

The 'Foot Street' revolution

On 17 July 1967 London Street became the first existing shopping street in the UK to be pedestrianised, initiating a revolution in city centre planning

**Norwich
London Street**





London Street in the early 1960s. Pedestrians had to cope with up to 800 vehicle movements an hour crowding the narrow carriageway

London Street just a week after the experimental pedestrianisation scheme began in July 1967. Already an entrepreneurial cafe owner was taking advantage of the opportunity of the newly-quiet street

Photo: Eastern Daily Press



Acknowledgements

This booklet was written by Paul Burall

The front cover reproduces that of *The Creation of a Foot Street* written by Alfred Wood and published in 1969

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Streets for People

On 17 July 1967 London Street became the first existing shopping street in the UK to be pedestrianised, initiating a revolution in city centre planning

Unleashing a revolution

On 17 July 1967 London Street in Norwich became the first existing shopping street in the United Kingdom to be pedestrianised, unleashing a revolution in the priority given to pedestrians over motorists in city centres: within three years, twenty other streets in the United Kingdom had been pedestrianised, and even Perth in Australia had followed the Norwich example.

Pedestrianisation was not new. In 1960, there were already thirty-seven pedestrianised shopping streets elsewhere in the world, mostly in Germany but with two in the United States. And the potential benefits had been recognised in the UK: the International Congress of Modern Architecture held in Hertfordshire in 1951 had



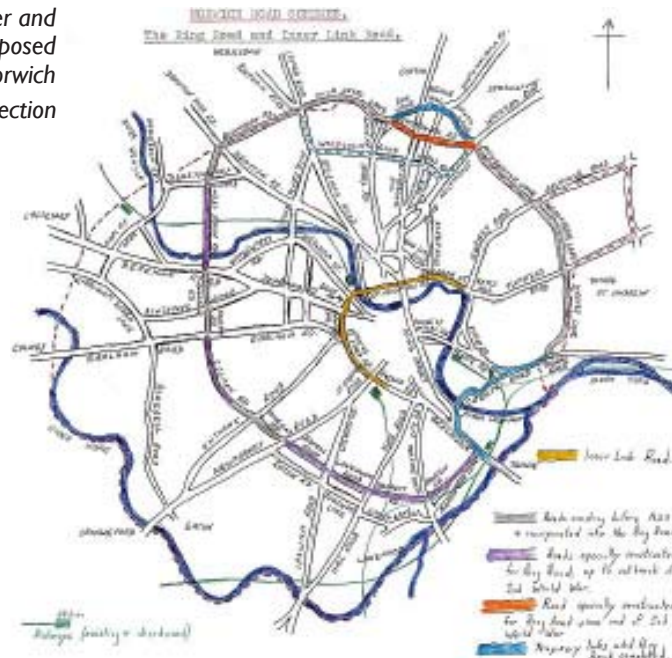
In 1960, there were already 28 pedestrianised shopping streets in Europe and two in the United States – Kalamazoo is shown above. Cologne (top) was visited by a study team from Norwich in 1966

called for a new approach to city centres with vehicles completely excluded from key pedestrian areas. And many UK towns and cities had prepared plans for pedestrianising shopping streets in the early 1960s. But these had all been shelved after meeting opposition from shopkeepers who believed that their trade would suffer if vehicles were not allowed to circulate through shopping streets.

So how did Norwich come to be the first in the country? The story is not one of straightforward civic leadership but a combination of accident, opportunism and the persuasive powers of one man.

The scene for the Norwich scheme can be traced back to the influential *Traffic in Towns* report produced by Sir Colin Buchanan and published by the Ministry of Transport in 1963. This warned of the potential damage caused by the rapid increase in the number of cars, warning that 'It is impossible to spend any time on

An early version of the inner and outer ring road system proposed for Norwich
 Photo: George Plunkett collection



the study of the future of traffic in towns without at once being appalled by the magnitude of the emergency that is coming upon us. We are nourishing at immense cost a monster of great potential destructiveness.'

In researching the report, Buchanan looked in some detail at three very different cities, one of which was Norwich. He worked up a strategy whereby this 'ancient town could retain its historic areas but at the cost of reduced vehicular access'. The City Engineer, Horace Rowley, developed this into a proposal – *The centre of Norwich: a basic plan* – for a ring and loop system to minimise traffic in the City centre, with through traffic using an inner ring road and only buses, cycles and commercial vehicles allowed in the central pedestrian zone. Rowley understood that 'The heart of the city is more than a collection of shops. It is a composite of architecture and the pattern of streets with a character of its own, the axis of Norwich life.'

But Rowley's proposals met considerable opposition, Norwich Corporation Policy Advisory Committee concluding that 'The city is not yet ready to commit itself to such a drastic series of restrictions on traffic flow' and instead recommended banning kerbside parking.

Broken sewer triggers breakthrough

The unlikely trigger for the breakthrough was the sudden collapse of a sewer in London Street in November 1964 which forced a six-week closure of the street to

traffic while emergency repairs were carried out. The shopkeepers feared that this would reduce their trade and cause problems with deliveries but, in March 1965, the *Eastern Daily Press* reported that, 'In the event traders have not suffered and in some cases reported increased trade'. The manager of Jarrolds explained that shopkeepers had come to realise that, as cars could not stop in London Street, they brought very little direct trade. Another retail manager observed that his customers liked 'to be able to walk across London Street with nothing more dangerous than a few holes to think about'.



London Street dressed for the 1935 Silver Jubilee celebrations

Photo: George Plunkett collection

In February 1965, the *Eastern Daily Press* columnist Jonathan Mardle commented that 'The exigencies of sewerage have given Norwich the opportunity to make a grand experiment in closing a main shopping street to all but pedestrians and delivery vans... Shoppers and strollers have been very much happier.'

The following month the newspaper reported that the London Street traders voted 2:1 in favour of closing sections of London Street between 9 and 6 pm.

This opportunity was grasped with enthusiasm by the newly-appointed City Chief Planning Officer, Alfred Wood. Charismatic and visionary, within three years Wood had overseen an experimental closure to traffic of London Street; the implementation of a permanent scheme amended with the lessons learned from the experiment; and, crucially, the development of a strategy to give priority to people over traffic throughout



London Street has been known by other names in the past

the city centre, a strategy that, today, is still the basis for the planning of the public realm in Norwich City centre.

Conflict between pedestrians and other forms of transport were nothing new. The 1783 Norwich Directory recorded that what is now London Street but then known as Cockey Lane and London Lane was 'So narrow that regular frequent interruptions, and sometimes accidents, happen by carriages meeting. Persons on foot must squeeze themselves into a dark alley or burst into a shop to avoid being run over or crushed against the walls; while in wet weather you are drenched by torrents of water from the hooves or plunged into a gutter, knee deep'.

Nearly 200 years later, conditions had hardly improved with almost 800 vehicles using London street during the peak hours. Alfred Wood commented that 'Noise and fumes from vehicles made conditions intolerable for both traders and shoppers and the traffic hazards deterred many people from using the street'.

But Wood understood that the problems were much more serious than the discomfort of pedestrians in one shopping street. Traffic was growing at 7% every year and Wood realised that, 'Even if unlimited money was available to institute a massive programme of roadbuilding, this would not provide a solution. It will merely create an unending spiral of more cars seeking to use the increased road space, and the road system again becomes congested. Historic cities, such as Norwich, are particularly vulnerable, and it would be unthinkable to sacrifice all the established architectural and historic character in order to cater for unlimited motorisation... A more satisfactory approach is to substitute environmental management for conventional traffic management.'

Alfred Wood's analysis was mirrored in 2016 by the Executive Director of Community and Environmental Services at Norfolk County Council, Tom McCabe, when he said that 'We have got to acknowledge that it is a medieval city. The transport systems are near or at capacity and doing nothing is not an option'.

Wood's ambition was to turn London Street – known at the time as the 'Bond Street of Norwich' – into a 'Shoppers Walk' (although he later adopted the term 'Foot Street' as his favourite descriptor). The pedestrianised street could be 'Much more pleasant than it is at present. Pedestrians will be able to go about their business in



Alfred Wood photographed here in 1985 re-visiting London Street in his capacity as the recently-appointed chief architect planner to English Heritage, a job he said was 'It is occupying me innocently in my declining years'

safety and free from the nuisance of vehicle traffic – noise, dust and fumes’.

There was still opposition. The Watch Committee was not convinced, worrying primarily about the possibility of increased traffic on neighbouring streets. The Norwich Society organised a meeting at the end of 1965 to discuss the idea. Alfred Wood summed up his case by saying ‘Norwich has no choice but to accept the idea of traffic-free zone’. But at the same meeting the Chairman of the Town Planning Committee doubted whether ‘The citizens are going to accept the discipline’.

Pedestrianisation experiment

Determined to learn from best practice elsewhere in Europe, Wood persuaded the Corporation to spend £480 on a study tour to four cities in Europe for himself and the chairman and two members of the Traffic & Town Planning Committee. This resulted in a report – *Foot Streets in Four Cities* – being presented to the committee in December 1966 with a recommendation for a three-month experiment to pedestrianise three sections of London Street: Jarrolds to Little London Street; Castle Street to National Provincial Bank; and Opie Street to Bank Plain. The committee approved the trial scheme, which Wood described at the meeting as ‘A great adventure’.

But there were objectors and the scheme was reduced to just two sections, between Swan Lane and Bedford Street and Opie Street and Bank Plain. Strongly backed by many London Street traders and by the Norwich Society, the experimental closure finally took effect for a three-month trial period on 17 July 1967 when the Lord Mayor of Norwich ceremonially tied a white ribbon across the southern end of London Street to signify the closing of the street to traffic and its opening to pedestrians (a film of the ceremony can be found at: <http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/9406>).

The experimental closure cost just £1,839, partly by utilising existing materials. Shrub



The costs of the experimental closure were minimised by utilising existing materials, for example using sewer rings as planters



London Street was known as the ‘Bond Street of Norwich’. The shoe retailer Bowhill & Elliott – an ever-present in the street from 1874 to this day – was obviously one of the highlights



People enjoying the peace and quiet of the traffic-free street during the experimental period (left) and the same scene today (right)



boxes were constructed from kerb sections and sewer rings were utilised as plant containers.

The experiment was an instant success. Within a week, people were eating at tables and chairs that had been set up by cafes outside their street fronts: 'The street took



These meticulously-drawn elevations of every building in London Street were prepared as part of the facelift pedestrianisation. The advisory scheme suggested colour treatments, fascia designs and lettering style

on a continental atmosphere as shoppers and tourists paused for refreshment', commented Alfred Wood.

A survey carried out in August 1967 and reported in the *Eastern Daily Press* showed three times as many people walking down London Street than before pedestrianisation. Interviews showed that more than 90% of people liked the street without traffic, with well over 80% saying they would support permanent closure and almost as many wanting more foot streets in Norwich.

Fears that the traffic that had previously used London Street would create congestion in neighbouring streets proved largely unfounded, the displaced traffic adjusted itself within a few days to alternative routes, mostly without problems. Two streets – Lower Goat Lane and Dover Street – did suffer increased traffic and the shopkeepers demanded that these too be pedestrianised. As a



According to one report, the number of pedestrians in London Street trebled during the experimental period compared with the period before the street was closed to traffic



Southgate Street



Bank Place



North Street



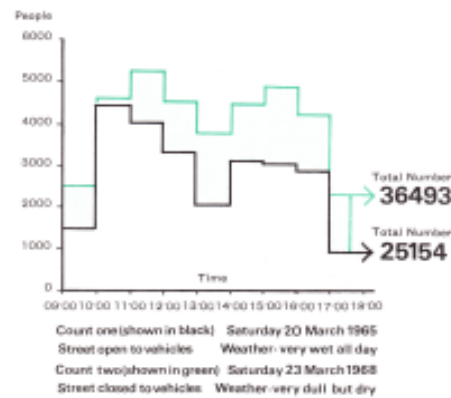
Gentlemen's Walk

on Street were prepared as part of the facelift scheme which Alfred Wood initiated to build on the success of our treatments, fascia designs and lettering styles and was accepted by the London Street Association

result, in June 1968, Lower Goat Lane was fully pedestrianised while Dover Street was pedestrianised on a limited time basis that still allowed a brewery to deliver to a local pub before 9 am.

Alfred Wood later use this experience to point out the advantages of an experimental order: 'Small troubles can easily be remedied before they become statutory objections'. He also claimed that running an experiment had 'The very important psychological advantage of being a democratic approach and also gives some room for manoeuvre whilst a scheme is settling down'.

Pedestrian flows surveys in London Street



Very few motorists objected to the closure. A survey of their Norwich members carried out by the Automobile Association during the experimental closure found that almost three-quarters said that they had not been inconvenienced by the pedestrianisation; only four per cent of comments were completely negative. Forty-one of the AA's members wanted more streets in Norwich pedestrianised.

The response from traders was also positive. Twenty-eight out of the thirty shops who responded to a questionnaire said that their trade and increased by between five and twenty per cent; the other two were national chains who said that the slight loss in their trade was in line with experience at their branches elsewhere. The six shoe retailers in the street all recorded increases of up to 10%, bucking the national trend of a general fall in business for shoe retailing.

Wood commented that the experiment 'Disproves the popular idea of many traders that if vehicles are removed from a shopping street, business will suffer. In fact, the reverse has been found to be the case in London Street'.

Alfred Wood's overall summary was that 'The experiment has proved a great success; the vastly improved environment gives both better shopping and working conditions with the added bonus of improved trade. The shopping public are strongly in favour of the foot street. They are now able to window gaze, pause for a rest or chat in safety. They consider it now a pleasure to shop in a street free from the anxiety of traffic danger.'

Making success permanent

The success of the experiment was rapidly recognised nationally and internationally. In October 1967, Lord Kennet, Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Housing,

took a look at London Street and declared 'The news really wants to get around. There are so many streets like this and it can be the shopkeepers who fear for their trade and who hold things up. But now we have got the proof. Takings and the number of customers have gone up and you can walk down the street without being killed. It is so pleasant.' That same month, the Australian city of Perth decided to emulate the Norwich scheme.



Winsor Bishop has been in London Street since 1834

So it is unsurprising that Norwich Corporation soon took the decision to make the scheme permanent, although the experimental period was extended for another three months to avoid the work on the final scheme being carried out in the pre-Christmas shopping period. When the scheme was finally made permanent in 1968, London Street was repaved without kerbs; new lighting was installed; and many signs removed. The full scheme cost £25,000.

The expected result in increasing the attractiveness of London Street to pedestrians was fully met: a survey carried out on a Saturday in March 1965 counted 25,154 pedestrians; a comparable survey carried out in March 1968 counted 36,493 pedestrians, an increase of 45 per cent.

The transformation of London Street did not stop with pedestrianisation. Wood initiated a facelift scheme for buildings throughout the street, developing an advisory scheme of colour treatments, fascia designs and lettering styles which was accepted by the London Street Association which encouraged its members to conform. The aim was to achieve a three-year cycle of redecoration, with one third of properties being newly painted each year 'With this arrangement, the street would always have an air of freshness and well-being which is an important asset in any business area,' wrote Alfred Wood.

International growth of pedestrianisation schemes			
	1960	1970	1980-1982
West Germany	35	110	300
United Kingdom	0	20	108
France	0	7	266
USA/Canada	2	28	70

Within three years of the London Street scheme being implemented, nineteen other cities in the UK had followed Norwich

The success of the pedestrianisation of London Street attracted a great deal of attention and within three years, the number of pedestrianised streets in the United Kingdom had topped twenty. To help fellow planners, Alfred Wood wrote a detailed account of how the scheme came about and the results achieved which was published in 1969 by the

Norwich Corporation under the title *The Creation of a Foot Street*. A more popular look at the scheme came in the unlikely form of one of the Rank *Look at Life* films made for showing in cinemas in 1968: The 10 minute *City's for Living in* film featured planning developments aimed at taming traffic in historic cities and featured Bath and Norwich; it can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMamOIdcS9A>

The Norwich Central Area Traffic Plan produced by Alfred Wood in 1969 took the thinking behind the London Street initiative into a plan for removing through traffic from the whole of the City centre and greatly extending pedestrianisation. In essence, it is still being implemented today, its most recent manifestations being the pedestrianisation of Westlegate in 2016 and the completion of this scheme in 2017 with the pedestrianisation of All Saints Green.

Unfortunately for the City, Alfred Wood left Norwich in 1972, a move prompted by the passing of the Local Government Act that year which meant that local government reorganisation would lead to many of the City Corporation's powers – including transport planning – would be handed to the County Council in 1974. After moving to Hereford and Worcester for two years, he was appointed as chief planner for the West Midlands Metropolitan County Council.

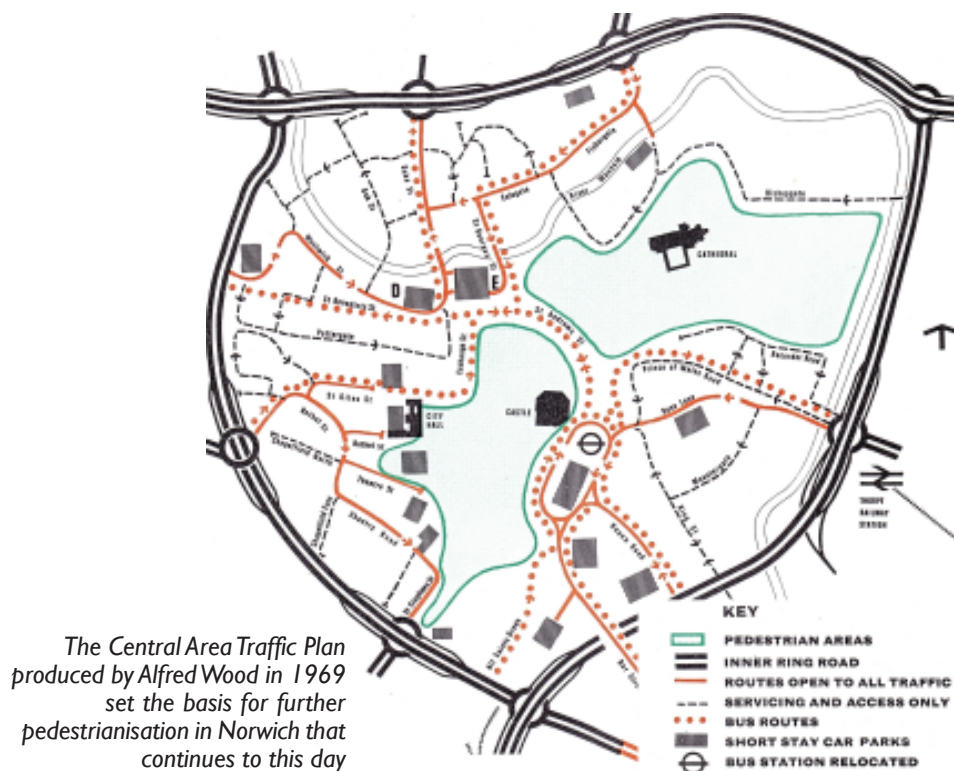


Illustration showing the development of pedestrianisation
in Norwich over the decades since 1967

What next?

Alfred Wood's departure cut short the transformation of the City centre that he had planned, many of which the Norwich Society would now like to see re-examined in the belief that they could bring similar advantages to parts of the city centre where traffic is still far too dominant, inhibiting the enjoyment of residents and visitors and – judging by the evidence from pedestrianisation schemes elsewhere in Norwich, UK and Europe – damaging the economy.

The Society's first target is Elm Hill, one of the UK's most complete medieval streets but which is unwelcoming to visitors as the narrow footpaths make pedestrians feel threatened by the closeness of passing traffic.

Alfred Wood was even more ambitious, stating that he would like to 'do something' about Tombland commenting that a 'High degree of visual amenity is being destroyed by traffic and parking'. Wood certainly did not plan for Tombland or Magdalen Street to be used by buses and might well approve of the Society's current desire to see a study carried out into the potential opportunities and benefits of pedestrianising Magdalen Street where, again, narrow pavements and the proximity of a large number of buses and other traffic discourages shoppers: Magdalen Street today bears a close comparison with London Street before 1967.



More streets in Norwich are being pedestrianised: Westlegate (above) was given over to pedestrians and cyclists in 2016 and All Saints Green in 2017



The Norwich Society has long campaigned for Elm Hill to be pedestrianised. Magdalen Street bears comparison with London Street before 1967 and, again, the Society has proposed a study into the possibility of pedestrianisation



The transformation of one Norwich street

Gentlemen's Walk adjacent to Norwich market place has long been at the core of commercial life in the City. But it has probably never been more pleasant place for local people and visitors as it is today

*The Norwich painter
John Sell Cotman
depicted
Gentlemen's Walk in
1806 with horses
and carriages mixing
uncomfortably with
pedestrians*



*By 1929 the horses and
carriages had been
replaced by trams and
cars and pavements had
been built to protect
pedestrians*

*Today Gentlemen's Walk is
a pleasant and thriving
pedestrian precinct*





Davey Place in 1968

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