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Inspector hears arguments for and against Network Rail proposal

Battle lines drawn in fight for rail crossing

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The future of Newmarket's Weatherby rail crossing could depend on a single issue, a public inquiry in the town heard on Tuesday.

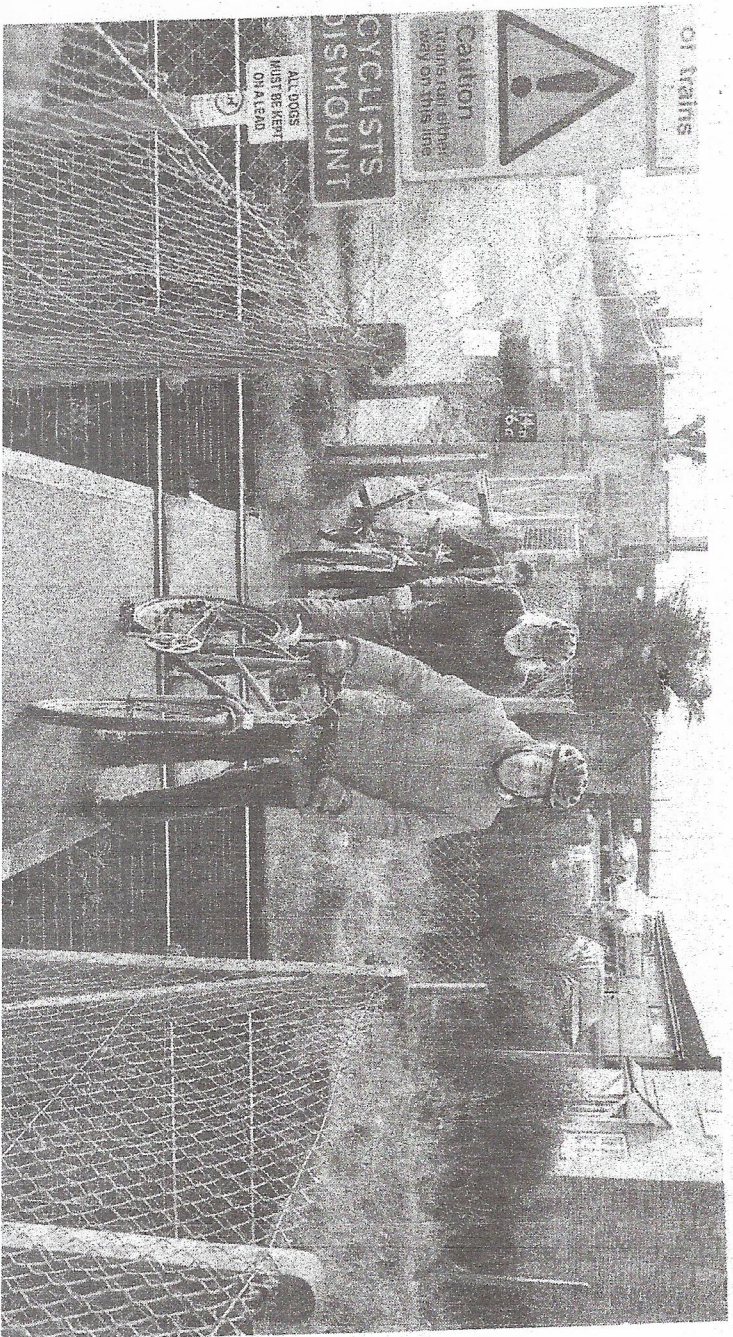
The inquiry, which is now expected to last until the beginning of May, was considering plans submitted by Network Rail to close or downgrade 24 crossings in Suffolk.

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But Jacqueline Lean, counsel for Network Rail, took the well-attended hearing by surprise only an hour into the opening day when she told government-appointed inspector Ian Jenkins that if he decided the diversionary route, via New Cheveley Road, Green Road and Granary Road, did not meet the criteria of being 'suitable or convenient', Network Rail would remove the Weatherby Crossing from the closure order making any immediate discussion of the right of way issue unnecessary.

"It will then be for Network Rail to take such actions as it sees fit with regard to the crossing - including closure on the basis that it is not subject to any public rights of way," added Mrs Kean.

Barrister Merrow Golden,



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The inquiry, which is now expected to last until the beginning of May, was considering plans submitted by Network Rail to close or downgrade 24 crossings in Suffolk.

An initial two days of hearings were held on Tuesday and Wednesday at the Memorial Hall when Network Rail faced opponents of the proposed closure of the Weatherby crossing, including Suffolk County and Forest Heath District Councils, Newmarket Town Council, The Ramblers Association and a number of individual residents who had submitted objections.

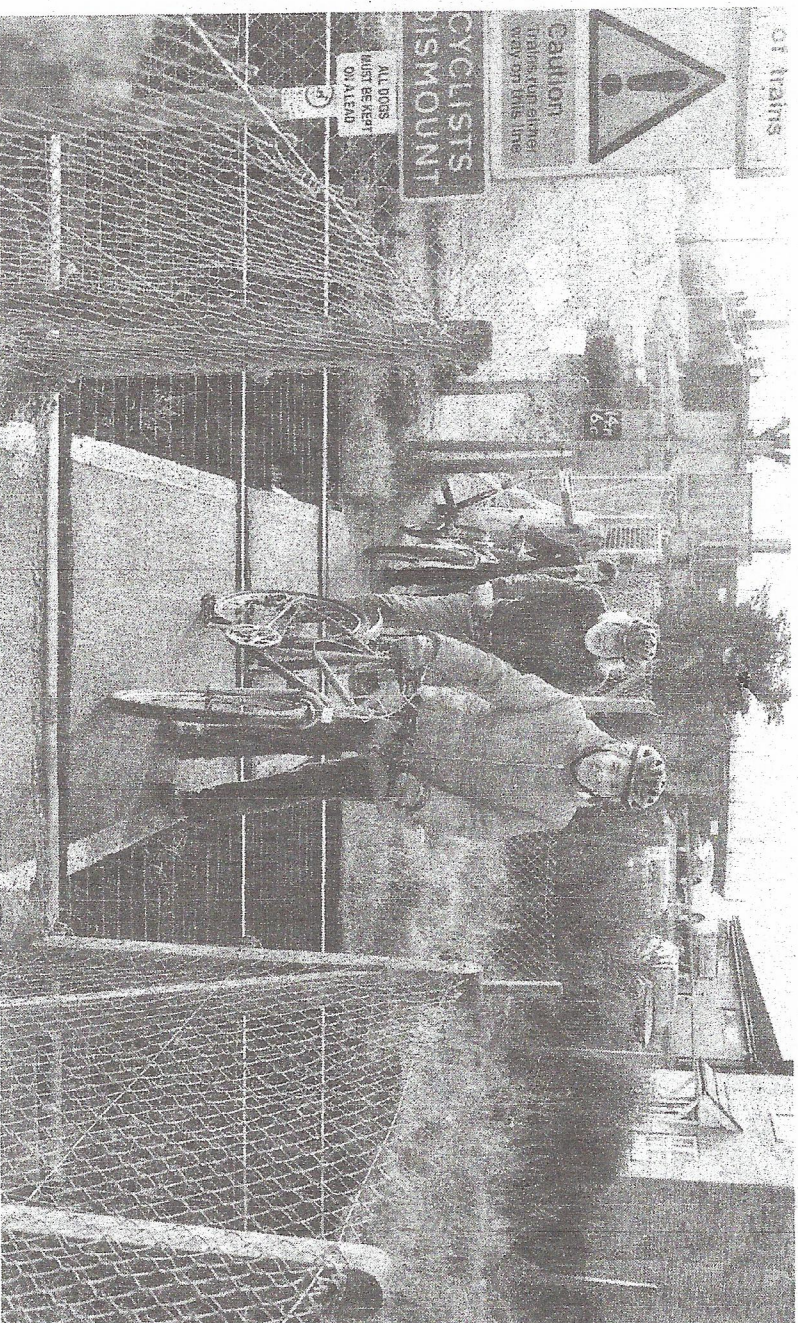
Two issues had been expected to dominate the hearing with Network Rail categorically refusing claims that the crossing was a public right of way, and objectors dismissing the rail company's suggested alternative route into the town centre as unacceptable.

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"It will then be for Network Rail to take such actions as it sees fit with regard to the crossing - including closure on the basis that it is not subject to any public rights of way," added Ms Kean.

Barrister Mervyn Golden, representing Suffolk County Council, replied: "The council strongly opposes any option or proposal which might allow Network Rail to close the crossing with out a full investigation of its status (as a right of way) being undertaken first."

A presentation by Sue Tilbrook, from global engineering and development consultancy Mott MacDonald who were engaged by Network Rail, told the inquiry that be-



Campaigners say closing the crossing will mean long diversions for townsfolk

tween June 25 and July 3 2016, her team had conducted a survey which revealed that 3,597 pedestrians and 442 cyclists used the crossing, mainly for access to property, employment and amenities.

Ms Tilbrook said that if these people used the suggested alternate route it would be about 850 metres further and would take about 10 minutes longer at normal walking pace. There was a good walking sur-

face, the width of pavements would comfortably accommodate the extra users and there would be no need for any extra additional road safety measures to be installed, she said.

"I am satisfied the proposed route is suitable and convenient for the uses the survey established," said Ms Tilbrook.

In answer to questioning

→

Rail inquiry

Lawyer points to 'fatal flaw' in case

→ FROM PAGE 1

from Ms Golden, Ms Tilbrook said her team had not carried out an origin and destination survey to establish where the 400-plus people using the crossing each day had come from and were going to.

"The county and district councils will say it is a fatal flaw that you did not do that," said Miss Golden. For a proper assessment of the route it was essential to know 'who was using it and what they were using it for', she said.

Earlier, John Prest, Network Rail's level crossing manager, told the hearing the Weatherby crossing was rated as high risk. There had recently been four 'near misses' which had required the train driver to apply the emergency brake.

"These involved a child being pulled back by a parent, someone using a mobile phone who was distracted, a mobility scooter user and a

cyclist," said Mr Prest.

The only completely safe option for the crossing would be a fully accessible footbridge but it was not cost effective and there was insufficient space on Network Rail land for this to be a viable alternative, said Mr Prest.

His assertion was challenged by resident Philip Hodson who had compared the site with the 'very impressive footbridge at Kennet' and believed there would be room for a bridge at the Weatherby crossing.

Mr Hodson said that on the basis of £2 million to erect a bridge and 3,500 users a month, the cost over 10 years would be £1.37 per crossing.

"I suggest this is quite cost effective," said Mr Hodson.

The inquiry is expected to be back in Newmarket for two additional days, probably on May 1 and 2 to hear lengthy evidence from Network Rail's Senior Project Engineer Andy Kenning who could not attend this week because of illness.