

# Widening of Biggin and Cannon Streets

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On April 10 in 1893 Dover ratepayers met to try to halt any moves to widen the town's main street, especially Biggin Street and Cannon Street leading from the Market Square. They opposed a controversial scheme which they realised would result in an increase in the rates that they considered high enough already. On the other side of the argument were those who realised Dover was growing and that the town's main street was far too congested to take the increasing amount of traffic.

Those who wanted the highway widened pointed out that in places the main street was as narrow as 18 feet in places.

The widening of Biggin Street was one of the biggest controversies in Dover in the late 19th century.

One set of councillors wanted to widen Cannon Street and Biggin Street while another group argued for a completely new road cutting through from the Market Square to Folkestone Road.

This second group consisted mainly of property owners in the crowded York Street area who saw compensation profits if they could win the day. They were among the ratepayers who met on April 10 in 1893 to halt Biggin Street widening.

But eventually it was a demand from another public meeting that forced the decision to widen the existing main street where often horse-drawn coaches and carts could not easily pass.

Congestion got so bad that a traffic census was demanded. A count carried out in Cannon Street over six working days at the end of May 1893. This revealed the movement of nearly 9,500 vehicles of various kinds, 446 horses and nearly a thousand bath chairs and cycles.

Action had been taken to widen Cannon Street in 1858 and again in 1893 when a number of interesting features fronting the road were removed. The most important loss was the impressive colonnade along the front of the properties that stretched from St Mary's churchyard towards the Market Square.

At that time the most important property in Cannon Street was the Royal Oak Hotel, almost opposite St Mary's Church and where The Eight Bells public house today enjoys a good trade. At the back of the hotel were the Royal Oak Rooms where many public meetings, banquets and balls were held. The balls were never so well attended than during the Napoleonic Wars when young officers of the garrison, awaiting an invasion, would dance with the more wealthy Dover lasses. It was at the back of this hostelry where, each week, farmers met in the Corn Market to buy and sell their products. In the inn's yard were housed the coaches and vans of the folk who had come in from the country to trade in Dover, then a very busy town.

It was in this environment that a group of townsmen including a group of Freemen came up with the scheme to drive a new road through from the Market Square to Priory Place and Folkestone Road. That was

the direction most of the town centre traffic was heading. It was estimated this new road would cost in the region of £76,000-with much of that money going to the citizens who owned property on the route.

Those with counter plans, who wanted to widen the existing street by demolishing property, came up with an estimate for their scheme of £54,000.

And there the two ideas remained with very little progress while congestion in narrow Cannon and Biggin Streets got worse. But townsfolk were getting fed up with the congestion and a public meeting was convened when it was demanded that action be taken. Dover Corporation listened, opted for the widening scheme and sought Parliamentary approval for the project to widen the main street. Parliament gave approval and the compulsory purchase of property began. A sum of £24,200 was paid for the block from the former Rose Inn, New Street (now Santander bank) to near the Market Square. A further £20,689 was paid for the complete block from St Mary's churchyard to the Market Square.

Solicitors and valuers' fees and the purchase of a little more property brought the complete cost for the scheme to widen Cannon Street to £53,744 but the Corporation was able to claw back more than £20,000 by the resale of the land, reducing the overall cost to just under £33,000.

Although some interesting features in Cannon Street, going back to the time of the Commonwealth, were lost it was claimed at the time very little of antiquarian interest was discovered.

The demolition of properties near the Market Square, where the church of St Peter had once stood (Lloyd's Bank site), revealed

a few skulls and bones. It was assumed these had come from the churchyard of St Peter's.

Following the widening of Cannon Street came the task of building new premises to front the new highway. It was reported at the time that the first property to be built was tobacconist Chidwick to be followed shortly afterwards, on the same side of the road, by the Metropole Hotel (part of which is now The Eight Bells) opposite St Mary's.

The most majestic of the rebuilds was the terrace of shops on the other side of the road, stretching from St Mary's graveyard to near the Market Square.

The Corporation had the wise idea of putting the design of these properties out to architectural competition (in the same way a similar competition decided the design of The Gateway flats many years later). This Cannon Street competition attracted 45 entries from all over the country, spanning a range of styles. The result we see today - but how many bother to look as they rush by!



*The popular Antwerp Hotel, just off the Market Square, where town councillors met for a drink after council meetings. Next door another hotel now an estate agents. It was about here, in the middle of the road, where in WW2 a shell landed killing soldiers, sailors, a member of the WRNS and a civilian.*