

Central Chilterns Community Forum 11 July 2012

*As presented
11-July-2012*

Concerns regarding Rights of Way - Introductory Statement

HS2 Ltd has decided that the topic for the second round of Community Forums should be Rights of Way so even though this is only our first meeting we have to make an initial stab at looking at that. So a number of people have had a first go at it, notably Carol Rainsford, John Gladwin, Keith Hoffmeister, Rod Passant and me. And there are grounds for very serious concern about the impact of H2 on Rights of Way in this area at the very heart of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The key point is of course that this is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has been designated as such by Parliament in the national interest. One of the purposes of that designation is to conserve it for future generations – a point picked up by David Cameron in a letter he wrote in 2010 committing a future Conservative Government to protecting AONBs.

Another very important purpose of AONBs is to provide people, and especially those living outside them, in places like London, Luton and Slough, with the opportunity to come into an area of the countryside, walk in it, ride in it, sit in it and use its beauty and tranquillity to recharge their batteries. The thinking behind Lord Lee's decision to bequeath Chequers to the nation – and I might point out to the HS2 Ltd staff who might not realise it but Chequers is just a couple of miles down the road – was that Prime Ministers need a place of retreat and recuperation and the beauty and tranquillity of the Chilterns were the ideal setting for it.

What is good for the Prime Minister is good for everyone else. The Government's own Natural Environment White Paper recognises the importance of access to the countryside to people's physical and mental health and well-being. It's not just nice and pretty – the Secretary of State herself has described it as crucial.

The Chilterns AONB is the closest to London and less than an hour away by public transport. Someone arriving at Great Missenden Station can walk out of it in any direction and within five minutes be in open countryside or ancient woodland. This area is at the heart of a spider's web of Rights of Way. They are all part of published routes – for example, short circular walks from pubs; longer circular ones with historic themes; cycle trail like the Sustran National Route 57 from Cricklade to Welwyn Garden City; and long distance routes like the South Bucks Way which links to the Midshires Trail that runs all the way up to Stockport. And of course there is the Chilterns Cycleway, launched in 2010 by Mark Webber – yes that Mark Webber, the racing driver who won at Silverstone on Sunday.

The Government has just announced a project to build on the success of the Chilterns Cycleway as part of its efforts to promote sustainable tourism. This is the Chilterns Sustainable Tourism Gateway Project. It should be noted that another important point about Rights of Way, again recognised in the Natural Environment White Paper, is that they have an economic value for their surrounding areas. For example people using the Chilterns Cycleway spend an average of £71 a head in the Chilterns. This is of critical importance to the local economy, local businesses and local people.

So the Chilterns Gateways Project has identified 3 hubs in the Chilterns where £800,000 of government money will be used to enhance facilities available to cyclists, including people using electric bikes - things like better route signage on rights of way, promoting bike rental and repair businesses and encouraging people offering accommodation to cater explicitly for walkers and cyclists. One of those hubs is the area of Amersham, Chesham and Great Missenden, exactly the area that HS2 will be carving through. And which department is putting up the money? The Department for Transport.

The decision has been made to carve HS2 through some of the finest countryside in England. You at HS2 Ltd now have to deal with the implications of that decision. The underlying design principle must be that we should not be able to see, hear sense or feel HS2. That applies to people out walking and riding and enjoying the beauty and peace of the countryside as well as to people in their homes. And it applies during the construction phase as well as when HS2 becomes operational, because construction will go on for years so the same standards have to apply then as during the operational phase.

So if HS2 goes ahead you have to work out how to build it and run it whilst at the same time maintaining in full the Rights of Way network that is one of the jewels in the crown of the Chilterns area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. And you have to ensure that people can continue to enjoy peaceful and uninterrupted access to this whole area. Please don't look down your noses and tell us it can't be done or it's too expensive, just go work it out.