

Reinstating Rail and River Routes from Guildford - The Cranleigh Railway Line

This article relates to a planning application WA/2020/0004 dated 02 January 2020 and placed before Waverley Borough Council by the Wey and Arun Canal Trust. It concerns the conflicts of interest that arise between various organisations; together with a wider question about transport infrastructure and connectivity at both local and national levels

Our colleagues at Gru- Guildford Railway Users Group recently alerted us that a Waverley Council decision is still pending for the planning application to which both Gru, The Guildford Society and others have objected. Since the application date, various transport reports and government announcements have also been made which we feel have a bearing on this decision.

Opened In 1816, The Wey & Arun Junction Canal linked the Wey Navigation near Guildford to the south coast via the Arun Navigation. It was intended to provide a safe, efficient route from the River Thames and London to Portsmouth to carry goods supplying the naval dockyards. However, the arrival of the railways led to its demise and by 1871 it was formally closed and over the passing years the canal fell into a state of disrepair and non-use.

WACT is gradually trying to reinstate the canal that used to connect these two navigable rivers between the Thames and the South Coast and have had loyal support and much success in restoring many miles of waterway for use by leisure craft. However, a number of canal sections remain to be joined up and the WACT have various projects towards this aim.

Application WA/2020/0004 seeks to install a new stretch of canal between Rushett Common and Birtley Road, Bramley that provides for the erection of new bridges, construction of a new canal cut, new footpaths and landscaping. This involves taking a short section of the closed Guildford - Cranleigh - Horsham railway track bed in order to provide an easier route for canal reinstatement than re-using the original canal course, due to land use and ownership issues.

This new canal cut would also divert part of The Downs Link a long - distance footpath, cycle path and bridleway between Guildford and Shoreham-by-Sea joining the North Downs in Surrey and the South Downs in West Sussex. The link is supported by three local authorities: Surrey County Council, West Sussex County Council and Waverley Borough Council.

The Downs link follows the route of the old railway line that was closed in 1965 (100 years after its opening) when many national rail routes were shut down in what became known as the Beeching closures. The routes of the canal link and the track bed also run parallel in many places with the A 281 road which could see increasing traffic flows along its route arising from the new housing conurbations being established at Cranleigh, Dunsfold, Horsham and beyond into Sussex.

A key point is that accessing Guildford from the South via the a 281 to Shalford or Artington is already at capacity. A rail-based solution could allow new services to be added in, reducing road congestion, noise and traffic pollution to the greater public benefit.

Does the Guildford – Cranleigh- Horsham link have to be a railway – there are potentially other options such as light rail hybrid transport operations such as bi mode or battery powered trains that do not require overhead cabling or a third rail for power; or proven hybrid tram-train operations, which are able to use sections of the main line rail network as well as road tramways and can in addition climb hills.

The Gru letter of objection says:

"The Guildford rail users (Gru) strongly object to the proposals by the Wey and Arun Canal to take part of the track bed of the currently disused Guildford – Cranleigh – Horsham railway somewhere in the vicinity of Bramley for the purpose of reinstating the canal, as that might forever preclude reinstatement of the railway.

This objection is because we believe that there will in due course, whether sooner or later, become a business case for reinstating the railway at least between Guildford and Cranleigh for the purpose of relieving the current road congestion and slow bus service between the two towns and possibly also for the purpose of serving any major housing development at Dunsfold, although that would need an extra branch off the former railway.

We would not wish all this to become precluded by one little bit of canal, especially when historically the canal existed separately at the same time as the railway and could presumably be made to do so again, albeit at greater cost.

Also looking further ahead, given the growing concerns over climate change due to carbon usage, in particular that generated by road traffic, we see the possibility that a Guildford – Cranleigh – Horsham railway in conjunction with a reinstated Horsham – Shoreham railway and a new spur at West Horsham could form part of a strategic rail link between the West Midlands, Reading and the port of Shoreham for freight and Brighton for inter-city passenger traffic, so reducing the need for road traffic but also avoiding use of the congested London – Brighton mainline railway."

The Gru viewpoint is also echoed by ERTA - English Regional Transport Association which has campaigned for many years for the re-instatement of this and other rail links, with the Cranleigh link having potential for future through routes as described by Gru as well as serving both local and commuter traffic.

The Guildford Society objected in March 2020 to the proposed WACT development as it has several consequences to the transportation corridor represented by the A281, old railway formation and the canal.

The Guildford- Cranleigh – Horsham transport corridor is becoming increasingly busy for through and local traffic. Growth in the Cranleigh area for employment and housing will place more stress on the Transport Corridor.

The corridor is an important leisure route being a well-used cycle and walking path.

The Old Guildford – Cranleigh – Horsham rail route is an important asset that is still in the most part in Public Ownership, and in good structural condition.

The Society objects to planning being granted as it believes Surrey County Council needs to have a proper strategy for the corridor to handle growth of Public, and Private transport modes, as well as meeting leisure use.

Our view is that before any encroachment on the existing old rail route takes place there must be an agreed strategy for the future of the Horsham to Guildford corridor considering factors such as modal shift and the use of the corridor for leisure purposes.

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More recently, on 1st October 2020 in a letter to the chair of Transport for the South East, transport secretary Grant Shapps has confirmed his support for sub-national transport bodies

and for the work of Transport for the South East in particular – but said that he does not want to take forward statutory status or to transfer powers at this time.

The news follows confirmation from transport minister, Baroness Vere, that she has instructed Department for Transport officials to have regard to Transport for the South East's transport strategy when developing government policy.

The DfT has taken note of a strategy document published by TFSE in July 2020 for which key points include

- The network was developed relatively early in the technological development of the railways. This means many routes were developed at a time when the economic geography of the South East area was different to how it is configured today.
- Some cross regional routes were closed when the railway network was rationalised in the 1960's
- The most pressing challenge for the rail network in future years relates to capacity, especially on radial routes into London. More capacity is needed on most radial railway corridors in the South East area (some more so than others).
- As with the highway network, orbital corridors are less well served by the railway network.
- There are also sections of orbital rail routes where capacity increases are needed such as the North Downs line, the Medway Valley line, Ashford to Hastings line and the two Sussex Coastway corridors

In January 2020 The Department for Transport has invited MPs, local authorities and community groups across England and Wales to propose how they could use funding to reinstate axed local rail services and restore closed stations.

We encourage our local councils and politicians to get behind this scheme and to take on board the various representations. Hopefully a compromise can be found that enables both the rail and canal projects to go ahead.

Incidentally, it should be noted that the original rail track was made to allow for double track at least as far as Cranleigh and we understand there would still be room for a single track line and the retention of The Downs Link footpath for walkers and riders

For further information see the following links

Wey and Arun Canal Trust

<https://weyarun.org.uk/>

Waverley Borough Council- Planning

<http://planning360.waverley.gov.uk/planning/search-applications?civica.query.FullTextSearch=WA%2F2020%2F0004>

ERTA

<https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/d0a88cb3/files/uploaded/Guildford-Horsham-Shoreham%20Brochure%20May%202020%20.pdf>

Downs Link

<https://www.visitsurrey.com/dbimngs/Downs%20Link%206%20Stage%20Route%20Guide.pdf>

Transport for the South East

<https://transportforthesoutheast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/TfSE-transport-strategy.pdf>

Department for Transport

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/re-opening-beeching-era-lines-and-stations>

Rail Future Surrey

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Surrey>

Cranleigh Railway Line

<http://www.cranleighrailway.info/>

Tram-Train

<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/tram-train-uk-sheffield-transport>