

The £8.5m Battle Over London's Secret Cold War Tunnels

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Beneath the bustling streets of London lies a hidden relic of the Cold War: a sprawling network of deep-level tunnels (DLT) originally constructed to shield vital communication lines from potential bombings. Known as the Kingsway Exchange, these tunnels, located under Chancery Lane and directly beneath the Central Line, cover 8,000 square metres. Now, they are at the centre of an £8.5m High Court lawsuit against FTSE-100 giant BT Group, filed by a retired real estate lawyer.

During World War II, the tunnels housed the Special Operations Executive, a secretive unit rumoured to have inspired Ian Fleming's Q Branch in the James Bond novels. In 1981, under Margaret Thatcher's drive to privatise state assets, ownership of the tunnels transferred from the government to British Telecom (BT). The telecoms giant retained control until 2008, when it put the tunnels up for sale. After a 15-year wait, BT agreed to sell the Kingsway Exchange to The London Tunnels, a UK-based group backed by private equity, for a £120m redevelopment project aimed at transforming the site into a tourist attraction by 2028, potentially drawing 4.2 million visitors annually.

However, the redevelopment plans have been overshadowed by a legal dispute. Paul Girvan, a retired real estate lawyer who worked as a consultant for BT between 2006 and 2018 through Paralaw, an external paralegal service, has launched a claim against both BT and Paralaw. According to court documents reviewed by City AM, Girvan alleges he uncovered the existence of the DLT network during his tenure and identified flaws in BT's public search systems. He claims the systems, managed by BT Openreach, were inefficient, causing delays and occasionally providing inaccurate results, as they did not disclose the tunnels' existence unless BT deemed there was a "need to know."

Girvan says he devised a solution called BT Property Search (BTPS), designed to safeguard BT's underground assets, provide early warnings of construction risks, and generate revenue through search fees and Asset Protection Agreements (APAs). He alleges that, with approval from BT's head of real estate legal team, he conducted a successful trial of BTPS in Autumn 2012. Under a Collaboration Agreement with his company, Paul Girvan Limited, he was to receive a 12.5% share of proceeds in the first year, with Paralaw taking operational control thereafter.

The claim estimates that Openreach handles around two million search requests annually, and had BTPS been fully integrated, half of these would have required a BTPS search. Girvan calculates that 1,000 searches would have necessitated an APA, generating over £6m in annual revenue for him. However, he alleges that in August 2018, he was abruptly excluded from BTPS operations, prompting his lawsuit for breach of contract and conspiracy to commit unlawful means. He seeks £8.5m in compensation for lost search and APA fees, plus interest and legal costs.

The case raises questions about the management of Britain's hidden infrastructure and the accountability of major corporations like BT. As the Labour government pushes its agenda, the legacy of Thatcher's privatisation era continues to stir controversy, with this Cold War

relic now a battleground for legal and financial disputes. The outcome of the lawsuit could set a precedent for how historic assets are handled in an era of private investment and public scrutiny.