



The countryside charity
Cambridgeshire
and Peterborough

Mere Way, aka Akeman Street: CPRE Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's view

CPRE Cambridgeshire and Peterborough were approached by residents of Waterbeach, and by the British Horse Society (BHS). They had concerns regarding the activities of Urban & Civic and Cambridgeshire County Council Highways to transform the Mere Way ancient trackway, which was part of the Roman road known as Akeman Street, into a form of 'green lane' for cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders.

We have now had the opportunity to review what is happening and to discuss it via Zoom with some of those concerned.

As a result of our conversations with local campaigners, CPRE has become concerned about several issues, and we have a number of questions, as follows:

History and Archaeology

For centuries, before the Romans arrived and after, the Fen Edges were considered some of the most attractive places to live by our ancestors. This is perhaps best witnessed by Flag Fen near Peterborough and, locally, by two examples; firstly, the discovery of the Wilburton Hoard of bronze on Wilburton Fen which resulted in recognition of the Wilburton Phase of the Bronze Age, c. 1150-975 BC; secondly the discovery of an unusual animal sacrifice in a Haddenham garden, one explanation for which was that it might have been to ask the gods to stop the then rising sea levels from flooding the fen. Therefore, it is quite possible that Akeman Street was a well-used trackway well before the Romans turned it into a road.

Consequently, we find it very surprising that the work being carried out now has not been preceded by a proper archaeological study of the route. This is even more surprising because, in 1991, when a new water main was laid from Histon to Milton which crossed Mere Way and then ran alongside, a full archaeological study was carried out.

Why, we ask, has a similar study, funded by the developer, not been requested on this occasion which affects a much longer stretch of the ancient route?

Effect on Countryside and Wildlife

It can be seen from visiting the site and from photographs that heavy machinery is being used to clear the vegetation from along the sides of the route. It is highly likely that the pattern of this vegetation itself has developed and reflects the thousands of years for which it has bordered Mere Way. That in itself should be a subject of study by trained ecologists as well as survey for wildlife impact, but we have seen no evidence that either has been done.

It is equally worrying that this work has started when, following the cold weather, birds could still be raising second broods. If that is the case, it would surely make this work illegal.

This route and the vegetation cover bordering it will be used not just by walkers and farm traffic but also by all kinds of wildlife, some of which could be rare.

Have the ditches been surveyed for water voles or the land along the trackside been surveyed for badger setts? Has Milestone's planning ecologist surveyed the route prior to work commencing and carried out vegetation, vole and bat surveys?

Construction Standards

We have been told, following communication by others with Cambridgeshire County Council Highways who are carrying out this work, that the design standards being used are taken from the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges. This is the appropriate source of design and construction standards for public highways, including major routes such as the A14 and the Ely Southern By-Pass. It may deal with minor road design also but it is clearly not exactly aimed at the widening of a public bridleway.

The County Council has previously been very concerned to ensure that any work carried out to manage and/or improve Public Rights of Way should use appropriate, sympathetic, design, materials and construction methods. These were documented, following much research, in the 2005 document, Rights of Way – The Way Ahead and its 2016 update.

The standards and methods expressed in these documents seem far more appropriate than the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges in the hands of a highway engineer. *Where are the Public Rights of Way team?*

Mere Way is bordered along its length by ancient drainage ditches which appear to remain in use and presumably now join the Internal Drainage Board's, (IDB), system. The tarmac surface will probably increase the rate of water run-off into the ditches and hence the IDB system. Run-off rate is an increasing problem for local IDBs due to the fact that when it does rain, climate change has increased rainfall intensity. *Has the local IDB been consulted? Will they wish to increase their drainage rates?*

Public and Farm Safety

Mere Way was designated for 'improvement' in the S106 requirements of Urban and Civic's planning application for Waterbeach 'New Town'. The current 'improvement' involves the laying of a 4 metre wide strip of tarmac along the centre of the route and digging up and damaging virtually the whole width of the entire Roman road. Presumably, softer surfaces will be re-laid beside the tarmac strip. Our view and that of others is that will result in a much more dangerous surface than exists now.

Mere Way is bordered by farms and used by farm vehicles large and small. The wheel track width of many of these vehicles is wider than 4 metres, so they will be driving with one wheel on the tarmac and one wheel off. When deep ruts form alongside the tarmac, such vehicles will tilt and, if not driven very carefully and at low speed, especially when unevenly loaded with equipment like a five/six furrow plough or a folded set of hydraulic disc harrows or rollers, could easily roll over and cause a severe and even fatal accident to the driver or any passer-by. The same risk of tilt and roll over will apply to heavily laden produce trailers with wheel-tracks close to or wider than 4 metres.

Many farm vehicles are much wider than their wheel-track width, a combine harvester for example or a powered sprayer. It is likely that Mere Way is currently used by farmers to move such equipment between their fields and not being a road, they probably move the vehicles in working configuration, for example a combine harvester with its header attached or a sprayer with booms partially or completely lowered. This would result in a significant risk to fast moving cyclists who on such a flat route would be able to move at speeds between 20-25 mph.

Just imagine the damage if a fast moving cyclist was taken by surprise and ran head-on into the front of a combine harvester travelling at 15 mph with its header on and lifted.

Mere Way is well used by horse riders. They too would be at additional risk if farm traffic becomes faster moving, driven by boy-racer contractors on the now apparently smooth surface. We appreciate that a soft surface is intended for horse riders but riders have to pass each other and horses, due to their poor eyesight, are skittish things and so can easily come to be on the tarmac. Additionally, tarmac surfaces are in themselves an additional risk for horses whose metal shoes skid on the hard surfaces. They are also an additional injury risk to riders should they be unfortunate enough to fall off. Bridleways with their wide soft surfaces are safer places for horse riders and that is why riders use them in preference to busy tarmacked roads.

It seems to us there has been insufficient consideration of the safety issues.

Farm security

CPRE is becoming increasingly concerned about the farm security issues arising not only from this project but also from other similar projects, such as the GCP "Greenways" which are seeking to urbanise the countryside by laying tarmac along bridleways and footpaths. The hard surface will be a boon to vehicle-borne thieves and vandals who will be able to use motor cycles and quad bikes at speed to assist them.

Most farm equipment is highly expensive and increasingly at risk of theft or vandalism or both. We wonder if the increased security risks arising from easier and more frequent access to the farms which border the route have been discussed with the farmers or with Cambridgeshire Police. *How much easier will it be for hare coursers to exercise their vile 'sport' and damage crops in doing so?*

In these expensive times, our farmers are struggling to stay in business and produce the food we all need. They deserve more consideration.

Consultation

We understand that this project came about as a consequence of the Section 106 agreement arising from the Waterbeach development approval. That agreement, only stated "improve the route", not trash it by building a 4 metre wide tarmac road.

County Council planning approval was then given by means of a Section 278 approval which includes no requirement for public consultation. Given the scale of the works, it seems very unsatisfactory that there was no obvious opportunity for public consideration of the full details of the work proposed - only the principle.

Use of Public Funds and Resources

We question whether the current project actually represents best use of public, albeit via S106, funds. Mere Way runs parallel, only a few metres to the east, of the proposed GCP Waterbeach to Cambridge Busway which, if built, will incorporate a cycleway and bridleway.

There is a proposed GCP Greenway proposed to the east of the existing A10, incorporating a cycleway.

The A10 footpath has recently been widened and resurfaced supposedly to facilitate cycle traffic. Then there is the A10 replacement study which could also incorporate cycleways. *Just how many cyclists are expected to travel from Waterbeach to Cambridge and vice versa?*

We question whether all the various bodies involved in competing to spend hard-earned tax-payers money are actually spending it wisely. In addition, this project is being managed by County Highways whose time and manpower are limited. Time spent managing this project will not be spent managing the care and maintenance of the existing road network which, due to under-funding by central government, is in a serious state of disrepair in many places.

CPRE's position is that we would like to see this project halted, at least temporarily, while all of the above issues are considered by councillors having had the time and opportunity to discuss with concerned members of the public and relevant public organisations such as the BHS and CamCycle.

August 2023