

At 4.30pm on June 29, 1976, Mrs Angela Bartlett led her Shetland pony Dandy down the steep hill, past the church and into the village high street of Bridge in Kent. It was a symbolic gesture – two hours previously it would have been suicidal. To understand why, one only had to read the hand-written placard tied to the pony's tail: 'Farewell TIRs' it said.

But then it was a day for symbolic gestures for the 1500 residents of Bridge. After 14 years of campaigning they had finally got rid of the big

trucks which had brought death, destruction and disruption in increasing doses over the past 20 years. Now Bridge has its by-pass to take the main A2 – London to Dover – international long-haul traffic away from the houses, shops and the narrow High Street. It had never been designed to cope with the strain of carrying a heavy TIR, let alone the two-a-minute average, day and night, which increasing trade with Europe had brought.

For Angela Bartlett the by-pass meant that the village was now safe for her seven-year-old daughter to ride through, just as she had done at

the same age. For 65-year-old Harry Hawkins it meant that the village would once again bear some resemblance to the sepia postcard in his photo album showing his news-agent's shop and just one 1920s car in an otherwise deserted main street.

For Mrs Freshman it meant that she could once again trundle her splendidly vintage electric bathchair down Bridge Hill to visit some friends. "Even after the war I used to come down in a pony and cart but it's years since I've been down to Bridge on my own – this thing would have been squashed in no time."


It was the death of a 66-year-old

local pensioner, George Smith, in January 1962 that started the Bridge By-Pass Campaign. Smith, a patient from the local geriatric hospital, had walked to the village to buy sweets and cigarettes for the bedridden old folk. Just as he stepped out of Hawkins's shop he was knocked down by a van and killed. Such things happen. But it highlighted the increasing traffic danger for all residents who were not so nimble on their pins.

Geographically Bridge was an inevitable disaster area. When the Romans constructed Watling Street as the principal link between London and their main supply port of Dover they laid it out in a straight line

Three miles south of Canterbury the road drops down into a valley to cross the Nail Bourne before climbing again to Barham Downs. The bridge at the river crossing gave name to the small community which over the years straddled the trackway through the valley bed, one of those comforting blends of mediæval, Georgian and Victorian houses and cottages which managed to avoid being overtaken by bungalow-mania. Bridge prospered: before the last war 34 small businesses thrived there. Of all the surrounding villages, Bridge was easy to get to and avoided the extra trek into Canterbury.

There isn't a main road in the country that hasn't seen an increase in traffic flow over the past 20 years. Bridge's problem wasn't so much the volume of traffic but the weight. Increased trade with the Common Market and new ferry and harbour facilities in the Kent ports had brought a sharp increase in heavy lorries to the A2 route and its towns and villages. During the late Sixties TIR traffic through the Channel ports was growing at the rate of almost 40 per cent. a year until in 1975 282,000 TIRs passed through Dover and Folkestone, 90 per cent. of which were using the A2/M2 link to London.

Bridge's problems were three-fold. Traffic entering the village from either direction had to descend a steep hill with a heavier than normal risk of brake failure or loss of control. Any truck driver who knew the road would also know that he'd have a steep climb out of the village and would want to sustain momentum. Furthermore, right in the centre of the village the road narrowed to a maximum of 17ft. 6in. - 

insufficient for two TIRs to pass without mounting the pavement.

The villagers have always been a little sensitive about their traffic problems. Harry Hawkins remembers complaints about the trotting horses in Edwardian times. Then in the Twenties the villagers had to contend with an eccentric local, Count Zborowski, and his succession of monster 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' cars which frightened their horses. The idea of a by-pass was first mooted in the late Fifties by local councillor Alfred Ross, but it took Smith's death to produce concerted action.

John Purchase's house sat right on the A2, across the road from the Smith accident. He was naturally worried: "At the time I had five young children and it brought home to me the dangers of the traffic to both young and old - we have one of the highest proportions of OAPs in Kent." Purchase wrote letters. He wrote to councillors, county planners, local papers. He wrote as a concerned resident, asking what could be done. Brian Lewis saw one of the letters in the local paper and made contact with Purchase to offer his help. "It was the beginning,"

HOW THE BATTLE WAS WON

1962

January: pensioner George Smith is killed by a van. John Purchase starts letter campaign. Brian Lewis joins forces. 564 sign petition to Minister of Transport.

1963

April: two lorries hit East Kent bus. Villagers erect banner: 'SLOW, PEOPLE LIVE HERE'. They also died there: since 1959 eight people had died, 49 had been injured between Bridge Hill and Town Hill. Demonstrators from local youth club distribute leaflets to motorists.

1964

March: 150 villagers block Easter traffic. June: a carnage carnival includes coffins and an effigy of Transport Minister Marples - fast asleep. Bridge By-pass Campaign enlarges to become A2 Group. Sharp lesson, as Canterbury M.P. Sir Leslie Thomas denounces Group as undemocratic. Committee must be elected. It is.

1965

August: lorry's brakes fail: ten vehicles are shunted, six people injured. Ministry will spend £½m widening A2, but no mention of by-pass. Major accidents miraculously cease. Apathy sets in.

1969

August: 100 people stage first sit-down; four arrested. Another village follows suit. Campaign appears to be marking time, waiting for fresh impetus.

1972

May: meat truck demolishes a Bridge shop. Driver dies. 300 protesters block traffic. New M.P. David Crouch meets Kent planners. Demonstrators lobby Ministry. August: traffic census shows Bridge High Street is 2½ times overloaded. In October, a thousand people block A2 for an hour. Government announces intention to by-pass Bridge.

1973

March: 40 mph limit placed on Bridge's two hills. *Motoring Which* survey pronounces Bridge the winner - for traffic noise. Close by village, juggernaut kills three soldiers. M.P. Crouch forces adjournment debate on A2 chaos. Lewis and Purchase meet Under-Secretary in Commons bar, which works wonders. By year's end, work on scheduled by-pass is underway.

1976

June: by-pass opens. There's dancing in the - empty - streets.

says Lewis, "of a 14-year Tweedledum and Tweedledee act." Certainly it looked an unlikely alliance: Lewis was 18, living where he'd been born, right by the A2, while Purchase was a relative newcomer, a local printer and 37-year-old family man.

Fourteen years is a long time in anyone's life but in protest group terms it's about seven times the going average. "Most groups," says Lewis, "manage only two years before apathy or political or personal dissent creeps in. We've sustained this campaign through sheer grass-roots love of the village. I was born here. My mother still lives on the main road. I love this place - and I was prepared to fight for it."

Neither Purchase nor Lewis now lives on the A2. Purchase, now into his early fifties, leads a quieter existence in nearby Bekesbourne. Lewis, now married and a quantity surveyor, has a new bungalow off the main road at the top of the notorious hill. But, despite the international publicity which the cause has attracted, it's always been strictly a local protest, succeeding without the help of the semi-professional environmental heavies. You can learn a lot, too, in 14 years. "If we knew then what we

into their brick and timber cottage, set next to the church at the bottom of Bridge Hill on a barely perceptible bend. They went there because they loved the cottage with its long garden overspilling with hollyhocks, delphiniums and London Pride. But they reckoned without the trucks. In 11 years the Roses' cottage has been hit 10 times. They've been hit by trucks, cars, caravans – Bill Rose once chased a lorry all the way to Canterbury to retrieve his guttering from its load. Now they have a red and yellow striped signboard to mark the most vulnerable corner of the unprepossessing grey cottage (well, it looks grey, but the last time it was painted it was cream).

Outside the cottage the pavement narrows to 15 inches wide.

Accidents were becoming commonplace in Bridge and, ironically, the more there were, the more the campaign's impetus flagged. "At one time a couple of accident-damaged cars would provoke press comment and pictures," says Lewis. "Gradually the shock value diminished and people just accepted it as one of those things." The six years from 1966 to 1972 would have deterred less dogged campaigners than Lewis, Purchase

left of the bedroom spilling down into the gutted rubble of the shop.

This was the emotive trigger that the A2 Group needed. On the same day villagers received printed leaflets with photographs of the crash. Two days later, 300 Bridge residents sat down to block the A2. In the same month, an emergency meeting was held between the new M.P. David Crouch and the Kent planners. As they met demonstrators protested. Another demo took place at the Ministry of Transport. And yet another in Dover, backed by letters to the transport ministers of all EEC countries warning them of the danger to foreign nationals using the Bridge route.


By now M.P. Crouch was heavily backing the by-pass campaign, though not condoning the civil disobedience. As a result the Transport Ministry sent an envoy down in September to report on the A2. Lewis and Purchase sustained the pressure on Crouch by demonstrating the weight of support for their cause amongst his constituents. Crouch may not have liked their methods – but he couldn't ignore the villagers' message.

In the same month Lewis and Purchase placed advertisements in

and their supporters. After the early rabble-rousing, there was an almost total lack of official action to show for it. A hundred people sat down in the road in 1969 – four were even arrested for the cause. But despite the goading and the posturing, nothing positive resulted.

Lewis admits that even the villagers were prepared to give up on him at this time. "Many people thought we were crying for the moon when they saw nothing was happening." It was this limbo period which the protesters feel they could, with hindsight, have reduced; they were learning about diplomacy and finding their way around the corridors of power in the Kent County Council offices and at Westminster. Most important, they had won their new M.P. round to their demands. But they needed a fresh stimulus to drum up support and enthusiasm. In May 1972 they got it. On the night of May 26 a Swiss-bound meat truck careered through the front of a general store in Bridge High Street, killing the driver. The shop owner's daughter, Angela, was sleeping in the front bedroom over the shop and woke up sandwiched hard between the wrecked truck and the wall, with what was

the local paper calling on support for another demonstration – another sit-down to block the traffic. The demo was peaceful but purposeful. "We told the police we were going to block the road," Lewis says. "We've had very good support from our police, even when we've been breaking the law. Many of them are local lads – and it's they who've had to come and clear up the mess when there was an accident."

To ram their point home, the A2 Group called another sit-down in October 1972. This time over 1000 villagers sat down and blocked the A2 for an hour. Village old timers like Harry Hawkins joined in: "I was fighting for my home, my life, my everything," he says. Five-year-old Nicholas Millyard sat down holding a placard. Nice, middle-class parents, whose protesting voice normally extended no further than a pained bleat about increased school fees, sat down too; Bridge had made its point. "The demos and the sit-downs were necessary," Lewis claims; "they were necessary to apply the pressure. Some of us have criminal records as a result – I was charged with conspiring to incite members of the community, with obstruction and 

deluged with requests for help from residents all over the country angry over similar problems. They aren't interested in becoming a kind of John Tyme double act, popping up at enquiries in all manner of protests. But they are happy to pass on their guidelines for successful protest.

● "First you must have an elected committee – otherwise opponents will say you aren't representative.

● "Then you'll need a printer on the committee for the paperwork, or at least know of one sympathetic to the cause.

● "You'll need some funds – we raised money from door to door and street collections. But play it straight and get permission from the police. We've never added up what we've spent personally, but our individual 'phone bills have been £30-40 a month!

● "You must begin by getting your M.P. on your side – but keep politics out of it. We've made sure that the A2 Group has represented all Parties – it's important that you're speaking as concerned residents or constituents, not following a Party line. Anything you do should put pressure on him to work on your

behalf.

● “Be positive: never take no for an answer – and never let up, otherwise support will fizzle out.”

Lewis and Purchase admit to a sense of unreality now that the 14 years of effort are finished. “When I walked into Bridge the day the traffic was switched away, it was like Alice and the other side of the looking glass,” says Purchase. Lewis just felt completely flat. “I couldn’t believe that we’d actually done it. Even a fortnight later my wife said, ‘You’re still planning that wretched road’. And it was true”



Five months after the by-pass opening, Bridge is a different place. It may not yet resemble that sepia-tinted Twenties’ postcard, but the transformation is tangible. Next to the church the Roses’ cottage shines with new Snowcem. Hawkins’s newsagents has its long promised face-lift. So have the two hairdressers’ shops and a scattering of little cottages closest to the narrow section of the village.

And was it just a diplomatic gesture on somebody’s part that Bridge has just received an award for the best kept large village in Kent? ●