

Public Outrage: Save Our Ancient Bridleway

Over 80 concerned residents of Nayland, Wiston, Leavenheath and Stoke by Nayland expressed their outrage at the works carried out to a section of a popular ancient bridleway in the heart of the Dedham Vale Area of Natural Beauty at a public meeting in Nayland Church Hall on Wednesday evening. This situation has occurred on the bridleway between Beachams Farm and Gravel Hill, Stoke by Nayland arising from the grant of planning permission by Babergh District Council Planning Committee for the erection of a new house at Beachams Farm and other works on the site.

The meeting, arranged by Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society, was attended by Suffolk County Councillor James Finch, Glyn French the SCC Rights of Way Manager, John Ward the Leader of Babergh District Council and Gemma Pannell a Babergh Planning Officer.

Local resident Christopher Whybrow QC presented the current situation and the main areas of concern. He indicated that a number of options were available including an application to the courts for judicial review and a reference to the Local Government Ombudsman for maladministration.

According to Glyn French, permission from SCC was not sought before works commenced to the bridleway. He accepted that there might be grounds to bring a prosecution under the Highways Act 1980 but was of the opinion that little would be achieved by doing so. He explained that SCC has a statutory duty to ensure that walkers, riders and cyclist are safe to use the bridleway. SCC have amended their intention to make an order for temporary closure of the bridleway for a continuous period of six months and are looking at arrangements whereby the public will have access at the weekends and bank holidays and at other times of the day. Damage by construction vehicles accessing the bridleway via Nayland and Gravel Hill has not been addressed but consideration is being given to directing traffic to the Gravel Hill entrance to the bridleway from Stoke by Nayland.

Work by UK Power Networks will commence on 9th April. He is hoping to meet with the owner of Beachams Farm and his contractor to discuss the access arrangements and he will take on board the request for a regular user of the bridleway to attend such discussions. He is aware of many points raised in the considerable amount of correspondence received: damage to an old oak tree and banks on Gravel Hill, the narrow nature of Gravel Hill to accommodate lorries and pedestrians. He said there is no proof that any damage was connected to works at Beachams Farm and said vehicle registration numbers and photographs of situations that occur could be sent to him. Following reports of dangerous metal and glass within the hardcore that had been laid along the bridleway he said that he had found only a few small items; this would be monitored. Regarding reinstatement of the bridleway he said he was not clear on what the public were expecting.

John Ward reported that consideration would be given to asking the owner of Beachams Farm to make an application for retrospective planning permission for the works to the bridleway. In such circumstances all interested parties would have an opportunity to make representations in the planning process and it was possible that conditions could be applied to the planning permission detailing the steps necessary to achieve reinstatement of the bridleway.

Open questions and statements followed. It was pointed out that despite signage, lorries had been entering the site via Cock Street. Several witnesses said caterpillar track damage to the banks and an Oak tree on Gravel Hill had been done by a Beachams Farm construction vehicle. A member of the public produced a wide selection of rubbish picked out of the hardcore. A speed limit of 10mph, as recommended by the British Horse Society, was suggested rather than SSC's suggested 15mph. It was felt two days notice of the temporary closures was insufficient. Concern was expressed that this situation could give rise to other developers flouting planning legislation. It was felt reinstatement of the bridleway back to the condition and character as existed in December 2017 should be the eventual aim. Asked which end on the bridleway would provide future access to Beachams Farm, Glyn French said it would be the Gravel Hill end.

Asked why SCC did not know this situation was happening, Glyn French replied that there had been no reference to the works to the bridleway in the planning application. Asked why they did not stop the works when they found out, he said Babergh had granted permission and work had started. Asked if we can have assurance that repairs to all roads and banks will be repaired Glyn French said he cannot give that reassurance.

It was necessary to close the meeting, with many members of the public unable to contribute, due to time constraints.