

Dersingham,
Langham Road
Robertsbridge
East Sussex
TN32 5EP

Proof of evidence

I have lived in the village for almost 9 years but have been visiting here all my life as my grandparents moved here in the 1950s. I have seen the village grow and known it when the A21 was the High St.

My understanding is that the Transport and Works Act is intended to enable projects whose expected benefits to the wider public outweigh the general assumption in law that a person is entitled to hold and enjoy their own property. I do not believe this is the case here. I will explain why in three key areas: lack of socio/economic benefits, traffic congestion and risk of flooding.

Socio/economic benefits

Over the years, various claims have been made for expected economic benefits from the link to the mainline railway, reaching into the millions. However, when it comes to making this application, RVR were noticeably more cautious. Their own report (Environmental survey Addendum A) stated,

"The local social/economic impacts of the scheme would be minimal, though very marginally positive amongst certain receptors in the impact area. The benefits would arise from improved connectivity for inward tourism that would translate to a small increase in local jobs in this sector."

My understanding is that RVR uses volunteers so will create few jobs actually running the railway. If, as they hope, most visitors would come by train, they would only use shops etc in walking distance. The High St is full of listed buildings, so there is no room to expand and the shops are those which fulfil the needs of a small village and the outlying villages which depend on it (mini-supermarkets, pharmacy, baker, hardware store, vet, florists, hairdresser). It would be harmful to the village if one of the existing facilities was turned over to tourist trade, which would only be seasonal. There is also the risk to existing businesses if parking becomes very difficult. The baker's is also a small coffee shop, with 4 small tables squeezed in and 2 or 3 outside. They have no room to expand. It seems unlikely any new business would be viable if it only has business for 4 months a year. The two pubs within the village could attract customers from the railway.

The major economic risk of this project is associated with the greater risk of flooding which I cover more fully in a later paragraph. The potential cost of insurance claims and higher premiums is significant.

Traffic/congestion

Tom Higbee's Proof of Evidence proposes that only 15% of visitors would arrive by train. This is a hope; not a certainty. Two small studies, of visitors to Bodiam and to a heritage railway near Tunbridge Wells (cited in Emma Watkins' objection), indicate the opposite. RVR offer no analysis of how their cars would impact on the village, apart from near the level crossings. It seems possible that cars would be arriving to catch the train just as people returning on the train were leaving, an unknown number of cars, in a short period. There are three places where traffic is reduced to one way; George Hill, Northbridge St and Station Rd. All three are very sensitive to even short term increases in traffic flow.

RVR intend to avoid "rush hour" as in 9ish and 5/6ish. However, we have a rush hour at 3-4pm as we have two schools, a primary on George Hill and a secondary at the top of Knelle Road. RVR could be running a train at this time, in term time. More cars park on George Hill at these times and 6 buses travel through the village to the secondary school every school day. There is also short term congestion at the crossroads between Langham Rd and Knelle Rd at school pick up time.

In addition the village has been allocated a target of providing another 150 houses and small infill developments do not count towards this total so there will actually be more than 150. A small village, with a conservation area, in a flood plain where 2 rivers converge, struggled to find suitable sites within the development boundary. One of these sites would be accessed from Northbridge St, near the proposed level crossing, the other from George Hill. Obviously this extra housing will generate more traffic. This is not RVR's fault but the cumulative effect needs to be considered. Also, when there is an accident and the A21 is blocked, traffic from the trunk road is routed through the village. This creates gridlock very quickly. There are obvious concerns if emergency vehicles cannot get through or are stuck amidst cars with so space to pass on pavements or verges.

Robertsbridge is a "Service Village", providing essential facilities such as GPs, a pharmacy and dentists to neighbouring villages. Those living outside Robertsbridge need to be able to park when they visit them. We already have the effect of commuters who do not want to pay for parking leaving their cars wherever they can; Mill Rise, Bellhurst Road and lower Langham Road are favourites. We now have parking enforcement which has reduced parking on Station Rd but it has been impossible to see whether commuters are using the station car park more or are moving further out into residential streets as normal travel patterns have been changed by Covid.

There is a car park at the station but no proposals from RVR on how visitors would be induced to use it if they believed they could park with no charge elsewhere. Their calculations for the need for parking spaces do not cover special events, such as "Santa trains", which they expect would generate more traffic. Therefore there is a significant risk that visitor parking would exacerbate congestion. People unfamiliar with the village do not know if their chosen parking space will block a road. As an example, in 2018, a car was parked on Knelle Rd. There are no yellow lines, no indication that this would be a problem. But along came the first of the school buses and struggled to get by as the car was on the curve of the road opposite a large tree. As the first bus struggled on the verge to

get its wing mirror past the tree, the other 5 buses were blocking Brightling Road/Station Road. At the same time, cars parked at the crossroads between Langham Road and Knelle Rd had left space for a car to get through but certainly not a fire engine.

The documents regarding the planning permission granted by Rother District Council included this comment from the local Highways Authority, East Sussex County Council,

"Concerns have been raised locally regarding the potential impact that this development will have on the centre of Robertsbridge, particularly with regard to on street parking. These concerns are shared by this highways authority and therefore we would wish to ensure that a travel plan is included as part of any proposal. Specifically, the travel plan should review the existing car parking within the High St, Northbridge Street, Station Road and associated streets."

This application only includes the assessment that they expect sufficient parking spaces will be available in the station car park-sufficient presumably if only 15% of extra visitors arrive by car.

In conclusion, increased traffic and parking would adversely affect daily life in the village and trade, worsen air pollution and potentially delay access to emergency vehicles.

There is a major conflict between two assumptions in Tom Higbee's Proof of Evidence. On one hand, linking the railway will create extra spending and encourage extra visits to other tourist attractions, yet most people will travel to Robertsbridge by train. If they are on foot, they will not be able to visit most other tourist attractions, eg, Batemans, or Sissinghurst.

Flood risk

Robertsbridge grew up on the confluence of 2 rivers. Clay soil becomes waterlogged, run off into rivers can be fast from the surrounding higher ground and as it is not very far to the sea at Rye, a high tide slows the rate at which the water flows out to sea. In the past river meadows served their purpose, could be used for grazing in summer and flood in winter with little harm done. However, over time, more houses were built on lower ground and in the 1980s the A21 Robertsbridge bypass was built across the flood plain on an embankment. Around the year 2000, this was found to have acted as a dam and the lower parts of the village were flooded twice. A very expensive flood prevention scheme was put in place, with flood gates, bunds and automatic pumping out of a drainage ditch if water levels rose too high. The Environment Agency keep a very close eye on the village when flooding is possible, they stay here, they are up all night, the risk is seen as a very real one.

Now RVR propose to build an embankment across the flood plain, joining the A21 embankment and at right angles to it. Their own earlier assessment (Environmental survey Non Tech Vol 1 Section 4) stated,

"The presence of the new railway embankment will result in a loss of floodplain storage and the bridge crossings will impact flooding by obstructing flood flows.... Flood defences at Northbridge St and Station Rd would need to be raised by .3 m to mitigate the increased flood risk caused by the proposed scheme. There are no plans to defend the museum, pavilion, a commercial property on Station Road, properties at Robertsbridge Abbey, Udiam Cottages, Forge Farm and Park Farm."

The next section of the report refers to the proposal from RVR to fund improvements to flood defences. They seem to have abandoned this commitment. However, after referring to these promised improvements, the report continues,

"However for an electricity substation west of the High St and a pumping station/electricity substation east of the village, there would be an increased risk of flooding, which is considered a significant effect."

So in a previous flood risk assessment(which did not include more recent upgrades for climate change),they were saying there would be an increased risk of power failure and sewage not being pumped away from the village even if the flood defences were raised.

Rother District Council imposed the following condition on the application for the A21 crossing,

"No development shall take place until a satisfactory scheme for compensatory flood storage has been submitted. The applicant will need to demonstrate that there will be no loss of floodplain storage post development with any loss of flood plain storage to be compensated for on a volume by volume, level by level basis and in a suitable location. "

RVR has not yet provided this. I believe the adequacy of such arrangements should be tested at this enquiry.

I think the importance of keeping the culverts under the embankment on the flood plain clear has been established. I do not understand why RVR has not provided a schedule of inspection for these culverts. I understand that they cannot provide a schedule for clearing them until they know how often they block but surely this inquiry should have the opportunity to test the adequacy of planned inspection (and remedial action) arrangements?

I do not know whether the flood risk assessments have included consideration of the surface water run off from the A21, which flooded houses in Northbridge St. I understand that representations were made to Highways England about diverting the flow of water, and any changes in water flow may affect the water flow on the river meadows.

Planning permission has been granted for 96 dwellings on the Hodson's Mill site which will reduce the capacity of land in the locality to absorb water. Plans for that development obviously took into account the flood risk there but I would like to be reassured that the development there and the railway are looked at as a whole, for their potential effects on each other.

I believe that the human and economic cost of potential flooding far outweighs any gains from having a railway.

I would have expected the applicants would have to provide a detailed business plan, to demonstrate that the scheme would be viable but they have just said in the past that their charity has the money to do this work. This seems inadequate to me. As an example, if the village floods, would insurance companies seek redress from RVR if it was clear the new embankment had exacerbated flooding? Would insurance cover that risk and have they budgeted for this? I understand they are now providing some financial information but I have not seen this.

I know other objectors will have gone into detail about the environmental effects of the proposed line. I support them on this. I have walked along the banks of the river, it was a perfectly tranquil,

beautiful setting, the river meadow bordered by a linear copse of mature trees which would be felled to create the railway line. The hoped for gains do not sufficiently outweigh the damage to the whole community to justify this destruction.

I also have concerns about the level crossings, safety and congestion issues on the A21 but feel these are adequately addressed elsewhere.

Kathryn Bell