

Aristotle Lane.  
Trap Ground Allotment Association.  
Evidence for Inquiry into Chiltern Railways Application.

Objection to the closure of the level crossing.

The Trap Ground Allotment Association together with two individual members and Oxford City Council have submitted statements of case to the Secretary of State for Transport objecting to the closure of the level crossing access to the allotment site.

TGAA members recognise the potential value of the proposed railway scheme and its benefit for ameliorating Oxford's transport problems. Allotments are also widely acknowledged as beneficial sources of fresh local produce and social activity for a wide range of participants and ours is a particularly popular site.

TGAA has a membership of 150 including a variety of social, economic, and age groups from the local community and their family members and friends who enjoy the particular beauty and productivity of the site.

The ten acres of land have been in use as an allotment since after the first world war as has the railway crossing which preceded its establishment and was associated with the Port Meadow Halt on the earlier line. The neighbouring bridge has also been in place for several decades as a main means of public access to Port Meadow.

TGAA's statement of case objects to the closure of the level crossing and presents a defence of its retention as the best means of access to the allotments by the great majority of the membership.

We understand that it is recommended by Network Rail that level crossings are not to be constructed on new railway lines except in exceptional cases and we wish to establish the exceptional nature of this particular crossing.

Allotment sites must have convenient access which needs to be level as raw materials and products require regular transport to and from the site. As you will know, ours is unusually isolated on the eastern edge of Port Meadow an SSI and a particularly valued area of water meadow, wild life and recreation for Oxford's population.

As access to Port Meadow is restricted, the local, narrow railway bridge path becomes crowded with cycles, push chairs, walkers and others, particularly at week ends, so allotment users hardly ever use it, but above all, it is steep and increases the distance to most people's plots, making the burden of access too severe for practical and convenient use. Unfortunately the bridge path is also habitually neglected, dog-fouled and prone to flooding which makes it unusable in severe conditions.

For these reasons we have repeatedly - last time in 2002 - resisted attempts by authorities to close the crossing, and tried to illustrate its safety, and emphasise its safe use by TGAA members. The site is fenced and locked so the public have no access to the allotments. We regularly remind members of the need to respect the warnings made by train drivers and observe our safety rules so that the crossing has had no accidents during our many decades of use.

We appreciate the proposals to mitigate the crossing closure with alternative improvements but, apart from the uncertain nature of the measures currently proposed, they provide no remedy for the burden of pushing loads up and down slopes over long distances, a severe disincentive to allotment gardening which our two witnesses will illustrate.

The new line is to be built to the east of the existing one to Bicester, apparently doubling the capacity to run four trains an hour between London and Oxford so we assume it will probably carry two trains an hour. For various reasons the line will be about ten metres from the nearest existing line allowing a comprehensive area of "breathing space" as a refuge for people crossing before they come to the existing lines. Sight lines, are excellent, warnings punctiliously observed and user protocols constantly refreshed in Newsletters, our website, and at our meetings.

As experienced users of this level crossing realise, the tracks are empty of trains for most of the day, particularly at week ends, and the new line appears to be even more sparsely used, so the closure seems an unnecessarily harsh measure and we appeal to the inquiry to recommend its retention for use by the Trap Ground Allotment Association as its private and only convenient means of access.

We understand that the local railway signalling system is due to be improved in 2015, so this might provide an opportunity to reinforce safety systems when the improvements are complete giving all users additional reassurance.

Tony Hollander. Chairman of the TGAA Committee.

Witness 1. Stella Boswell.

I started my allotment in 1997 and have found over these 13 years that I have greatly benefited, not just in the ability to grow my own food, but from the exercise and the comradeship that it has given, and these two latter points are of great importance when taking account the immense value of allotments, especially in these days of stress and strain.

I would not have joined the Society if I had had to take the long way round, over the bridge and down through the Port Meadow gate and then back to my plot. Coming and going I often have to carry heavy weights; potatoes, apples, tomatoes etc. and my bike is usually laden. The ability to cross during the many train-free minutes of the railway line, has enabled me and many others, to continue with the therapy and companionship of the allotment.

When we had to use the bridge due to work on the line, I visited the allotment less and seriously considered giving it up, as pushing my laden bike or wheelbarrow up the narrow and steep path, avoiding the many Port Meadow walkers with their dogs and pushchairs, was very unpleasant and exhausting.

We older members have an important part to play in the Society, giving advice (asked and unasked for,) and encouragement to the new ones. It would be a tragedy if we could not continue to use the allotment as a result of an unnecessary closure of the crossing.

Stella Boswell

Witness 2. Joe Lee.

Objection to closure of the Trap Grounds level crossing. Evidence as a member of the Trap Grounds Allotments Association by Joseph Lee (Plot 113) of 48 Temple Rd, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2HB.

Currently I am training in Paediatrics and a Clinical Academic Fellow under the Great Ormond Street and UCL Institute of Child Health, where I perform epidemiological research into child maltreatment. I am a member of the Heritage Seed Library and have previously been employed in conservation research by the RSPB.

I have been an allotment holder since 2003 when I started working on plot 113 as one of a group of medical students. Career moves and pressures have whittled down the numbers, but I remain working on the plot with my girlfriend. I do not have the luxury of a garden of my own other than at the Trap Grounds, and cannot foresee a time when I will be able to have one. I use the allotments as a place to grow food; in particular I try to grow varieties of vegetable not commercially available.

The time I spend on the allotment is extremely important to me as a quiet and constructive change of pace and a place to reflect away from my daily work. Due to the pressures of daily life I am not able to visit the plot every day, or even every week, and when I do I never choose to walk the extra mile to cross over the bridge. I have never felt that the level crossing was unduly dangerous, or the risks unmanageable and am always careful when crossing.

Considerable and sustained effort has been expended on the plot over years: to improve the soil and its microbiology, build a greenhouse and a small polytunnel, install automatic watering systems, a shed, a cold frame, and a 900 litre water storage system filled both by rain and by a solar powered pump from a hand drilled borehole. All of these projects have required the use of the level crossing. All of them have required carrying multiple small loads for several kilometres. All of them would have been compromised by having to use the bridge.

Even using the crossing is quite a walk over to or from my plot carrying a rucksack full of tools or potatoes. The loads themselves are not particularly heavy for a young man (although my largest pumpkins weighed several stones), but the combination of weight, awkwardness and distance may require rest stops on the way, especially on the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>

journey.

To be forced to carry large or heavy objects up several meters of incline would change the equation. Even before considering the difficulties of passing every other person with or without a bicycle or wheelbarrow the journey becomes daunting. The loads must be smaller or lighter, and consequently there must be more trips. Given that the proposed route is going to be longer as well as more arduous, the effect will be additive as well as a multiplier of the effort required. Many more trips, hauling loads over a high bridge, and having to walk farther is not going to be fun. I value time spent on my plot, not trudging over a dog soiled bridge or driving through an SSSI full of angry walkers and bird watchers.

This level crossing is exceptional because of geography. There is and can be no alternative access to the allotment site that does not involve climbing, kilometres of detour, or both.

Joe Lee.