

TRAFFIC AND REBUILDING

The London traffic problem is just one of those questions that appeal very strongly to the more prevalent and less charitable types of English mind. It has a practical and constructive air, it deals with impressively enormous amounts of tangible property, it rests with a comforting effect of solidity upon assumptions that are at once doubtful and desirable. It seems free from metaphysical considerations, and it has none of those disconcerting personal applications, those penetrations towards intimate qualities, that makes eugenics, for example, faintly but persistently uncomfortable. It is indeed an ideal problem for a healthy, hopeful, and progressive middle-aged public man. And, as I say, it deals with enormous amounts of tangible property.

Like all really serious and respectable British problems it has to be handled gently to prevent its coming to pieces in the gift. It is safest in charge of the expert, that wonderful last gift of time. He will talk rapidly about congestion, long-felt wants, low efficiency, economy, and get you into his building and rebuilding schemes with the minimum of doubt and head-swimming. He is like a good Hendon pilot. Unspecialised writers have the destructive analytical touch. They pull the wrong levers. So far as one can gather from the specialists on the question, there is very considerable congestion in many of the London

thoroughfares, delays that seem to be avoidable occur in the delivery of goods, multitudes of empty vans cumber the streets, we have hundreds of acres of idle trucks--there are more acres of railway sidings than of public parks in Greater London--and our Overseas cousins find it ticklish work crossing Regent Street and Piccadilly. Regarding life simply as an affair of getting people and things from where they are to where they appear to be wanted, this seems all very muddled and wanton. So far it is quite easy to agree with the expert. And some of the various and entirely incompatible schemes experts are giving us by way of a remedy, appeal very strongly to the imagination. For example, there is the railway clearing house, which, it is suggested, should cover I do not know how many acres of what is now slumland in Shoreditch. The position is particularly convenient for an underground connection with every main line into London. Upon the underground level of this great building every goods train into London will run. Its trucks and vans will be unloaded, the goods passed into lifts, which will take every parcel, large and small, at once to a huge, ingeniously contrived sorting-floor above. There in a manner at once simple, ingenious and effective, they will be sorted and returned, either into delivery vans at the street level or to the trains emptied and now reloading on the train level. Above and below these three floors will be extensive warehouse accommodation. Such a scheme would not only release almost all the vast area of London now under railway yards for parks and housing, but it would give nearly every delivery van an effective load, and probably reduce the number of standing and empty vans or half-empty vans on the streets of London to a quarter or an eighth of the present

number. Mostly these are heavy horse vans, and their disappearance would greatly facilitate the conversion of the road surfaces to the hard and even texture needed for horseless traffic.

But that is a scheme too comprehensive and rational for the ordinary student of the London traffic problem, whose mind runs for the most part on costly and devastating rearrangements of the existing roadways. Moreover, it would probably secure a maximum of effect with a minimum of property manipulation; always an undesirable consideration in practical politics. And it would commit London and England to goods transit by railway for another century. Far more attractive to the expert advisers of our various municipal authorities are such projects as a new Thames bridge scheme, which will (with incalculable results) inject a new stream of traffic into Saint Paul's Churchyard; and the removal of Charing Cross Station to the south side of the river. Then, again, we have the systematic widening of various thoroughfares, the shunting of tramways into traffic streams, and many amusing, expensive, and interesting tunnellings and clearances. Taken together, these huge reconstructions of London are incoherent and conflicting; each is based on its own assumptions and separate "expert" advice, and the resulting new opening plays its part in the general circulation as duct or aspirator, often with the most surprising results. The discussion of the London traffic problem as we practise it in our clubs is essentially the sage turning over and over again of such fragmentary schemes, headshakings over the vacant sites about Aldwych and the Strand, brilliant petty suggestions and--dispersal. Meanwhile the experts

intrigue; one partial plan after another gets itself accepted, this and that ancient landmark perish, builders grow rich, and architects infamous, and some Tower Bridge horror, some vulgarity of the Automobile Club type, some Buckingham Palace atrocity, some Regent Street stupidity, some such cramped and thwarted thing as that new arch which gives upon Charing Cross is added to the confusion. I do not see any reason to suppose that this continuous muddle of partial destruction and partial rebuilding is not to constitute the future history of London.

Let us, however, drop the expert methods and handle this question rather more rudely. Do we want London rebuilt? If we do, is there, after all, any reason why we should rebuild it on its present site? London is where it is for reasons that have long ceased to be valid; it grew there, it has accumulated associations, an immense tradition, that this constant mucking about of builders and architects is destroying almost as effectually as removal to a new site. The old sort of rebuilding was a natural and picturesque process, house by house, and street by street, a thing as pleasing and almost as natural in effect as the spreading and interlacing of trees; as this new building, this clearance of areas, the piercing of avenues, becomes more comprehensive, it becomes less reasonable. If we can do such big things we may surely attempt bigger things, so that whether we want to plan a new capital or preserve the old, it comes at last to the same thing, that it is unreasonable to be constantly pulling down the London we have and putting it up again. Let us drain away our heavy traffic into tunnels, set up that clearing-house

plan, and control the growth at the periphery, which is still so witless and ugly, and, save for the manifest tidying and preserving that is needed, begin to leave the central parts of London, which are extremely interesting even where they are not quite beautiful, in peace.