

40 years old and grinding to a halt

JUST over 40 years ago, secret plans were being laid to build a new city in the fields of North Bucks. A plan so bold that, upon delivery, it would subsume three towns, several villages and thousands of fertile acres in the valleys of the River Great Ouse and its tributary the Ouzel.

One of the key reasons that this particular site was chosen was transport. The new city would be on the M1. It was also directly on the London to Glasgow rail line. But what really set Milton Keynes apart was that, like Los Angeles, it was built for the car.

It was to have a grid system to take easily the traffic generated by the planned population expansion - up from the 40,000 in 1967 to the 250,000 of today and beyond. The grid would ensure high-speed transit between every point and, to show that its designers were not insensible to the risks posed to cars by pedestrians who might dent those wondrous sleek machines with their fleshy bodies, the planners carefully separated them one from another.

For a time all was well. You could drive anywhere in Milton Keynes in ten minutes, safely and legally.

Yet dark forces were plotting to destroy this urban Eden. They saw that there was big money to be made, not to improve Milton Keynes for its residents, but for the Exchequer and other vested interests; by 'losing' the grid; by building over it and its lush green borders; by closing or blocking road after road, by over-developing the centre; by making parking harder, costlier and more frustrating and by

Theo Chalmers



not extending the grid into the expansion areas.

These people drive cars too but they have nice, secure, reserved car parking spaces, slap bang in the centre. What do they care about maintaining the sheer convenience of living in this fine new city? All they can see are the targets they've been set, to rape Milton Keynes for every penny.

But surely nobody would buy hell if they were used to heaven? So they took note of the nascent anti-car lobby and started making noises about 'pollution', 'greenhouse gasses' and 'forcing' people out of their cars. Not that *they* would ever ride a bus, of course. *Their* jobs were far too important for them to have to rely on

public transport. Nor would they invest in the much-needed tram/monorail system originally planned for the city, however green it was.

That was too good for a city that was busily turning itself into Luton, snatching defeat from the arms of victory.

So they started to unveil their plans, slowly at first - carrot then stick. After all, how could they sell land to build another shopping centre unless they closed Midsummer Boulevard first? And surely no one would complain if they drastically reduced the speed limit on a certain V road because a pedestrian had tragically died there?

Never mind that there was a perfectly good pedestrian overpass. To misquote Orwell; two legs good, four wheels bad.

Having successfully done that, they thought 'Why not turn the V10 into a winding village street with speed humps and a 20mph speed limit?'. Never mind that it's the only north-south grid road between the V8 and the V1, closing it to through traffic will really help to destroy the grid. It seems they're even prepared to force the Parks Trust to give up its land, land that is supposed to be held in trust for future generations.

Then they started on the roundabouts. Why not swap them for traffic lights which stay red whether someone is coming the other way or not? Suddenly your ten-minute transit is taking 20 minutes, 30 minutes or more. And why not slather the city in pay-and-display machines, no-right-turn signs, bus-lanes (with no buses) and ridiculous new speed limits?

Next they slyly revealed another roll-

out strategy; to destroy the underpass at the corner of Avebury and Witan for a pedestrian crossing with traffic lights. They plan it 'to deliver a vibrant city centre that is both pedestrian and vehicle friendly'. Never mind that someone will inevitably die crossing that road: separation of car and pedestrian must end.

Now we hear that they've decided to demolish Secklow Gate and, with it, most of the parking spaces around the shopping centre in order to extend it. So we lose yet another major road. Instead of a convenient car park above the centre, they want to build a new multi-storey car park north of Silbury Boulevard.

The shopping centre becomes the biggest in Europe but you'll have to queue for an hour on what will become a congested ring road to park a city block away and then have to cross a dual carriageway on foot. The new centre will be almost a mile long by a mile wide and if the car park is crowded you will have to park at its far end near H5 Portway. You'll have a round trip of almost three miles to get to John Lewis, M&S and back. Fancy that in your lunch hour?

If you think that you'll park in the free spaces by the market, think again. They're going too, along with the market itself. A market will survive, just, outside the food hall, where, of course, it'll take over all the parking bays there.

This is not just a war on the car. It's a war against the much-promoted lifestyles of the residents of this city. Are we all just going to sit back and take it?

Happy 40th birthday, Milton Keynes. Cheerio.