

Battle of the Sabbath-free zone

How plans to give Jewish mothers somewhere to wheel their babies has ruffled Hampstead Garden Suburb.

By DINA RABINOVITCH

LORD MCGREGOR, chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, has had his fair share of public scrutiny these past few weeks. But as if scandal-prone royals weren't enough for any man, all has not been quiet on the McGregor domestic front either.

Baron McGregor of Durris is also Life Peer of Hampstead, and in fact chose to reside in loch-free Hampstead Garden Suburb, that genteel area of London where strict laws govern every aspect of a man's castle, down to the colour of his front door. But even here, monsters lurk below the manicured surface.

Recent council meetings in this green and pleasant corner of London have become so heated that local politicians have been yelling "Shut up" at their citizens, and the local newspaper, the Hampstead and Highgate Express, has run increasingly lurid tales of threatened racial violence. Lord McGregor, chairman of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust, the body responsible for keeping the suburb's founders from turning in their graves, has resigned.

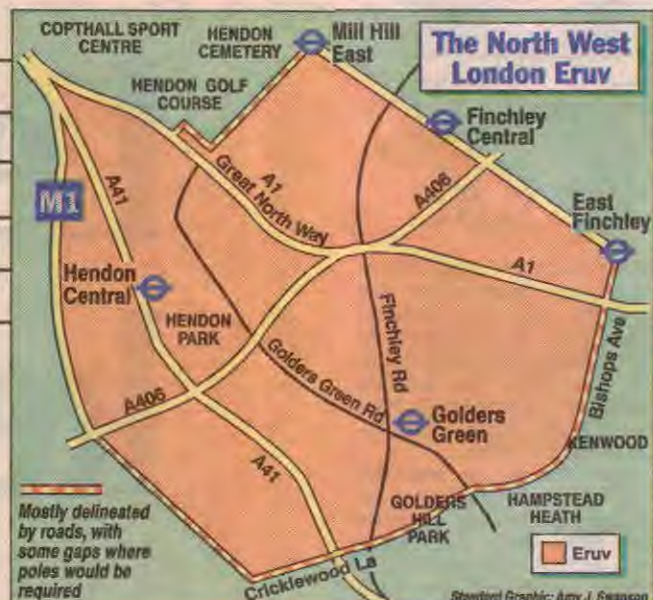
The issue is the request of the local orthodox Jewish community to create an eruv — a religious requirement involving the setting up of some telegraph poles and wires.

Like Lord McGregor, I have also spent many years in this neighbourhood, and what I have learned about my neighbours from the eruv debate is that though we grieve over the Bosnian crisis, we are not able to tolerate religious differences in our own backyards.

According to Jewish law, on the Sabbath, when all industry is forbidden, one may not carry objects in public areas. What does carrying have to do with industry? It is seen as the first step of any economy: distribution and transportation. In practice, this means that I, for example, as an orthodox Jewish mother, cannot push a buggy carrying my children on the Sabbath. However, carrying is permitted in an area considered a private, rather than a public, domain. An eruv is a means of creating the conditions of a private domain in a public area; crudely, setting up boundaries around the district, to enable orthodox Jews within the area to push buggies or wheelchairs on the Sabbath.

MOST OF the boundaries for the proposed eruv in Barnet already exist — the M1, for example — but any gaps would have to be spanned by telegraph poles and wires. "For goodness sake," said the man from the Church of England at one of the local meetings I attended, "why on earth can't a dispensation be given to help these poor people in wheelchairs who can't get about on the Sabbath?"

Judaism is a legal system, and the eruv is a legal fiction within that system, creating a private domain out of a



public one; in effect, it is the dispensation. But because those who keep the eruv must constantly be aware of where it is in operation, the dispensation is not one which allows them to forget the original prohibition and the reasons for it.

In most cities where there is a large Jewish population, an eruv has been set up. So why the acrimony in London?

Lord McGregor told me: "The introduction of posts and wires will become a focal point for all sorts of disagreeable and damaging activities, such as vandalism."

This fear has been fuelled by a report of a Jewish vigilante group planning to patrol the eruv. Local police say this is a hoax.

Since the concerns about vandalism have surfaced, the mayors of Melbourne and Los Angeles have sent letters to the mayor to assure him there have been no such episodes in their cities.

I myself wondered how the talk about vandalism of the eruv started — until a recent planning meeting. The well-groomed lady in front of me noticed me taking notes. "All one has to do is take a pair of

wire-cutters to it," she said. When she saw the look on my face, she realised she'd mistaken her audience and quickly added: "Well, I wouldn't do that, of course, but here are people who will."

Lord McGregor told me there were a host of other reasons for his opposition. "We have for a long time in this country maintained and defended religious tolerance and a basis for destroying this is one group behaving in a manner to affront others. Very large numbers of people are affronted by potentially unsightly physical trappings in an outstanding area of natural beauty."

Those who state such a case — and at meetings around Barnet non-orthodox Jews and non-Jews have used the same grounds for their opposition — are really saying that to be tolerant we must not tolerate any overt religious activity. But this is not tolerance. We are not all the same; and in a real democracy we are not all required to be identical versions of each other. Telegraph poles and wires in Barnet? Whatever next — a mosque in Regent's Park?

What it's all about

WHAT IS AN ERUV? It is an area, designated by Jewish authorities, in which Jewish law on the carrying of objects is suspended. It enables Jews to carry things — such as keys, handkerchiefs and even walking sticks — on the Sabbath that they are not otherwise allowed to carry, except in their own home. It is extended to the pushing of prams.

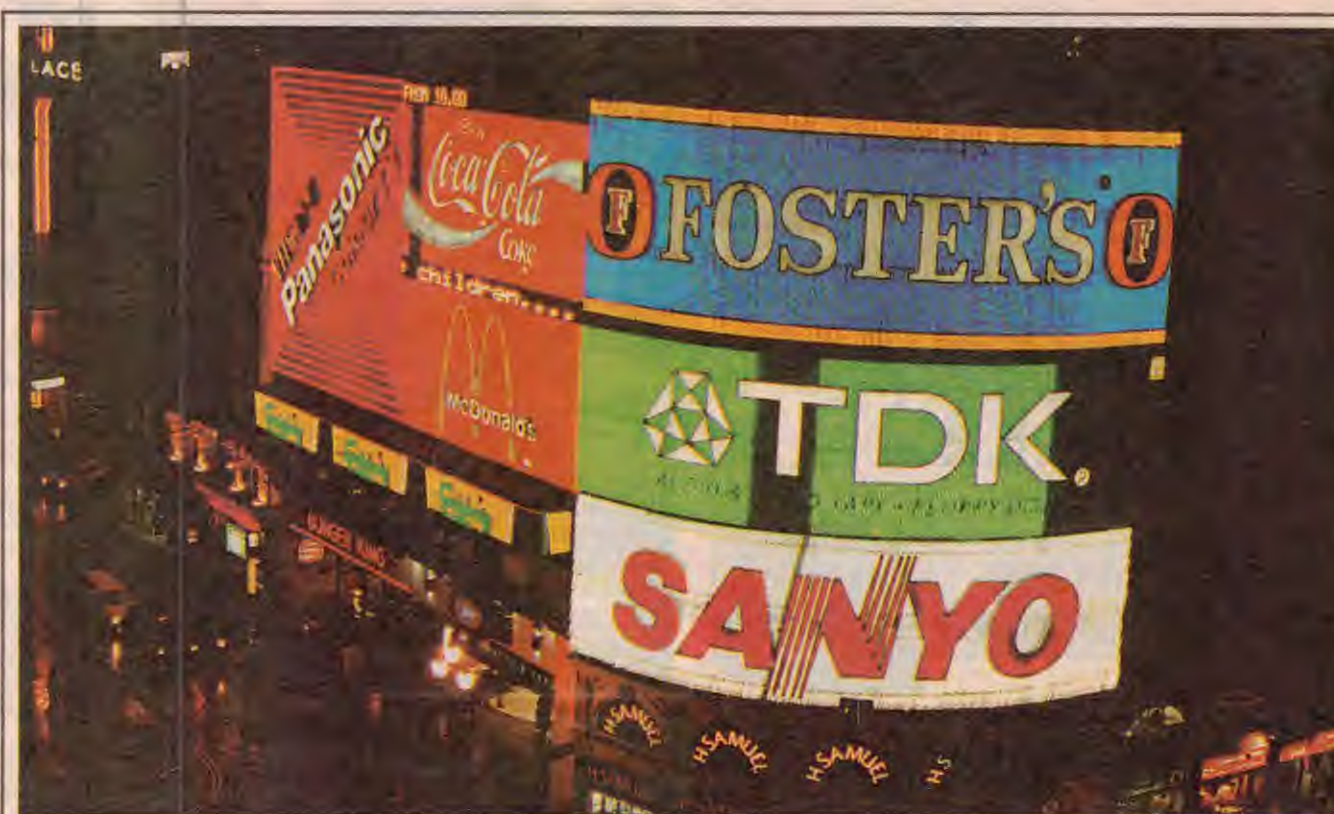
WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? Its borders can be marked by natural or existing boundaries (such as rivers, motorways or railway lines), but where these are absent a thin wire, supported by poles (like telegraph poles), can be used to complete the circuit.

WHERE ARE THEY? There are more than 100 eruvs around the world, including in Melbourne, LA and Washington DC, incorporating the White House.

WHAT IS THE APPLICATION FOR? The plan is for an eleven-mile perimeter eruv, requiring 84 poles and a total of about 950 metres of wire.

ARGUMENTS FOR: Relaxing Jewish law allows greater freedom of movement on the Sabbath. It is a respectful way of lessening the pressures of strict orthodoxy. The cost would be borne by the Jewish community.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST: Other ethnic or religious groups may demand special facilities in the area. There are also fears of inviting vandalism against the Jewish community. Some people consider the poles unsightly.



The hoardings that dominate Piccadilly

Let's keep our neon city

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celebration of Coca-Cola and Canon are out of scale with the buildings which support them; that is exactly what gives them their excitement.

The idea that third-rate old buildings, such as the London Pavilion and the Monico, must be spared the suggested desecration of paid-for communication is a desperate one.

London should recover the opulence and prosperity that impressed Henry James. It won't do so with timidity. London would certainly be better if it were more chaste, refined and better designed.

But it is typical of the bureaucratic mentality that it

confronts big, easy issues, such as monumental advertisements, and neglects the more niggling ones, such as souvenir stalls and artless urban clutter.

I like the great big ads. They are cosmopolitan and confident. They are, above all, honest. I hate the souvenir stalls and all the other concessions to lowest-common-denominator tourism. They are suburban and craven.

Still, for the sake of London, we should do a trade: you can dim the lights on Piccadilly Circus if you pull the mat from underneath the hawkers, flyposters and bandit tour-bus operators. I don't see it happening.

How to bring the mouse down

YOU don't expect the patter of tiny feet in the offices of a bridal magazine. But there it was. Fashion Editor Kim Prior discovered something untoward among the racks of silk and tulle, the veiling and delicately beaded satin slippers at the Soho headquarters of You and Your Wedding, the country's most stylish bridal publication. A little furry head popped up between the be-ribboned hat boxes and a mouse shot across the floor.

On the other side of London, in the office of another leading women's magazine, journalist Erica Miller reached into her handbag and closed her hand around another furry fiend.

According to Rentokil, it's not a mouse backlash against the media, but a common phenomenon as likely to affect merchant bankers, restaurateurs or humble householders. The recession is among a number of factors to blame. Power lunches are out, sandwiches at the desk in, and introducing food into commercial buildings is akin to putting a sign outside proclaiming "Mouse Party".

Unlike rats and cockroaches, for



which no one thinks twice about calling in the exterminator, mice are considered cute. "Rats make headlines, mice make cartoons," says Peter Bateman, director of Britain's biggest pest-control company.

"I wanted it got rid of," says Kim Prior, still fighting the urge to jump up on her chair, "but I didn't like to think of it being killed." Unfortunately there's no way around this particular dilemma. Even one mouse can cause havoc. Last week American Airlines lost an

estimated £15,000 when a mouse on board grounded a Manchester to Chicago flight.

Catering establishments face fines of up to £20,000 if just one mouse is found on the premises. And mice don't stay single for long: a pair can have 2,000 descendants within 12 months. Imagine what just one set of rodent teeth could do in a computer centre or an air-traffic control tower.

High-risk businesses are well aware of the danger and employ high-tech alert systems at a cost of around £3,000. Using burglar alarm technology scaled down to mouse-house proportions, infrared beams in "mouse-friendly" traps close the doors on intruders. The trap then transmits a signal to the central control box which automatically phones the mouse-catcher.

If you have mice and hope to see change from a tenner in order to see the back of them, what can you do? Although the Navy pensioned off ships' cats 15 years ago, that London landmark the Cutty Sark last week reintroduced moggy-power to curb its increase in non-paying tourists.

Rentokil, however, says it is not about to become Rentopuss. "A cat is as much a health hazard in a catering establishment as a mouse," says Mr Bateman. "And imagine the mess. Ginger could get in tangled up in the cable of a software house." Domestic cats are too well-fed to be of much use and, in most cat owners' experience, tend to work in reverse — going out to find mice to bring home as playmates.

The DIY approach involves a shopping trip for either poison or traps. Mouse-bait has, by law, to be humane, causing no pain or suffering, and is less gory than the traditional hit-and-miss sprung trap. (If you insist on the latter, nutty chocolate is the mouse's choice over cheese any day.)

For the sentimental there are now "green" traps which keep the mouse alive, presumably so it can be let out on Clapham Common to invade someone else's property. However, experts say these cause severe stress and a painless death is the more humane, if terminal, answer.

Helen Williams

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