



The Campaign for Accessible Transport had its first meeting at the Royal Festival Hall, on London's South Bank, aka "The Peoples' Palace" in 1988. It brought together leading activists and thinkers such as Ruth Bashall, transport researcher, Steve Cribb, chair of Hounslow Community Transport and liberal democrat councillor, Alan Desborough, transport policy officer and Tracey Booth from the London Dial-a-Ride Users' Association.

The story was a simple one, each of them knew that separate door to door services like Dial-a-Ride could never meet the travel needs of disabled Londoners, demand for the service outstripped supply and many people were housebound. The answer surely was to make buses accessible so as many disabled people as possible could use them, freeing up bookings for people who needed 1:1 support and assistance that Dial-A-Ride provided.

CAT were the very early mavericks insisting that disability become a mainstream issue. Initially campaigners wanted full access to the whole transport network but focussed on buses to start with because they were visible, iconic and of course when you miss a bus there's always three more to follow! So buses were the early

target of direct action campaigns in Oxford Street, Westminster Bridge and Covent Garden.

What appeared, on the outside to be a random disorganised, jumble sale of disabled people, was in fact a highly organised and well informed set of people who knew about discrimination and exclusion, this common identity gave incredible strength. All the demonstrations were thoroughly researched and planned to attract maximum media coverage; CAT had a simple message which was media friendly and soon many Londoners were talking about how easy it could be to get access onto buses.

Each demonstration saw many disabled people arrested & detained in the cells by the London Metropolitan Police. The original gang of 4; Ruth, Steve, Alan and Tracey were joined by experienced campaigners from the lesbian and gay community; this was a great boost to CAT. Eventually there were fines and court fees to be paid and CAT reached out to other user led groups for support and benefit gigs were held.

CAT's campaign for accessible buses was simple and achievable as more and more accessible routes were introduced members turned their attention to wider issues of exclusion and discrimination and joined up with the Direct Action Network.

The Campaign for Accessible Transport (CAT)

About Vicky Waddington:

In 1987 she changed her life and became deeply involved with the disabled people's movement. Employment as Press Officer for London Dial-a-Ride Users Association and then as Development Worker for Lambeth Centre for Independent Living brought her into everyday contact with hundreds of disabled people. She became an activist with several campaigning groups notably the *Campaign for Accessible Transport (CAT)* where she coordinated press and publicity.

On Saturday 15 September 1990 CAT organised a famous demonstration in London's Oxford Street when hundreds of disabled people blockaded the street. 16 disabled protesters were arrested, including Waddington, who recalls proudly "It was one of the best days in my life" adding triumphantly "I was carried in my wheelchair up the steps of Marlborough Street Magistrates' Court!" The event received widespread media coverage which forced the authorities to drop obstruction charges.

http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/victoria_waddington_2

and

<http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/living/features/direct-action-life-on-the-streets>

CAT-Campaign for Accessible Transport

by Sue Elsegood

In 1989 after graduating from University, where I had taken part in Anti-Apartheid Marches and Stop the Poll Tax Demonstrations, I moved into my first independent flat with volunteer PA support.

I had known Katherine Araniello as a friend since childhood. Katherine was a former ILA Chair & Tracey's Partner, who many of you knew and is very much missed. When I moved back to Greenwich I could see a lot more of her.

It was Katherine & two other Disabled friends- Veronica Pakenham and Kate Brown who initiated my life of Disabled People's Rights Activism by way of an invitation : "We're going to hijack a bus on Oxford Street, they proclaimed -do you want to join us?" A little confused, with a bit of a rebellious streak, beneath a mild exterior & more than a little curious I said yes!

Well, I never looked back...

When I got out in the noisy, bustling road in front of the red double decker route-master bus, stopping the traffic, along with my friends it all clicked in place: This was a public bus, we were part of the public, and we had a right to ride like everyone else!

Up to that moment I had believed it was my fault that I couldn't access buses as I couldn't climb the steps, I thought I would either need to be cured or live with exclusion and segregation from much of life.

This then was a moment of empowerment, an epiphany that I could feel emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and almost physically –it was a political realisation that an individual and even more so a group, could make a significant social change. Getting a cure for my condition was 'pie in the sky' but putting ramps and lifts on busses was well within the reach of possibility –it was not rocket science after all.

I left proudly, spirits high, one of the Oxford Street 8 - members of CAT (Campaign for Accessible Transport) who had been arrested and charged that day for obstructing the high way.

The police unable to physically bundle us in their police vans in our wheelchairs- (many of them heavy powered chairs); commandeered my accessible van to ferry protesters to jail- ironically they had, in effect, high-jacked my van!

After release from the urine reeking, cold damp Belgravia Police cells, I didn't need transport home that day I was floating on air.... A week later we all received a letter to say" charges had been dropped as it was not in the public interest to prosecute", the Horseferry Magistrates Court was not wheelchair accessible –I rest my case! So began my Activist journey...

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Sue Elsegood

Other Disabled Activists in CAT included:

Tracey Booth (later, Proudlock)

Ruth Bashall

Kirsten Hearne

Val Stein

Katherine Araniello

Veronica Pakenham

Keith Armstrong

Alan Holdsworth

Mike Kender

Allan Sutherland

Alan Desborough

Steve Cribb

Vicky Waddington

Carlo Salvatore

Notes from conversations

Conflicting reports of a demo on Westminster Bridge or Tower Bridge.

Kate:

The police told us on Tower Bridge that it would break because by stopping the buses their stationary weight would break the bridge – we didn't believe them and we carried on with the demo. There was a taxi caught up in the demo and we went over to speak to the driver, worried that they would lose some earnings. But he told us to "go back to the institutions where they came from", so we left him there for three hours.

At the Oxford Street demo all the police kept apologising to us for arresting us, and they made us tea and biscuits. Kate was the fifth activist to be processed at the police station after they had all been arrested and taken there. The sergeant said to the PC, "Okay, you can lock her up now".

"But where?" said the PC.

"There's an 18-person cell on this level. Use that."

"Sarge, there's four wheelchairs in there already. No more will fit."

"Right then, straight to court it is" said the sergeant, and they had to carry each of us up 18 steps when we got there. This might have been Marylebone Court.

There were about 18 of us in the court, and in my wheelchair I was in the dock but could only see what was happening by looking under the dock rail. The prosecutor asked the magistrate for us all to be banned from entering the WC1 postcode of central London. "Be quiet," the magistrate told them in reply.

Carlo:

I was working from 1986 to 1992 as a volunteers organiser job-share at Hackney Community Transport. There was an argument there when I came in the day after one of the CAT demos. I was on the demo in my distinctively yellow wheelchair that I had through PACT (which later became Access to Work). I'd got to the demo in a minibus, seeing it in the distance and saying, just drop me off here, I'll make my own way back. This was Tower Bridge. But later at work my Co-ordinator manager wasn't happy, there was all hell to pay, saying I should not be on a demo in work-related equipment, my wheelchair. I'd been interviewed on the evening television news so they had all seen me. But I said, this is about accessible transport, this IS my work. When the camera had been shoved in my face in the demo I hadn't given it a moment's thought, but it all blew up at work afterwards. I also had a phone call from someone at PACT saying pretty much the same thing, but they ended the phone call with, "I hope you get what you want."

Kate:

I had a similar call from the council after the demo too, telling me off along the lines of, "we saw you in OUR wheelchair on the news last night."