

Lord Radnor
Longford Castle,
Salisbury,
SP5 4ED

DOWNTON
PARISH COUNCIL



19th February 2021

Dear Lord Radnor

Re: Proposed Footbridge Across the River Avon at Downton

The Parish Council is in receipt of the letter dated 22nd January 2021 from Mr Canty informing us of the Estate's decision to withdraw its agreement in principle, originally set out in a letter dated 16th May 2016, to allow a permissive path across the Estate's land and making it clear that the Estate will not facilitate a footpath to be created across the water meadow or allow a bridge structure to land on the river bank.

Of course, the Parish Council is very disappointed by this decision. The project to create a footbridge crossing the river from the East at Avon Meadow to the West at a field owned by the Estate, currently leased to Mr Dickson and used for cattle grazing, has been a long-deliberated project but one which surveys have shown is very well supported by residents of Downton. On the strength of the permission in principle outlined above, a significant amount of work has been undertaken and some considerable spending of public monies to progress the project.

The Downton Neighbourhood Plan, adopted in 2017 and supported by an overwhelming majority of residents, identified the desire for the bridge as a widely championed project. For so many reasons the bridge project has been held to bring benefits from facilitating access to open space (The Moot, the Recreation ground and Millennium Green) to residents in the West of the village encouraging well being and exercise and, for east end residents, making access to school safer by reducing the need to walk along the road or use cars, exacerbating parking problems in the village. Recent contact with both Trafalgar School and the Primary School has shown their strong support for a bridge for use by students and their families.

Mr Canty identifies a list of concerns, most of which have been expressed before, to the Bridge Project working group and about which members of the working group have offered to explain and counter the concerns. Three times a meeting has been offered without this being taken up. For information I have included some opening discussion points about the concerns he raised which are attached as an appendix.

We would very much like to understand if there is any further discussion or reassurance that we might provide in order that the Estate might reconsider the decision given in the letter of the 22nd January and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Jane Brentor
Current Chair of the Parish Council and Chair of the Bridge Project working group

cc. Will Dickson
The Hon P J Pleydell-Bouverie

Miss S A Laing
Mrs H Clark
Mr David Canty
Mrs Bev Cornish (Clerk to the Council)

(for appendix, please see following page)

**Appendix to letter from the Parish Council's Bridge Project working group
dated 19th February 2021**

NB The points that follow identify extracts from the Longford Estates' letter of 22/1/2021 and are identified in italics

Having reviewed the Ecology Report, Ecology Survey Summary and the working group's draft report, the Estate continues to have serious concerns about this project. These concerns include but are not limited to:

The cost of maintenance to the bridge, the proposed footpath and fences (that would be required either side of the footpath) in perpetuity

In previous discussions Wiltshire Council offered to maintain the bridge subject to certain conditions as when adopting infrastructure on new housing developments. However the Parish Council already maintains its property. The path would not experience the damage caused by vehicles to New Forest car parks and other self-binding cycle tracks in the New Forest receive little maintenance. Fencing would be common and simple post and stock wire to comply with Environment Agency requirements in a flood plain, however it was hoped to discuss fences with the Estate and learn from its experience with the permissive path they granted to Whaddon. The point about permissive paths is that the landowner maintains control over their opening so perpetuity is not an issue.

The practicalities of who is going to inspect, maintain and repair fences on a daily basis when livestock are grazing the water meadows

Observations are that grazing is infrequent on the particular meadows and they already contain fencing along the hedges, ditches and banks that the majority of the path follows. New fencing has been installed recently for grazing in Langley Woods along both public and permissive paths. Details of the farming requirements could be part of further discussion.

Many of the public footpaths for which Longford Estates has responsibility have been improved by volunteers, including installation of kissing gates using Path Improvement Grants and clearance of the Gills Hole to Langley Wood path. Volunteers have also cleaned the bridge by the Tannery so Downton has demonstrated its ability to maintain its infrastructure.

The increased potential risk of livestock escape and dog worrying of livestock

The three existing public footpaths that cross the meadows between the Newcourt Carrier and Trafalgar School, are accessed from South Lane and the A338, are unfenced. The aim of fencing the proposed permissive path is to restrict access by people and their dogs in the same way as the hedges and fences already restrict access from the public right of way along Track 60 that forms half of the route. We also note that there is no fencing on the meadows between Charlton and the Borough and wonder if there has been incidents of dog worrying.

The amount of litter that will inevitably become apparent

Downton Parish Council operates existing a litter pick service and inspection along the current footpath route in Moot Lane would reveal its success, as does the clean-up following the Cuckoo Fair, and this pick could be extended along the permissive path. We are also aware that Trafalgar School has previously addressed the litter issue along its boundary with the water meadows.

By contrast comments have been made about the large amount of litter along the length of Barford Lane across Longford Estates' land where no litter picking has been organised. Clean up does however take place across the New Forest to Cadnam and around Cadnam itself where volunteers can often be seen picking.

The potential use of the route for undesirable activities

Previous discussions with Will Dickson and Alastair Jones- Perrott indicated the main concern was if vehicular access was increased giving rise to fly-tipping and hare coursing and the route doesn't increase this. The route is an alternative to the

existing route along Moot Lane and the High Street so it is unclear how this might enable anti-social behaviour.

The likelihood that the path will be unusable for six months of the year due to water levels

This is an unfounded concern. Three of the Working Group members live overlooking the water meadows and can attest to flooding only occurring occasionally. The last major flood event in the Avon Valley was in 2014, for which there is photographic evidence, and even then Track 60 only held a few puddles. Some special measure such as a boardwalk may be required to cross the small wet area in the corner of the meadow where the Newcourt Carrier meets the Avon. The nearby existing footpaths across the Avon at Burgate, Cow Bridge and Charlton All Saints are all in regular use throughout the year.

The potential environmental impact on the flora and fauna of the main river and the water meadows

This is a matter for Natural England to address, being responsible for the River Avon SSSI, and previous discussions indicated the route is acceptable but this would be considered in determining a Planning Application. There are many examples of existing footbridges and paths in the Avon Valley and its tributaries without any reported concerns about nature conservation and, on the contrary, new permissive paths have been opened in nearby nature reserves.

Contrary to restricting access, DEFRA grants for environmental protection sometimes require public access, such as nearby permissive paths across Hale Estate and at Pepperbox Hill.

The proposed bridge landing point on the western bank is amongst a host of water vole burrows, this is home to both a protected and endangered wild mammal

This is recognised as a matter requiring mitigation measures and the Government has specific guidance for the protection of water voles. Mitigation measures are given in the CGO Ecological Survey already supplied to the Estate and these require further consideration but the measures proposed for the east bank could be adopted on the west. It is also known that Wessex Water have conducted work on the river bank at the Millennium Green with water vole mitigation measures in place. The presence of water voles should not have come as a surprise to Longford Estates as they should have been reported by its fishermen and they were known about by Downton residents. It was the Working Group members who advised CGO of the presence of voles prior to their survey.

Potential flood impact on the village (the Ecology report states that 'it is conceivable that there would be potential additional impacts during flood', this is omitted from the working group's Ecology Survey Summary)

The Environment Agency has to assess the flood impact and they have been consulted at various stages through the project and their advice followed in the plans for the bridge and the path. Unfortunately they declined a pre-app planning meeting so their formal position will only be obtained when a Planning Application is submitted. However flooding of Downton only occurs from a build-up of water upstream and the levels are well below any housing when the meadows flood at proposed downstream bridge location.

In summary:

From the outset this has been a project where Downton's community were dependant on the support of the landowner, Longford Estates, and were well aware that this was discretionary so it is especially disappointing to have received permission and then had it suddenly taken away. We hope that our answers above can be used as a basis for further discussion.