

The Chiltern Railways (Bicester to Oxford Improvements Order:

Public Inquiry

The Ramblers & Oxford Fieldpaths Society Joint closing submission:

Rights of Way

Ref OBJ41/9 & OBJ55/4 sheet 1 of 3

1. During the course of the Inquiry we have heard much said with regard to what are exciting future railway developments and what appears will be an increasingly important strategic link in developing a railway fit for use in the 21st century. Whilst we were happy to restate the support of our amenity groups to these developments it was disappointing that only the current usage of the two footpaths ref Gosford and Water Eaton FP229/4; Oddington FP318/6 and the Beebont bridleway BR 157/4 was considered and not their future improvement.
2. If I could quote from Oxford Fieldpaths submissions throughout the course of Project Evergreen and the current Inquiry. *"It must be recognised that all Oxfordshire County Council reports quoted have a common aim, which is the appreciation of the cultural heritage and the **improvements** of the existing rights of way".* Oxfordshire County Council's key report, Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2006 to 2011 document ref CD/4.5 has the word improvement as its title. The Proof of Evidence of Ian Gilder CRCL/P/12/A paragraph 11.90 was not correct in stating that this document suggested that, *"the overall integrity of the public rights of way network to be disjointed and fragmented."* This quote of a margin note on a map referred to only small parts of the network and did not generally apply to the network as whole. This minor shortcoming is addressed as one of the main aims that the plan sought to rectify. There is no suggestion that the three rights of way in question are disjointed or fragmented at present but they will be when their rail crossings are severed.
3. This improvement aspect of this key plan with regard to these rights of way has been sadly lacking in the Chiltern Railways proposals to date. As an amenity group Oxford Fieldpaths Society sought to show the efforts we make to ensure footpaths are adequately maintained; and sadly in the case of Oddington FP318/6 this has been a continuing problem. The Proof of Evidence of Ian Gilder CRCL/P/12/A paragraph 11.87 records the inevitable response that rights of way matters are always someone else's responsibility. We also back the County Council's plan by seeking to develop ways of improving footpath usage in just such areas as these. These are of course long term objectives, just as are some of the railway developments that we are looking forward to. This is precisely why we consider that when the railway is being improved the rights of way affected should, if not be improved at this time, at least not be sacrificed for some short term gain.

4. A most significant point arose in the Rebuttal of the Ramblers Association Proof of Evidence ref doc CRCL/R/OBJ41 in paragraph 3.5 and the diversion of Gosford & Water Eaton FP229/4 pedestrians along the A34 trunk road and the very questionable statistics regarding the safety of walkers crossing the railway using the footpath crossings. There is no suggestion that any attempt will be made to *“eliminate the safety hazard”* of crossing a trunk road. Statistics recording the continuing sad loss of life of walkers on any of the local trunk roads are I am sure readily available, whilst the statistics for similar accidents on railway crossings, by walkers using the current footpath crossings are not sufficiently transparent so as to be readily seen. The odds quoted for accidents on unmanned crossings as a whole actually seemed to be approaching vanishing point when compared to similar accidents on the road network. Using the admittedly poor record of Holts farm crossing as a reason to close Oddington FP318/6 and Beebont BR157/4, when in fact it transpired that there was not a single problem reported for either of these crossings, was not an action to be expected in a serious evaluation.
5. As experienced walks leaders, we would state again that the hazards of crossing or walking along trunk roads are self evident; whilst even without the train approach systems we are told will become more widely used, trains are both highly predictable and visible. We would reiterate our evidence that it is the footpath diversions either across or along trunk roads that present the greatest danger to walkers. They have also been the regrettable cause of what little fragmentation and disjointing of the rights of way network in Oxfordshire that has occurred to date, noted in Ian Gilder’s Proof of Evidence of CRCL/P/12/A paragraph 11.90. The safety concerns arising from walkers using footpaths crossing railways pale to insignificance when compared to the real and all too well known safety hazards arising from heavily trafficked main roads.
6. Perhaps for walking groups such as ourselves and indeed with apparent national significance, we would refer to Chiltern Railway’s Rebuttal of Oxford Fieldpaths Society’s Proof of Evidence ref CRCL/R/OBG55 paragraph 3.25. This refers to Oddington FP318/6 footpath and the preservation of the historic landscape that it represents. It may be true to say that at this time, when not aligned against existing field boundaries, footpaths may not be discernable on the ground. This does not diminish in any way the cultural heritage that rights of way flowing down from ancient highways, which at the very least pre-date the enclosures of the 17th to the 19th century, represent. These are not the transitory routes of agricultural workers going about their contemporary day to day business, business which may of course vary from time to time. In many cases this business is now one of amenity use, rather than the use by the rural workers for whom they were provided. Footpaths such as these may from time to time continue to adapt to suit local needs, as circumstances change. Rights of Way such as Oddington FP318/6 and Beebont BR157/4 are however part of the highway system from which our society grew. They are as much an intrinsic part of our cultural heritage as any listed historic building. As highways it is their route that matters, not their fabric, which may decay as Mr Gilder pointed out. It is their route that was the reason for their existence and their significance and as walkers it is their route that we seek to preserve just as much as any building may be preserved for future generations to appreciate.

7. Ian Gilder's Proof of Evidence of CRCL/P/12/A paragraph 11.87 also states: "*Views of Otmoor landscape will be able to be enjoyed from the new bridge proposed at Beebont/Holt Farm.*" This is tantamount to saying you can see Oxford's dreaming spires from the top of the Westgate Shopping Centre multi storey car park but no, you can't walk past the Bodleian Library and the Sheldonian Theatre!

8. After the care the Victorian railway engineers took to maintain the rights of way network, the trunk roads and motorways were allowed to tear them up without a thought about their cultural heritage. We look to Chiltern Railways to provide a lead to the rail industry and ensure these mistakes are not repeated. The rights of way such as Oddington FP 6 and the Beebont bridleway for much of our history were the railways or motorways of their age. These are the bare bones of our cultural heritage that should remain available for future generations to appreciate and form a living history, walking on the roads of our ancestors under the same skies they walked and not viewed from a nearby bridge.