

Merton Park Ward Residents Association

How it all started

At the MPWRA AGM on 5th July 2011, David Slocombe addressed the Association. His remarks are reprinted here with his kind permission:

The story of the Residents' Association (or pre-history, if you will) started, not in 1990, but with a knock on my door in the autumn of 1986. A Liberal Party worker on my doorstep asked me whether I had heard of a proposal by Merton Council to build a so-called Relief Road across the fields from the Savacentre near Colliers Wood to an underpass beneath the then heavy railway line (now Tramlink) and sweep uphill around a very tight bend into the Kingston Road.

After my caller left, I started to imagine the barrier such a road would present to Merton Park Residents wishing to access Wimbledon Town Centre via Hartfield Road. I thought of the dangers the scheme would present to drivers and pedestrians alike. And then I tried to imagine the colossal environmental impact the road would have on the whole northern end of Merton Park Ward.

It seemed likely that the scheme would actually increase rather than relieve traffic by channelling Sainsbury's shoppers along the Kingston Road. Only much later did we discover that this was the true purpose of the road – part of an agreement reached between Sainsbury's and the Council. The other astounding point was that the road was estimated to cost over £12m (worth more than twice as much in today's money) which was double the cost per mile of a major motorway.

The more I thought about it, the more I resolved to oppose it. During the following ten days, I knocked on some 50 doors in the area to ask owners if they knew of the proposals and, if not, told them what I had heard and asked for their views. Some thought I was scare-mongering but others, like Mike and Bridget Smith in Mostyn Road, were more sympathetic and invited me in to discuss it over a cup of tea.

The majority reaction was one of outrage that such a scheme was being considered and being presented as a relief road (today we would call it spin!). Many were already incensed by the poor representation provided by the then Ward Councillors and other issues, such as the proposed development of the 1,000 year-old Glebe fields bordering St Mary's Churchyard. I encouraged everyone to write strongly worded objections to the Relief Road proposals, before irreversible decisions were made.

Another door I called at was that of Roger and Pam Pattenden. (You may remember Pam was a nurse at the Church Lane Surgery before her family moved.) An initial group of eight – Roger, Dick Halle, Dr Phil Whitehead, Dr

Richard West, Tim Ward, Fred Raynor, Tony Bottrill and I formed the Merton Relief Road Action Committee (MRRAC) with Roger as Chairman.

Over the next three years we raised over £20,000 in donations, compiled endless traffic statistics and arguments, raised petitions and spoke at Council meetings – all to no avail. The Council refused to acknowledge any of our arguments. Of course, the Council had unlimited ratepayers' money to fight us. But later, we sought a judicial review . . . we lost. We appealed . . . we lost.

Then, out of the blue, in October 1989, it seemed as though the gods intervened. A ward bye-election was called in Merton Park. Dr Phil Whitehead came round to my house and said he was encouraging Bridget to stand as an independent councillor as she had already supported the idea when it was proposed by Dr Richard West at an earlier Residents' Meeting. I thought this was a brilliant idea and pledged my full support. I felt that somehow this was a golden opportunity to stop the Relief Road but I didn't quite see how until a little later on.

From scratch, we had barely a month to mount an election campaign (which none of us had done before). But we mustered dozens of supporters who each did little else for the whole month. My job was to erect a lot of highly visible (and sometimes amusing) "bus stop" posters. Somehow Team Bridget managed, against deeply entrenched and well-financed major parties, to reverse a large Conservative majority. It was a defining moment in the long history of Merton Park Ward. The celebrations went on far into the night.

Bridget had bravely taken a leap into the unknown and an apolitical life is never easy. She obviously needed and deserved our support. But how could we best provide it? A group of us got together to discuss this and felt a Residents' Association was the answer. So was born the Merton Park Ward Residents Association, with its awkward acronym of MPWRA. Hubert Child, already well-known and active in the area, agreed to take on the job of Chairman and, as Vice-Chairman, I undertook the task of writing a constitution and getting it agreed. A management committee was formed and monthly meetings were organised.

Seizing the moment, we felt that if one Independent could be elected, why not the full three to represent the Ward. We wanted to give the Association the teeth it needed to get things done on behalf of Merton Park Residents. Consequently, Dese Child and Neville Beddoe stepped forward and offered to stand alongside Bridget as Independent Resident Candidates for the local elections of May 1990.

We, at MRRAC, soon came down to earth with a bump, as six of us were forced to personally guarantee another £20,000 to pay possible award of legal costs against us. However, with another victory, now for three Independents, the Labour majority on the Council honoured their pledge to cancel the Relief Road scheme and so it was ultimately our relief that the "Gang of Six" did not have to

dig deep into their pockets. MRRAC had run its course and achieved its objective in a way that none of us could possibly have foreseen.

That, ladies and gentlemen, was how MRRAC was born, died and transferred its life-force to the new MPWRA – a force that is still in the ascendant all these years later.