

NOTES ON THE LITTLEWORTH RAILWAY CUTTING WHEATLEY TUNNEL, OXFORDSHIRE

J S Watson, April 2001

The disused railway cutting leading to the east end of the Wheatley tunnel is at grid reference SP580 051 to SP587 056 and is aligned approximately Southwest to Northeast. The cutting comprises about 2 hectares, some 0.9 km in length from the road in Littleworth to the tunnel entrance - almost twice the length of the equivalent cutting to the west of the tunnel, in Horspath. The tunnel was opened in 1864 and extensively repaired in 1883. Photographs of the work being done in 1883 are in the Bodleian Library. The railway was single track and was closed in 1963.

During the 1970s the cutting was largely infilled with pulverised domestic refuse under the authority of the District and County Councils, but the tunnel entrance remained clear. The waste was covered with about 1.5 m of clay and 0.5 m of subsoil and the site was officially acquired by the Oxfordshire County Council in April 1974.

In 1975 some local residents complained about effluent polluting the local streams and following investigations, in 1978 the County Council created several 'islands' with introduced topsoil on which to plant clumps of native tree species and the other open spaces were grassed (see sketch map, courtesy of David Mancey). The County Council agreed to retain ownership of the site in order to monitor the long term effects of the remedial works. In 1981 the Wheatley Parish Council expressed interest in leasing the site and in 1983 a 5 year lease was agreed but at the present time (2001) the County Council manages the site. Present management is fairly low key and primarily amounts to an annual grass cut in late summer, intended to prevent bush encroachment, with effluent monitoring if needed.

Over the intervening years several proposals have been made to create a more formal nature reserve on this site. In 1982 the Wheatley branch of Friends of the Earth (Joe Weston) suggested a reserve but negotiations between the County Council and the Wheatley Parish Council were inconclusive. In late 1987 the County Council suggested that the Wheatley Parish Council should take over the site to create a nature reserve, but again no agreement was reached.

At the present time the site is a *de facto* nature reserve. The trees planted in 1978 are well established, there are some wide open grassy spaces, several marshy areas with sedges and moisture loving plants, several patches of nettles - which thrive on fertile soils and presumably have taken advantage of the decomposed household refuse and the boundaries on the slopes of the cutting contain many indigenous plant species some typical of ancient forest.

The cutting to the west of the tunnel, in Horspath, was improved during 2000 and is now a formal 'park' with gravelled footpaths for ease of access. In contrast the Littleworth cutting has informal footpaths which are muddy, overgrown and sometimes difficult to access. The time may therefore be ripe to consider, again, some improvements for Littleworth.

As a first exercise for Littleworth, it would be desirable to do a botanical survey and to prepare an up to date field plan. Local expertise is available and willing: Ivan and Jacqueline Wright of Shotover Wildlife live in Horspath and have already been involved in botanical surveys in the Shotover Country Park. They

would be willing to advise on how to conduct a botanical survey and possibly to help if pupils from the Wheatley Park School could become involved (co-ordinated by Roger Kerr) - the pupils already help with heath restoration on Shotover.

To celebrate the millennium, a committee was formed in Wheatley - called 'Wheatley 2000'. Funds were accumulated during 2000 which are available for continued works (village meeting 30/3/01). It might therefore be possible to use some of the Wheatley 2000 funds to sponsor pupils from the Wheatley Park School to attempt a botanical survey and mapping project. If this could be successfully completed then it might lead the way towards further plans for improvements - which necessarily would be more expensive and would need some specific fund raising.

Distribution for comment:

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