

Parish Council Matters for February 2014

Closure of Shorne Mead level crossing

It was learned by the Parish Council in December 2010 that the level crossing at the end of Queens Farm Road had been closed by Network Rail, without local consultation, and people were no longer able to gain access to it. This crossing, giving both vehicle and pedestrian access, was frequently used by walkers visiting the marshes. It also led to the towpath of the Thames and Medway Canal on the north side of the railway and to the road which leads to the remains of Shorne Mead Fort on the south bank of the River Thames.

Network Rail stated that their decision to close the crossing was made on safety grounds, following a number of near misses there involving both pedestrians and private vehicles. They argued that access to the crossing via an unlocked pedestrian gate was especially hazardous, given that when trains emerged from the nearby Hoo junction depot, there was not a clear view of the crossing for the driver, and pedestrians could have been easily hit by a train.

Network Rail said that use of the vehicle access gate had been provided to a small number of official key holders, yet some additional people had wrongly received copies of the key, and many were ignoring instructions to call the signaller. This had created safety hazards including an incident involving a motorist in June 2009.

Network Rail decided that in all the circumstances the only option, on safety grounds, was to close the crossing altogether. They pointed out that the crossing was not registered as a public right of way.

The Parish Council considers that Network Rail was unjustified in closing this crossing without considering other options, and even giving prior notification to the local community. The Council fully supports the need for additional measures to be introduced to ensure safe passage over the crossing and believes that, once these are in place, the crossing could and should be reopened as soon as possible.

The Council believes that a potential stumbling block to progress might be the fact that the crossing was not shown as a public right of way on the Definitive Rights of Way Map drawn up by the Department of Environment back in the 1980s. Considering that the crossing was in continuous use ever since the railway was first built, and a bridge had been provided over the canal which preceded the railway, this was surprising. British Rail acknowledged at the time that the crossing represented a right of way for pedestrians. It seems, from the Council's examination of the records, that the omission of this crossing as a public right of way from the new Map was an oversight on the part of the Department.

The Council took legal advice, which was to apply for a Definitive Map Modification Order to include the crossing as a public right of way. If this could be achieved, legal proof of this status would have been established, thus considerably strengthening the case for reopening the crossing.

One of the strongest arguments to be deployed in seeking the Order, Kent County Council advised, was evidence that this crossing had been enjoyed by the public as of right and without interruption for at least 20 years. The Parish Council accordingly organised the signature of more than 50 signed affidavits from regular users of the

crossing. These accompanied an application for a Definitive Map Modification Order which was submitted to the County Council on 29 February 2012.

At the time when the application was made, the Parish Council was advised that there was a backlog of applications of two years, and that it might be some time before the application could be processed. We are now looking forward to a response from KCC as soon as possible this year so that we can make our case, with legal backing, for the crossing to be reopened.

Proposal for Crematorium and Cemetery in Chalk

In the Parish Matters article for December I reported that a planning application for a crematorium and cemetery, to be constructed near to the church in Chalk, had been referred to Gravesham Borough Council. Shorne Parish Council had voted against this proposal. On 12 December 2013, Gravesham Borough Council gave planning for this development to proceed subject to certain planning conditions being met.

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Shorne Parish Council