

A partial history of how Leegate was developed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Photographic records show that in Victorian times the present Leegate site had shopping parades on its Eltham Road and Burnt Ash Road frontages. The corner was occupied by a branch of Barclays Bank. This was all swept away during the 1960s and early 1970s by a development whose style reflected its time.

July 1957. Clark Barker & Partners, architects, submit an application on behalf of Rushey Development Company to develop what is known as the “island site” bordered by Eltham Road, Burnt Ash Road, Dorville Road and Leyland Road. The plan comprises mainly housing but with commerce and shops at the north end (the Leegate site).

June 1959. Planning permission is given for the housing.

September 1961. London County Council (LCC) discusses widening Eltham Road to 100 ft to give eight lanes of traffic, with a flyover taking the road across the Lee Green crossroads.

November 1961. Clark Barker apply to redevelop the Leegate site but since “traffic on Eltham Road, the possibility of a flyover, the northern aspect and the lack of shops on the north side make Eltham Road unattractive to shoppers,” Burnt Ash Road is seen as more suitable for shops. A department store is planned for the corner of Eltham Road and Leyland Road. “The aim is create a shopping centre which will set a standard for the redevelopment of the whole of the area which is expected to follow this project.”

December 1961. Lewisham says the plan for 48 shops with housing above, an eight-storey department store, a multi-storey office block, car park for 52 cars and a three-storey care park fronting Leyland Road is “unobjectionable.”

January 1962. Lewisham’s planning officer appears to have changed his mind and raises doubts about the need for so many shops though “the idea of a shopping precinct restricted for pedestrian access only is a reasonable conception.” He adds: “The proposal to provide a new departmental store of massive proportions comprising basement and eight floors with floor space of over 92,000 square feet is one upon which there would appear to be grave doubts as to the need or suitability in this locality. Its siting at the extreme eastern end of the pedestrian concourse [ie on Leyland Road] in a position most removed from the ‘live’ frontage of Burnt Ash Road casts some doubt as to whether such a venture would succeed.”

March 1962. LCC town planning committee recommends refusal of this scheme – which also includes a 16-storey office block - on the grounds the size of retail is inappropriate because of the proximity of Lewisham town centre and Eltham High Street. It notes: “Lee Green is a local shopping centre and is not of sufficient importance to justify the inclusion of a large multi-storey departmental store.”

May 1962. Clark Barker propose revised plans for offices, a smaller, 40,000 sq ft department store, 10,000 sq ft supermarket, “club” cinema for 500 people, a swimming pool convertible for dancing, skating and tennis, and “possibly” a bowling alley.

July 1962. Clark Barker submit a revised application that drops the proposal for a department store but does include offices, shops, a 30-room hotel, a bowling alley over the car park and a warehouse. It

proposes “a shopping precinct with pedestrian access for the surrounding streets to an attractive centre free from the noise and danger of vehicular traffic.”

August 1962. Local residents object to the bowling alley on the grounds that “during the last 10 years there has been a progressive worsening (sic) of the character of Lee Green,” “Lee Green is being turned into a Kursaal or a Dreamland” and “such a scheme would encourage far more people (and most probably of an undesirable type) to the area.”

August 1963. Kentish Mercury reports that the small traders of Lee Green fear being excluded from the new development and have instructed solicitors. The company says it is willing to offer leases but they must reflect modern values.

November 1963. The plans for a large department store and bowling alley are dropped.

September 1964. Lewisham approves details of the first stage of redevelopment including a four-storey hotel and a two-tier parking garage.

September 1966. Work on the hotel halts at ground floor level and an application is made to turn it into a student hostel with an additional storey.

May 1971. Application made to add more office space and include a banqueting hall/restaurant. Office proposal is rejected because Lee Green is not designated as an area for big office development.

July 1977. Permission granted to convert hostel building for use as offices.

This is an incomplete record because some of the files covering the development of Lee Green are missing from the planning department’s archive.

Some lessons may be drawn from this history.

1. Lee Green’s significance as a commercial centre has in the past posed problems for planners, developers and residents. Is it a major centre for office and retail development or should it not attempt to rival bigger centres including Lewisham town centre? The conclusion appears to have been that its role was more modest and that large-scale retail was not appropriate. It is currently eighth smallest of Lewisham’s nine major and district town centres.
2. Previous plans have been through repeated revisions as proposals have been put forward and then modified after further consideration. The first plan is not necessarily the best.
3. The planners have in the past been aware of the need to respect existing pedestrian and shopping patterns, refusing to allow a large store on the “wrong” side of Leegate, away from the “live” frontage of Burnt Ash Road.
4. The planners placed a high value on the public spaces to be provided in the redevelopment. They offered respite from the noise and danger of traffic.
5. Planners have been aware of the key role played by the Leegate corner site in setting the tone for the surrounding, mainly residential areas.
6. Small retail tenants feel threatened by redevelopments that can push up the cost of their leases.

With thanks to Lewisham Planning Department for help in consulting their archives.