

# *The Curious Case of the Ash Valley Track*

ON 22 OCTOBER seven Widford residents attended an inquiry held under the terms of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 because there were plans to make a modification to a footpath in Widford that could result in a wide track being carved through the cow meadows in the valley beside the old railway line. The story begins in 2004 when a gentleman – Mark Westley from the Hertfordshire Footpath Society - noticed that a footpath (that had appeared on a map at the time of the building of the railway) no longer existed and he thought it should be reinstated. The problem was that since that time some of the land had been sold to Thames Water to build the sewage works, but the path had not been moved or repositioned on a map; it had just disappeared.

The fact that we all walk along a track around the sewage works is irrelevant. Mark Westley found from documents in 1878 that the path from what is now the coal yard on the B1004 should travel alongside the railway to its junction with Pegs Lane, be metalled and 20ft wide. This path was planned due to the Highways and Locomotives Act 1876 which encouraged the County Council to adopt roads leading from railway stations as main roads. He said this road would have been important because it avoided the gradient of what is now the B1004. As residents, we pointed out the flooding problems of this route and the choice of other higher routes heading towards Pegs Lane.

Widford residents were present because back in 2011 Richard Brickwood discovered what was planned when maps were posted showing the proposed changes at locations along the current path, which is presently used as a footpath. Twelve residents sent in letters supporting Richard stating that we did not want this footpath upgraded to a BOAT (byway open to all traffic). Herts County Council (HCC) and Thames Water (TW) also wrote their own views on this issue.

At the inquiry the move to make this path a BOAT had been dropped and it was suggested that it be made a restricted byway with the stile replaced by a gate that both cyclists and horse riders could use. The inquiry now concentrated on the footpath that had at one time crossed the land where the sewage works now stand. The route it actually took is in some ways irrelevant because, having established where it used to go, the information will then be passed to another department at HCC who will mark on the definitive map where it is *now*! Which brings us back to years of research by the planning department of HCC, a tome of paperwork sent to all the interested parties and a whole day of inquiry involving five members of HCC. So much expense to get where we *already* are! The hearing was adjourned and at the time of writing the outcome is still unknown as we wait for a decision from the Chairman of the inquiry. **Janine Wignall**

MICHAEL BUCK adds: An adjournment was necessary because of several complex issues involving the sale of land subject to rights of way of non-owners, the feasibility and plausibility of the proposed “historic” route and issues about flooding.
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