

Michael Thomson obituary

The brains behind the fight to stop 'ringway' roads around London

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J Michael Thomson, transport economist, expert on cities, sportsman and church organist, who has died aged 82, was known by his peers as the man who confounded the official case for ringing London with motorways. Thomson's intellectual and intuitive understanding of how cities work, and how traffic flows, made him the brains of a campaign against roads that could have caused huge damage to London.

Thomson, whose father was a businessman, was born in Hull and grew up in Yorkshire and Kent. John, as he was christened, demonstrated at an early age a determination that was to be a hallmark of his life. Climbing to the top of a ladder at the age of four, he refused to come down unless he was called Michael. And so he was. After school at Bedford, followed by the London School of Economics (LSE), he tried his hand at banking with Barclays in Dubai. Deciding he had taken a wrong turn, he headed off in the direction of transport, first at the ministry itself and then at its research wing, the Road Research Laboratory.

There, as secretary of an expert panel on pay-as-you-drive road pricing, he made his first major contribution to transport thinking. The Smeed report of 1964, which Thomson drafted, argued in favour of the development of pricing methods. Transport ministers have since shied away from the idea, but others, from Singapore to central London, drew on an analysis of consummate clarity, set out in sparse and fluent prose.

Thomson's next contribution followed his appointment as research fellow in transport at the LSE in October 1965. Britain was by then increasingly committed to the motor age, and planners at the Greater London council (GLC) had decided to circle the capital, at astronomical cost, with orbital motorways.

Residents across the city soon learned that these huge roads would mean the destruction of 20,000 homes, blight more and, on countless streets, add to traffic, noise and fumes. Opposition began to mount locally, but Thomson and others saw the need to put forward a case that was London-wide. This need was filled by the London Amenity and Transport Association (LATA), a grouping of 60-odd local societies. Thomson was its chairman.

The LATA gave Thomson a broad platform. He argued his case, first in the LATA publication *Motorways in London* (1969) and then at a public inquiry as chief witness for both LATA and the London Motorway Action Group, headed by Douglas Jay, Labour MP for Battersea North.

Thomson's proposition was that "ringways" would not only be destructive, but would also fail to deliver what Londoners wanted. By creating room for more, and longer, car journeys, they would lead not to less congestion, but more. And by encouraging more car travel, they would withdraw passengers and revenue from the buses and tubes. London's transport problem was not only poor roads: it was equally the difficulties faced by pedestrians, cyclists and passengers by bus and rail. In seeing this so clearly, Thomson was far ahead of his time.

The objectors at the inquiry did not win the battle, but the war against the ringways was duly won. Although planning for the roads had gone on under both Labour and Conservative London councils, it fell to the former, following the 1973 election, to cancel them. Lack of funds was a key issue but Thomson's arguments made it easier for the politicians to override their highway engineers.

In the 1970s Thomson moved to Paris and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, where he headed a study of inter-city transport. In 1977, after a world tour, he published *Great Cities and Their Traffic*. In it, he noted that choosing a transport strategy is "a choice of way of life ... a choice that may affect different sections of the population very differently ... (and thus) a highly political question". In a still valued textbook, he made abundantly clear the nature of that choice.

Aged 48, and by then a global transport authority, he worked worldwide as a consultant. A colleague in Bangkok noted: "Michael was an original thinker. Others in the team would arrive with computers and boxfiles. He took out a pen and pad and said, 'what exactly are we trying to do?'" And, whether in Bogota or Taipei, thanks to a mixture of observation, theory and intuition, he always seemed to know.

In 1955 Thomson married Elizabeth Paish, with whom he had three daughters. For 27 years they lived in Kentchurch, Herefordshire, where he learned to play the church organ and, every morning, after a run, plunged into a cold bath. In 1997 he was widowed. The following year he married Wendy Webb. He is survived by Wendy and his daughters, Calvia, Pippa and Lydia.

- John Michael Thomson, transport economist, born 1 January 1928; died 4 May 2010