

TOR HILL PEDESTRIAN WALKWAY PROJECT

This briefing paper has been produced to give Kington St Michael parishioners information about the historical context of the Tor Hill Pedestrian Walkway project at the south entrance to the village from the A350 Plough Crossroads.

Introduction to the project

Any resident traversing Tor Hill in or out of Kington St Michael village will be aware that the road on the hill is steep, very narrow in places and has blind bends. So much so that pedestrians crossing the road at the foot of the hill, are not visible to drivers approaching the top of the hill from the south.

Background to the project

The safety of residents and visitors to the village via Tor Hill has been of great concern to the Parish Council (PC) for many years. In 1963 PC records show that both the speed of traffic and the narrowness of the road presented significant risk to pedestrians who had no alternative route to take.

These issues were raised again in 1964, 1967 and 1969. North Wiltshire District Council (NWDC) Accident and Prevention Committee concurred with the PC regarding the dangers of the road. At this time the County Surveyor was asked to investigate. A spate of accidents then occurred in 1970 and from 1971 to 1976 the PC repeatedly informed the appropriate authorities of the dangers presented by Tor Hill to road users and particularly to pedestrians. Survey work on Tor Hill was finally carried out in 1986 and plans were developed to both widen and straighten the road and to build a pedestrian and cycling pathway separate to the road.

Compulsory Purchase Order

A compulsory purchase order commenced in 1987 to acquire a 9-metre strip of land alongside the C154 From the crossroads south of the village, down Tor Hill to the boundary of Magpie Cottage. The purchase was completed on 22nd of April 1988 for the sum of £900. At the same time the council was pursuing the purchase of Magpie Cottage No.1 Kington St Michael. The cottage, which stands at the foot of Tor Hill, was acquired in March 1989 for the sum of £108,000. The rest of Magpie Cottage and grounds were sold to a private owner in July 1990. The Council retained a 2-metre-wide strip of land across the front of the cottage which remains the property of Wiltshire Council to this day.

All was now in place for the long awaited "Road improvement and Footpath scheme". A significant amount of time, energy and public money had been spent to improve the safety of road users on Tor Hill. Then, quite simply no further action was taken by North Wiltshire Council to implement the scheme. The Parish Council continued to raise concerns about dangers accessing the village to no avail.

On the 1st of April 2009 North Wiltshire District Council was abolished and superseded by the single Unitary Authority of Wiltshire Council.

With the advent of the new Wiltshire Council the PC once again raised the issue of safety on Tor Hill. The PC now however was focussing on building a walkway to provide safe passage for pedestrians in and out of the village.

Between 2010 and 2012 progress was made with officers of the new authority to confirm ownership of the land previously purchased. The new County Council still owned the land and the need for safer access to the village was still present. The Landowner who had sold the land, under a compulsory purchase order, was also a parish councillor and confirmed that he had no claim on the land.

The minutes of the PC meeting 15th November 2012 refers to a site meeting between Wiltshire County Council Officers, Parish Councillors, the landowner and a Wiltshire Council Surveyor. The site meeting agreed that some of the compulsorily purchased land would be retained by the PC for the creation of a footpath.

Tor Hill: Phase 1 and 2

In April 2013 work started on phase 1 of the footpath alongside Tor Hill. By September 2013 having completed the ground works for the footpath the PC applied for a match funded Path Improvement Grant Scheme (PIGS) which was successful. This meant that the cost of the whole scheme would be shared 50/50 between KSM PC and the PIGS grant. Phase 2 of the pathway was carried out during the following months and the current Tor Hill path was completed in the spring of 2014.

Upon completion the path has provided a safer route to and from the village for pedestrians. This in turn has improved the safe passage of motorised vehicles on the hill, which no longer had to avoid pedestrians on the hill.

Although the second phase of the footpath had now been completed the path still stopped short of being linked to the existing footpath system in the village. Owning the land across the front of Magpie Cottage was essential to the project but was not in itself sufficient to enable the PC to proceed with the project. The new footpath had been built adjacent to the C154 not on it or crossing it. Although a relatively small project in respect of its length the last section of the footpath would be both technically and financially much more challenging to achieve. There were no sources of funding to help the PC commission the necessary surveys to develop a fully costed scheme to enable the path to be built.

Feasibility study

The PC took the decision to fund a feasibility study to be carried out by professional highways consultants. The study would produce a detailed proposal, to be compliant with all necessary guidance and regulations. This in turn will allow the Parish Council to request formal, competitive tenders from qualified construction companies. This formal process will enable the Parish Council to apply for alternative sources of funding/grants to be applied for. To facilitate this the PC added a new budget heading: Tor Hill Project to the 2014/2015 financial year, with an initial budget of £4000.

The PC continued to monitor the safety issues on Tor Hill which remains a hazard for road users.

By 2017/18 the PC had sufficient ear marked funds in the Tor Hill Project Budget to seek out a suitably qualified local architect to carry out the feasibility study. With the

help of the Royal Institute of Architects free service “Find an Architect “the PC was able to appoint a local architect to begin work on the final phase of the footpath.

By June 2018 initial visits and scoping works had taken place and a fee proposal agreed. It soon became clear that the complications of the relatively small (in Highways Project terms), project would require all the skills and expertise needed for a major highways project. This led to some acceptable delays. The Parish Council were then able to transfer the project to Mayer Brown.

The PC subsequently made a submission for a grant toward the survey and scheme development costs to Community Area Board Transport Group (CATG). Unfortunately, this request was rejected in the summer of 2019.

Parish Council Budgetary Commitment

The Parish Council discussed different options available at meetings in October and November 2019. The Parish Council voted to proceed with an initial financial commitment of £20,000 for consultancy fees, survey fees and project development (to take the project to the start of a formal tendering process) to ascertain the likely cost of capital works. However, this would now also include essential remedial works to some of the existing footpath. To reduce the steepness of the path for it to be fit for purpose and within Health and Safety guidelines.

This work with Mayer Brown has proceeded well but like everything else was considerably affected by the arrival of the Covid 19 Pandemic and all its restrictions. This was particularly so during the period March 2020 to December 2021, when various levels of lockdown were being enforced. Much of 2022 was also impacted by the ‘catch up’ effect of Covid but gradually surveys were taking place and have now been concluded with options now proposed.

The Parish Council are now ready to consult residents on proposals provided by Mayer Brown.