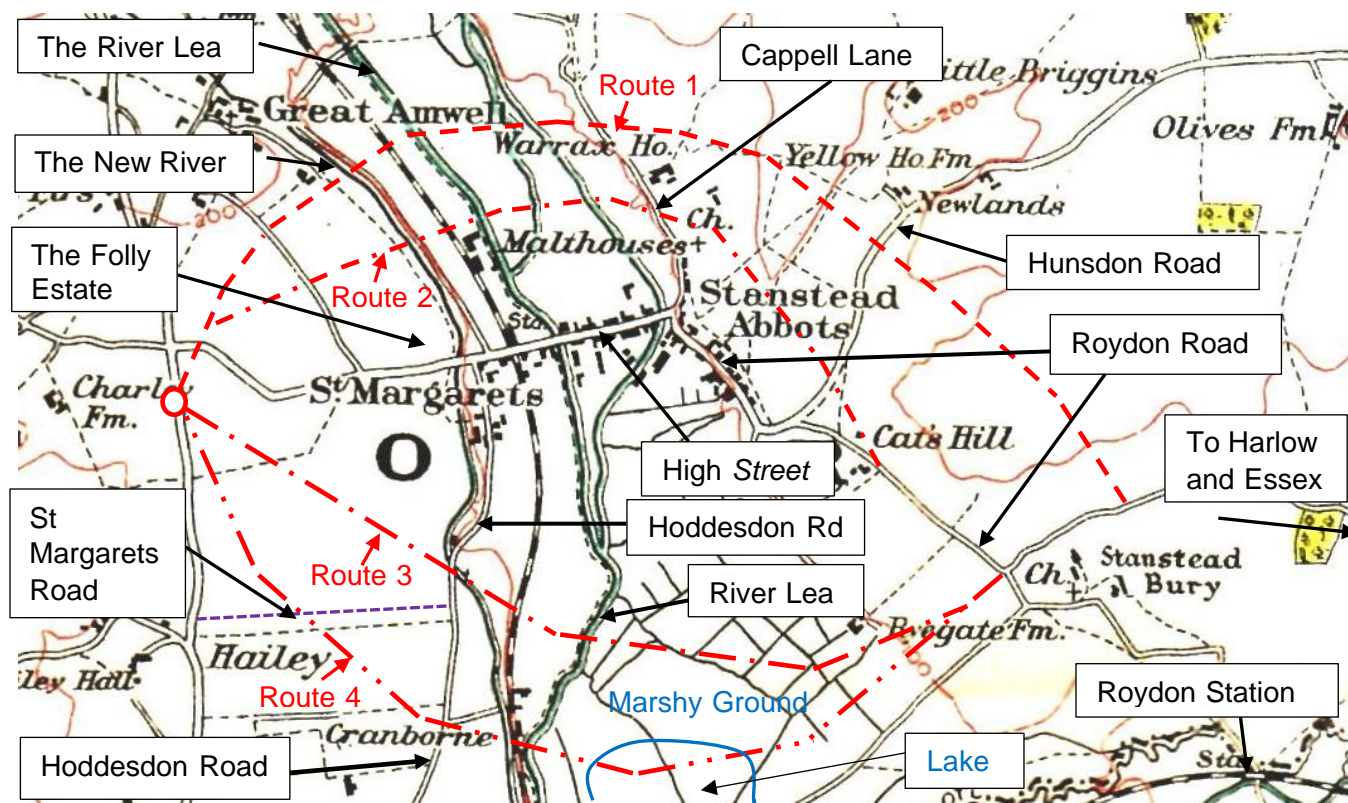
A lot of work was done in more conventional ways in the 1970s to draw attention to the fact that a bypass was desperately needed. Notable in these efforts locally was Nigel Copping who acted, often through the Ashlea Society to push the local authorities to look at the possibilities of a bypass. In 1975 the local MP Sir Derek Walker Smith raised questions in the House of Commons to enhance the profile of the campaign for a bypass. Many others were involved in pushing through this project over the following years. The next three years must have been particularly testing for those involved as very little real progress was made beyond written responses from the local authorities.

As if to underline the problems 1978 saw a lorry do considerable damage to the Pied Bull Inn and the ancient shop opposite owned by the Springham family. An articulated lorry travelling westwards through the village carrying a 30-foot-long container failed to negotiate the sharp bend outside the Red Lion Inn. The front right corner of the container damaged Springham's shop and the rear left-hand side gouged the Brick work of the Pied Bull on the other side of the road. The lorry ended up spreadeagles across the road almost blocking the road. It was 45 minutes before a sufficiently large rescue truck arrived to clear away the lorry and fully open the road. It was reported at the time that the safety barriers at the corner had already been broken and suffered damage on a weekly basis. Shortly after this accident Hertford County Council announced that the Department of Transport had agreed to plan for the funding of a feasibility study to investigate the bypass options for Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets .

The feasibility study which began in 1978 included looking at the viable options for the route of a bypass and consider the engineering and environmental issues. Of particular concern was that any route would have to cross the valley floor with its extensive underlying peat deposits which posed a considerable engineering challenge. This was because any embankment or viaduct construction on the valley floor would be expensive, due to the lack of firm foundations. There was also a need to ensure that the village was not affected by the noise of fast-moving traffic on a bypass positioned close to the existing residential areas. Of course, as with all such projects the overall costs had to be within acceptable limits. This was in many respects a tall order for this particular bypass and required some innovative techniques to be used to achieve these sometimes-conflicting requirements. As part of this process public participation in the debate on the possible options took place. This included a series of public consultation meetings and an exhibition. This exhibition was held in the Village Hall in Roydon Road, Stanstead Abbots over several days and asked the public to respond on four proposed routes .



## PROPOSED BYPASS ROUTES



*The above map shows in general terms the routes put forward by the County Council as possible alternative routes for the long-requested Stanstead Abbots bypass. All the proposed routes began in the west at the roundabout at Amwell, that had replaced the Amwell crossroads in autumn 1974.*

### A BRIEF SUMMARY OF EACH ROUTE

*The descriptions of the routes below start at the Great Amwell roundabout.*

**Route 1.** The most northerly route crossed the fields and passed just to the south of the current Amwell School site in a shallow cutting. It then would have emerged onto a sizeable viaduct over the fairly wet valley floor of the River Lea. A long and in places quite deep cutting through the fields to the north east of the village, took it south eastwards crossing the Hunsdon Road by an overbridge. It then continued south eastwards before forming a junction with the existing route east of Stanstead Bury.

**Route 2.** This route crossed the fields close to the northern boundary of the Folly Residential Estate. It emerged from a shallow cutting onto a viaduct to cross the valley of the Lea and Cappell Lane before entering a cutting through the fields in a south easterly direction. This took the proposed route 2 closer to the village than route 1 and joined the existing road not far beyond the top of Cat's Hill. This was the shorter of the northern routes suggested and offered some financial savings due to its shorter length.

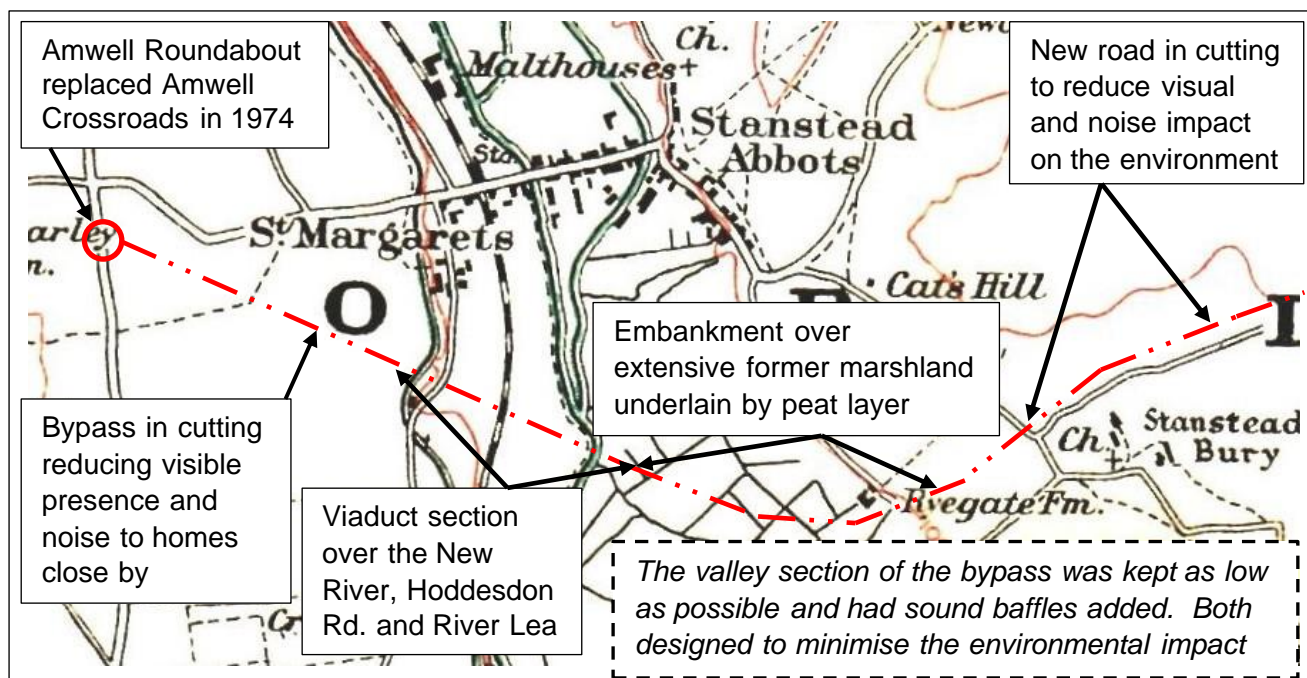
**Route 3** The southerly route which passed closest to the village of St Margarets. It ran south westwards from Amwell roundabout in a wide cutting and then onto a viaduct as it passed over the New River, Hoddesdon Road and the River Lea. It continued on an embankment over the considerably wider flood plain of the Lea Valley south of the village. The valley floor here was quite marshy and criss-crossed by drainage channels. This route connected into the road to Harlow and the County of Essex close to Stanstead Bury.

**Route 4** This was the most southerly of the routes and would have required the demolition of a considerable number of homes in and around St Margarets Road and Hoddesdon Road. It also traversed a longer route across the marshy valley floor and an existing lake. Due to these factors, it had the potential to be less favoured and more expensive than option 3. It joined the line of route 3 before joining up with the existing road heading eastward towards Harlow.

As with any public consultation the local authorities needed to provide adequate information to the public to encourage a wider understanding of the issues involved. The routes offered were all viable options and gave the opportunity for the pros and cons of each to be understood and enrich the engagement of the public. This ensured a more informed response from the public and a greater level of consensus. In this case the consultation took place against a background of a desperate need for a bypass to remove the blight of traffic on the local residents in Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets. Within the options offered in the consultation one of the routes provided an overall better solution to the issues involved than the other three. The consultation allowed the public to have the necessary discussions that would lead to an understanding of the final choice of route for the bypass. Of course, any solution would inevitably lead to those who benefited more than others from the bypass when built.

The public consultation raised many significant concerns. Not surprisingly those who lived at Amwell and the Folly Estate were less than keen on the northerly routes. Equally those who lived on St Margarets Road and Hoddesdon Road to the south of the village were not very welcoming of either of the southern routes. Stanstead Abbots residents particularly were unhappy with the northern routes both of which required long and wide cuttings through the farmland to the north west and north of the village. It was felt that this would cut off the residents from the surrounding attractive countryside, like a moat around a castle. Permeating all the concerns were worries about the visual intrusion and noise generated by a bypass intruding on villager's everyday lives. It was considered that route 3 offered the best balance to meet the public concerns raised during the consultation. It was understood that all the routes posed similar and considerable engineering challenges which were difficult to accurately cost in advance. However, route 3 did have the benefit of lower costs due to the shorter route and inflicted less environmental damage, compared to the other proposed routes.

### THE CHOSEN BYPASS ROUTE



As part of the final plan for the bypass the junction at the eastern end with the Roydon Road near Stanstead Bury had limited access. The junction as built only had slip roads to allow westbound bypass traffic to access Roydon Road and traffic from Roydon Road could only join the main road eastbound. This was decided upon as locals hoped that this would help reduce traffic on the steep Cats Hill section of the route through the village which had historically been a notably worrying accident blackspot. It has been suggested more recently that as the population of the two villages increases it may be wise to add in the two missing slip roads at this junction. Villagers were informed that once the bypass was opened it was likely funding could be found so that the road through the village could be remodelled to suit a much lower traffic level. During the consultation the public were informed that it was expected that bypass construction would begin in 1983 with completion in 1987.



Construction of the bypass had commenced by 1984 with some preliminary work carried out the previous year. A major engineering issue was related to the lack of firm foundations for the embankment and viaduct lengths which were needed to cross the valley floor. The problem was made worse by detailed surveys revealing extensive peat deposits not that far beneath the surface. These were *saturated* with water and varied in depth between 1.5m [5 feet] to 3.5m [11 feet 6 inches] thick. The peat layer was formed by the marshes that had existed for thousands of years on the valley floor. The area of the marshes being gradually reduced by the digging of drainage channels in the C16th to C19th. The large increase in the extraction of water from underground, using steam powered pumps in the C19th had lowered water levels sufficiently for much of the marsh land to dry out, at least in the top surface layers.

In order to overcome the peat problem a University Professor was consulted who came up with a rather innovative and money saving solution. It involved consolidating the peat by squeezing out the water from the peat where it needed to be load bearing. The use of vertical drains cut down into the peat during this process attracted considerable interest in civil engineering circles. This method was used on the viaduct sections where the weight of the viaduct was concentrated beneath the slender supporting legs. This new technique proved to be very successful and led to learned articles being written for the benefit of later engineers to understand the rationale and reasons for the success of the technique. To explore the issue of subsidence for the embankment sections on the valley floor, the embankment was built early on in the construction sequence and allowed to settle for 18 months.

*It is interesting to note that the issue of the peat layers arose again when the High Street was remodelled some five years after the bypass opened. The High Street by then free of the burden of the previous high level of traffic was treated to a facelift which also involved measures to slow the mostly local traffic passing through the village. One of the suggestions was the introduction of speed humps as a physical obstacle to higher speeds particularly in the High Street. However, the County Council explained that this was not possible in the High Street as there was an underlying peat layer some 1.2 m [4 feet] below much of the road surface. Such humps would result in vibrations caused by vehicles going over them being transmitted through the saturated peat and surface ground layer above it into the buildings either side of the road to an unacceptable degree.*



Picture by Charlie Lovick

*The view above shows the embankment in its raw state once first formed. It was allowed to settle for some 18 months before it was then prepared for the completion of the final levels in preparation for the road surface.*



The concrete viaduct sections were erected by Sheperd Hill Ltd. . The engineering difficulties presented by the flood plain required a very innovative technical process of assembly which required very precise methods to be used. The concrete viaduct sections were all cast on site with the reinforcing rods being tensioned during the assembly. The viaduct required the casting of 260 pre cast concrete components which were sealed together with a special type of epoxy resin and using a unique process especially created for this project. Some of this work, of necessity, took place during the colder months of the year and gas burners were used to prevent cracking of the new concrete in the freezing conditions. The speed of the work, weather permitting, was at the rate of one viaduct box per week with each span being of a double box design.



This view shows the underside of the viaduct section built over the flood plain close to the river Lea. It shows how the concrete sections fit together to form the deck of the viaduct. The creation of firm foundations for the round supporting columns was one of the key engineering challenges within this bypass project.

*This photograph shows the bypass viaduct as it carries the road over the channel of the Lea Navigation. It was taken looking upstream towards the villages of St Margarets and Stanstead Abbotts. It was part of the requirements that adequate clearance for boats travelling along the navigation was provided.*



By 1987 the planned year for the completion of the bypass, work was taking place on the last sections of the major infrastructure. A report published on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1987 described how the final length of the viaduct was under construction. This last section today takes the road over the New River and the Hoddesdon Road in the parish of St. Margarets. It was observed that the top surface of the road was already in place on some sections of the bypass. The report remarked how the landscaping designed into the scheme could already be seen to hide the road and the vehicles that would be using it from local residents. It also mentioned that the planting of 15,000 trees and shrubs along the embankments and at other strategic places would provide a barrier to both hide the traffic from view and considerably reduce the traffic noise being heard by local residents. In addition, the embankments were to be planted with a variety of suitable grasses as well as plentiful seeding with wild flowers. The report also mentioned that the use of the unique method of dealing with the problems posed by the layers of peat underlying the valley floor had saved a considerable amount of money over pre-existing methods. At the time of the report, it was hoped that the bypass would be completed and ready for public use by early October 1987.



By the end of August much of the major work on the bypass was complete but many of the relatively minor works yet to be done. This was the state of play when the villagers were able to enjoy a day holding a bypass celebration in the form of a "FUN Day" on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1987. This started at 10.30am and an estimated 10,000 people ventured onto the unopened bypass for a once in a lifetime never to be repeated event. A series of activities and displays took place including a fancy-dress competition, whacky bed race, flour fight, various other attractions and a 10km fun run with about 200 runners. Away from the bypass the Queens Head pub in Roydon Road held a beach style party with attendees suitably dressed as part of the celebrations. These activities as well as providing a good deal of enjoyment for those who attended also gathered in money to donate to charities. The Rev. John Moore held a religious service which included an organ; well at least for a while until it malfunctioned. He conducted the service rather unusually in the middle of the road standing on a bale of straw. Souvenirs of the day available to purchase included mugs, T shirts, glasses and a brochure with details of the bypass and the event. Many of these items sold out within the first couple of hours and are probably rare items these days. The day concluded with a vintage vehicle parade which included in the 70 participating vehicles some interesting cars from the interwar period as well as a rather impressive vintage fire engine. It is difficult today when driving quickly along the bypass to imagine this one-off event, with large numbers of people standing all over the highway.



*A couple of the cars in the vintage vehicle parade included the 1934 Morgan three wheeled sports car and the 'Woody' shooting brake and trailer. Various pieces of contractor's plant were conveniently parked out of the way in among the festivities awaiting their use in the next month or so.*

The opening of the bypass for the celebrations allowed for just the day for good views of the village from the height of the bypass above the valley. One such example is the view below which shows the millstream rejoining the river Lea downstream from Stanstead Abbots. In the middle distance can be seen the large grey industrial building that belongs to the boatyard and their boats are seen moored along the river bank and scattered over the grass between the river Lea and the millstream.



The £15 million bypass that took three and a half years to build was opened to normal traffic on October 7<sup>th</sup> 1987. The full length of the new dual carriageway was 1.8 miles [3kms] long and required a 14-span viaduct and a very long 20 foot [6 metre] high embankment to cross the valley. Post opening surveys showed that the bypass was diverting on average 15,000 vehicles a day away from the village. Meanwhile in the village the noise and pollution from the many vehicles that had passed through was now a thing of the past and for a time was difficult to get used to, with memories invoked of how bad it had actually become in the years before the bypass opened.



Picture by Brian Johnson

*The bypass as seen from the overbridge near to Stanstead Bury at the eastern end of the new road.*

As with all such projects there are winners and losers and one such casualty of the bypass opening was the station garage in Stanstead Abbots.



*This view of the Station Garage was taken in 1975 from the railway footbridge adjacent to the level crossing. The owner was of the opinion that 80% of his forecourt sales came from the through traffic and thus the opening of the bypass would take away much of his trade. This was compounded by the fact that a BP garage at the junction of Hoddesdon Road and Station Road shared in the trade from the through traffic. The station garage owner therefore, decided that he would be unable to compete with the BP garage for the local customers business once the bypass opened. The Station Garage closed for business as the bypass opened, a casualty of a bypass much needed by the local villagers.*



In the year following the opening of the bypass the road to Harlow, to the east of Stanstead Bury, was also widened into a dual carriageway thus further improving the flow of traffic on the A414. This additional work as well as the bypass significantly reducing travelling times between Harlow and the A10, an important north to south route that the A414 meets at Great Amwell.

Once the bypass had opened the village soon settled down to a quieter and more pleasant existence without the heavy flow of traffic and thoughts turned to improving the route through the village. It was five years later that work commenced to redesign the village environment particularly in the High Street. This involved speed restriction features and a decorative road surface which significantly changed the appearance of the High Street. In addition, new street furniture and safety bollards were incorporated into the design. A big community effort was also made to ensure that annual floral displays in baskets and flowers beds could be created maintained into the future.



*The left-hand view show the refurbished High Street as seen from the river bridge over the river Lea. The other view shows the treatment given to the sharp and difficult corner at the other end of the High Street. This corner was one of the major accident blackspots in the village before the bypass opened.*

During the process of improving the High Street many shop owners became concerned that the disruption to their trade was a very serious financial issue for them. Not really surprising as the disruption to their trade lasted for a full six months. The improvement scheme for the High Street was to cost £340,000 plus and was completed by mid-1992. It was decided that a celebration day should take place on Sunday August 9<sup>th</sup> 1992 to mark the new improved village environment. The local Vicar started off proceedings in the morning with a short service in the High Street before the gathered group moved off to the new bus shelter by the station. A brief speech was given by the local MP Marion Roe. A notable person among the assembled villagers was Kathleen Tew who was at 98 years of age the oldest resident in Stanstead Abbots. Celebrations continued in the afternoon with a procession of floats moving along the High Street led by three shire horses. Competition prizes being awarded for the best float and the best High Street window display. For the children there was a best fancy dress competition and a best decorated pedal bike competition with of course prizes for the winners. Various stalls were set up in the High Street selling items of interest for those enjoying the afternoon. Meanwhile refreshments were provided around the corner in Roydon Road at the village hall. The highlight of the day for some was an evening guest appearance at the Lord Louis pub [The Oak] by the Kinks a 1960s well known group who just happened to be the friends of the landlord of the pub. Once again money was gathered during the day from the various activities in support of various charities.

It is now over 37 years since the bypass opened and it is quite difficult to remember just how bad the High Street had become with the heavy flows of traffic passing through every day. The traffic on the bypass has continued to increase over the years and indeed through the village. However, the present flow of traffic through the High Street remains much lower than was seen in the years before the bypass opened. The refurbishment of the High Street has weathered well and provides a distinctive look which complements well the many older buildings which line the once long-distance main road through St Margarets and Stanstead Abbots.

Stuart Moye January 2025