

Rail electrification in the Goring Gap - update

The ugly, over-engineered gantries are continuing to go up and the devastating impact on our once beautiful landscape is there for everyone to witness (see photo). Soon the attachments and the wires will be fitted and then they will look even worse.

What is being done about it? The short answer is 'quite a lot'. The activities of both the Railway Action Group (RAG) and our staunchest allies (the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs AONBs), with whom we are working closely, have resulted in a 'Statement of Intention' from Network Rail (NR), to undertake retrospective work to replace or alter the installed apparatus - once the testing of the current system has been completed. However, the statement does not give us sufficient confidence that NR will actually undertake any remedial action. The letter says that this depends on the level of opposition experienced in the formal consultation process, the availability of funds and the agreement of a mutually acceptable design.

In December a further letter was sent by the heads of the two AONBs to Network Rail's CEO (Mark Carne) and the Secretary of State for Transport (Patrick McLoughlin) requesting a meeting with government and pointing out the statutory duty of NR to comply with the law. The letter insisted that the government gave a cast iron guarantee that a budget will be ring-fenced for NR to replace the current electrification design with a more visually sympathetic version, one appropriate for the landscape within the AONBs, given that they have the highest level of protection in the land with the same status as a National Park.

At the same time in December, several members of RAG, who are professional planning consultants, have researched the legal basis of NR's 'Permitted Development Rights', which it is using to justify the electrification of the whole Great Western Main Line. They were looking to see if NR has respected all the relevant laws, specifically those protecting Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Following this research, RAG engaged a leading Environmental & Public Law firm (Richard Buxton) to get an independent review of their findings and the way that NR has carried out 'due process' for its electrification programme of the GWR. A specialist barrister was, in turn, then employed to review the law firm's conclusions. Several potentially significant issues have been identified. A letter from Richard Buxton, detailing these concerns, was sent to Network Rail on 24 December on RAG's behalf asking for a response before RAG's next meeting with NR on Thursday 14th January in Goring.

We look forward to NR's response to the legal questions, its new electrification designs and its promised proposals for the belated (by several years) public consultation process.

What can concerned residents do to help the campaign? We urge you to attend the public consultation meetings when they are announced and voice your opposition to the current design, which is doing so much unnecessary damage to our landscape. Also, you can sign the nationwide government petition on our website and forward the web link to others anywhere in the UK who may support the protection of AONBs. Finally, the engagement of a legal firm has incurred costs for RAG and any contributions to the Fighting Fund we have set up would be most welcomed. Details are on the 'How to Help' page of our website www.savegoringgap.org.uk. Thank you.

Ron Bridle (RAG member).



Photo caption: Electrification in progress through South Stoke

Photo credit: Bernard Novell