



From Holland to 'Mini-Holland' - Lessons for a Better Highgate High Street

What could our commercial centre look like if it were a place that prioritised people, not cars? There are compelling lessons from home and abroad for a better Highgate High Street.

If you were asked to name the best public place in the world to spend a leisurely afternoon, where would top your list? You likely pictured a space for people, where those in it actively choose to linger; a place lined with interesting businesses. Perhaps most importantly, a place with little if any motor traffic; few tend to suggest Amsterdam's Canal Ring or Kraków's main square would be improved by the addition of more cars.

At one time, streets the world over were primarily places for people. In the early 20th century, as the image below shows, you could even stop to chat to the local bobby in the middle of Highgate Hill. Imagine trying to stand and conduct a conversation in the same spot today:



The advent of mass car ownership in the mid 20th century brought tremendous gains in personal freedom to millions. However, in urban commercial centres, cars have proven time and again to be a disruptive, domineering and highly space-inefficient presence, and one which directly worsens the experience of all those not inside a two-tonne metal enclosure of their own.

While this realisation has been slow to permeate the British consciousness, the Dutch began grappling with the issue decades ago. As a result, in the years since the 1970s, their urban centres have undergone steady transformations into spaces that prioritise the needs of people, not those of cars. Below are images from commercial parades in the Netherlands, taken in the 1960s/70s and the same locations in the present day. Which decade's pictures are most reminiscent of Highgate's High Street?



Clearly, many continental European urban spaces have moved on from the car-centric mentality of the mid-20th century. Meanwhile Highgate's road layouts remain frozen in the 1970s, albeit with many times more traffic than existed 50 years ago.

Can similar feats to those achieved in the Netherlands be replicated in London? For an answer, we must again look east, though not as far as the low countries. In 2014, Waltham Forest was one of three boroughs (along with Kingston and Enfield) that were awarded a £30m grant as part of then-Mayor Boris Johnson's 'Mini Hollands' scheme, aimed at implementing Dutch-style sustainable travel initiatives in the capital. While Enfield and Kingston concentrated much of their funds on a handful of infrastructure setpieces, Waltham Forest chose to focus on traffic reduction in the network of Victorian roads known as 'Walthamstow Village'.

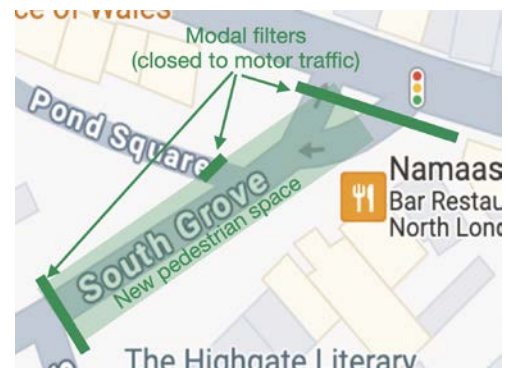
Prior to 'Mini Holland', this area's character and charm was stunted by motorists' habit of 'rat-running' through its streets. Through the implementation of modal filters in the residential streets

and traffic restrictions on the Village's main commercial parade (Orford Road), the character of the area rapidly changed post-implementation, as a glance at images of Orford Road before and after the interventions shows:



Shortly after completion, data showed that the scheme had resulted in a 13% increase in walking, an 18% increase in cycling and no additional time spent in cars (i.e the car journeys that still happened were not any longer in duration). What the figures don't show is the radical improvement in quality of life and economic vibrancy that Walthamstow has undergone, in part due to these efforts. As well as Waltham Forest winning the 2017 'London Borough of the Year' award, Walthamstow was named London's 'Coolest Neighbourhood' by Time Out in 2022 and, in 2023, an analysis by ADT named it the 'Best Place in the UK to raise a family'.

What specific changes might be necessary to replicate some of the successes from Waltham Forest on our own High Street? As a starting point, we now have the repurposed former bus stand at the corner of South Grove, a road which is also closed for a week every June for the Highgate Festival. As a logical next step in the same part of the village centre, a relatively simple increase in pedestrian space could be achieved by permanently closing the junction between South Grove and the High Street. If combined with a reduction in on-street parking, allowing a widening of pavements and



some suitable traffic-calming measures (e.g speed humps, partial brick/cobble surfacing) on the road itself, this 'baby step' could have a significantly positive effect on the noise, traffic and pollution levels on the High Street and encourage more outdoor seating provision from the cafes and restaurants along it.

However, to truly transform Highgate's centre for the better, we should seek to go much further and advocate for the closure of the High Street to private motor traffic along a much longer stretch - perhaps from Southwood Lane to Cholmeley Park. As with Orford Road in Walthamstow, a narrowed, grade-level carriageway could still allow the occasional bus or delivery van to transit as needed, but the shared space would allow for a true people-centred oasis in the heart of Highgate, returning it in a meaningful way to the London 'village' it purports to be.



Rather tantalisingly, an AI-powered tool now allows you to visualise any street in the world with traffic-reduction principles applied. Here are some of its renderings of what a better Highgate High Street could look like, with the cars removed:





Imagine the possibilities for local businesses if our high street became a place people actively sought to spend time (and money) in, where the commanding view over London's skyline became something you could savour from a café table, rather than glimpse briefly through a windscreen. Imagine the quality-of-life improvements on offer to the whole community from being able to make the most of this public space and children and families being able to enjoy unpolluted air and the absence of roaring engines.

Sadly, in discussions such as these, the same tired objections tend to rear their heads:

1. *If customers can't drive to and park near the shops, businesses will suffer.*

On the contrary, making places more conducive to walking and cycling has been shown to increase footfall and trading by up to 40%. A study from 2011 showed that shoppers arriving in London's commercial centres on foot each spent £147 more per month than those arriving by car. Adjusted for inflation, that's around £300 per month today.

2. *If you shut off a road to traffic, it will just lead to more traffic on other roads.*

Again, the reverse is true. Recent, London-specific studies by both King's College and Hackney Borough Council looked into the effect of road closures and LTNs (Low-Traffic Neighbourhoods) and found that this has proven not to be the case. A recent (2022) paper by academics at Imperial and the LSE found that the implementation of three LTNs in Islington resulted not only in a decrease in traffic volumes within the LTN (of 58%), but also a 13% reduction in traffic at the boundaries of each zone - the places often thought to suffer an increase in traffic following such interventions.

3. *All this works fine in the Netherlands because it's flat - north London is hilly . . .*

This argument is sometimes used to suggest walking and cycling are less viable in hilly areas. Leaving aside the modern option to use an ebike to take the sting out of inclines, consider that, in 1949, over 30% of road distance travelled in the UK was by bike - a higher proportion than in the Netherlands today. The topography of our area has not changed since 1949, but the volume of car traffic has. As examples from both Holland and 'Mini-Holland' show, when you make efforts to calm and reduce motor traffic, more people will walk and cycle, irrespective of undulations in the landscape.

4. *What about access for emergency vehicles/buses/deliveries/the disabled?*

While physical barriers (in the form of 'modal filters', which allow pedestrians and cyclists to pass but not motor vehicles) are generally used to restrict residential streets, the modern approach to traffic control on commercial parades is via the so-called 'bus gate' - a simple 'busses/cycles/deliveries/blue-badge-holders-only' sign, sometimes in effect only for a specific period within the day, that is enforced by ANPR cameras. This allows necessary and authorised vehicles to pass unhindered.

Many of you already need little convincing that our High Street has the potential to be vastly improved as a space for people. It will take many discussions, concerted pressure from us residents and no small amount of persistence with both local authorities. But such things have been done before, can be done again and increasingly are being implemented in more and more parts of our city. It's time for Highgate to lead rather than lag; the rewards would repay the efforts many times over, and for decades to come.