

Stephen Plowden and the making of modern transport planning



Readers may wonder where certain core ideas in transport planning have come from – in many cases their roots are in the work of Stephen Plowden, who died last month aged 85. He played a key role in creating the idea that more and bigger infrastructure was not always the answer to meeting people's travel needs or their aspirations for the places they inhabit. His pioneering work on managing demand and on the pursuit of safe, active and sustainable transport was reflected in a career spanning more than 50 years, well before these phrases were coined.

Stephen started work in market research but by the mid-1960s he was focused on transport planning, including work on the social and individual costs of airport expansion. He became a beacon of common sense, reason and an evidence-based approach in the 1960s and 1970s, when the prevailing orthodoxy was that transport planning should be based upon providing for the ever-growing demand for car travel. He was an inspiration to more than one generation of transport planners and the impact of his ideas can be seen today in the continuing effort to achieve a sustainable transport policy.

In his ground-breaking work, *Towns Against Traffic* (1972) he argued that transport planning should not simply 'predict and provide' using partial modelling techniques, but should attempt to shape the future more strategically to ensure towns are not overcome with traffic. While Colin Buchanan's work *Traffic in Towns* (1963) had clearly defined the problems, Stephen began the process of creating policies to avoid them.

He went on to become executive secretary of the Independent Commission on Transport, which published the ground-breaking *Changing Directions* in 1974, well ahead of its time in laying out the issues and suggesting solutions that are familiar to transport planners today in terms of environmental limits and demand management. It is worth remembering that in the 1970s the next round of cuts to the rail network (including converting some to roads) were being

considered and plans for urban motorway-building were reaching their peak – including three huge US-style orbital 'Ringways' and connecting radial motorways planned for London.

This led Stephen to become a founding member of the London Amenity and Transport Association (LATA), which brought together over 70 local societies in opposition to the Ringway plans. Stephen, together with LATA chairman Michael Thomson, demonstrated the complete technical inadequacy of the London Ringway proposals at a public inquiry under Frank Layfield. Although Layfield recommended "traffic limitation" he supported the innermost London motorway but not others at the huge scale envisaged. This was the opposite of the LATA position, which was that of the three Ringways, the outermost ring was the least objectionable.

However, the inquiry had also crystallised a huge change in public opinion, which found expression at the political level through the London Motorway Action Group, led by Douglas Jay, MP for Battersea North. Transport was the key issue of the 1973 Greater London Council elections that returned Labour, who had promised to scrap the plans, which they then did. This marked a point of change for urban road building, and not just in London: urban motorway plans all over the country were scrapped in the years following the London decision – for example in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Nottingham and Newcastle. Although major road schemes continued to be built, it was no longer credible that they would be the leading component in an urban transport strategy.

LATA had a number of experts on its committee including Michael Thomson, Keith Buchan and Tim Pharoah but also representatives from local groups, and this was a combination that Stephen always enjoyed.

He leaves a considerable legacy of published works, many of which remain relevant today. One of the great qualities of his writing is that it stays clear and accessible, when describing his many innovative ideas or making sense of complex data.

Publications in the arena of sustainable transport followed, including *Taming Traffic* (1979), and *Transport Reform: Changing the Rules* (1985). Stephen also worked closely with architect and town planner Mayer Hillman on a number of studies including *Danger on the Road: the Needless Scourge* (1984), and *Speed Control and Transport Policy* (1996), both of which focused on how to control speed in the interest of safety and freedom from intimidation. Throughout his work he emphasised that trialling cheap and reversible public transport sub-

sidies and other 'soft' approaches should be used as an alternative to irreversible and expensive 'hard' road building.

Stephen drew on his market research background to work on key reports on traffic restraint in 1990/91 including *Traffic Restraint: What drivers think*. For the first time these probed the attitudes of drivers towards both restraint and the real costs and benefits of using a car. This led to *The Independent* headline "City motorists see the car as a cocoon" when drivers talked frankly about why they drove. They also revealed in detail what they disliked about driving. These findings began a more effective analysis of what would really make alternatives attractive, leading to the early projects on travel behaviour change in the mid-1990s. This remains a key element in transport planning today.

His interest in freight, both in terms of its efficient operation and its environmental impact, led to his appointment to panel membership of the Wood Inquiry into Heavy Lorries in London (1981-82).

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Stephen co-wrote the minority report proposing an environmentally designed (hybrid) urban delivery vehicle and HGV charging, illustrating his embrace of technology as part of transport policy. He continued this interest, co-authoring (with Keith Buchan) *A New Framework for Freight Transport* in 1995.

His energy and tenacity in opposing insensitive and unnecessary development, often as an expert witness, helped to stop a road being built across Oxford's Christ Church Meadow in the 1960s (where he worked closely with Colin Buchanan) and the construction of urban motorways in Yorkshire as well as London in the 1970s. Again with LATA, Stephen was a key figure in opposing the planned comprehensive redevelopment of Covent Garden in 1974.

From the 1970s to the 1990s Stephen also worked internationally, including for the European Economic Community, United Nations, the World Bank, World Health Organisation and multiple national governments on road safety, and policy development and implementation in developing nations. Work in Holland in the 1970s helped shape the policy of challenging the dominance of the car, which has been systematically applied since then and made the country an interna-

tional leader in sustainable transport.

Many of Stephen's ideas entered the mainstream during his lifetime. He argued throughout for the promotion of walking and cycling as forms of transport, as well as for the introduction of 20mph limits for some 30 years before their widespread adoption. As early as 1975, Stephen was working on the case for providing small electric pool cars in an English provincial city.

Long into his retirement he continued to apply his tenacity and expertise to campaign for a range of causes, most notably the fight against the HS2 rail link, where he was active both with local campaign groups and working with members of the Houses of Parliament.

His interests ranged far beyond environmentalism. This was perhaps no more apparent than in his pursuit, via the Freedom of Information Act, of Tony Blair's deception of the Cabinet and the British public in the run up to the invasion of Iraq. He persuaded former Labour international development secretary,

Clare Short, to appear at the hearing and give evidence against Tony Blair. He was then invited by politicians in the European Parliament to tell his story, and Hansard subsequently refers to his action as the "Plowden Case".

Stephen was a lover of the English countryside and outdoor pursuits such as walking and wild swimming. He was widely read, especially in the classics, and greatly enjoyed visiting theatres, museums, classical music concerts, cinemas and art galleries, which often prompted a strongly held and well-argued opinion. He took great pleasure in the company of family and the many varied friendships he made throughout his life.

He will be remembered as a kind, generous and gentle man by those who knew him personally, and as a fearsome and tenacious intellect, who used cool and rational argument against unreason and inhumanity by many of those who encountered him throughout his pioneering work.

He is survived by Susan, his wife of 54 years, two sons, four grandchildren and his brother Geoffrey. [TT](#)

We are indebted to Keith Buchan, Tim Pharoah and members of the Plowden family for preparing this article.