

**David Faithfull (OBJ/1037)**

**Re: Proposed Rother Valley Railway (Bodiam to Robertsbridge Junction) Order**

I am a retired physics teacher and Chartered Electrical Engineer, and my wife and I have lived in the village for the last 27 years.

In this presentation I am referring to my letter of 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018 to The Secretary of State for Transport.

My objections to the proposal are concerning the following – by now well aired - issues:

1. The compulsory purchase of land
2. The crossing of the A21
3. The impact on traffic and parking in the village
4. The increased risk of flooding in the village
5. The realistically possible benefits being far outweighed by the severity of the problems

However, I wanted to focus these objections on the approved and ‘made’ Salehurst & Robertsbridge Neighbourhood Development Plan (SRNDP), which I believe shows that in many areas the RVR plan **contravenes its policies**.

The Neighborhood Plan represents a most accurate and comprehensive snapshot of the views of a very large cross-section of the village population, across a very wide range of issues.

Unfortunately, I was not able to be present for the presentation by the Chairman of the Parish Council, which will have clearly presented the Neighborhood Plan policies which are of particular relevance here, and I am conscious of the importance of not going over ground already covered. However, I am keen to add my weight to these considerations.

Before I do that, I would wish to make my own comment on the issue of the possible compulsory purchase of land. This has of course been very well aired and discussed

already, but it is of huge importance.

Like I suspect the vast majority of people, I find CPOs deeply unpalatable in principle. However, I accept that where a development is *significantly* and demonstrably important for the local or national transport infrastructure such orders may be necessary. I believe that in no way is the RVR proposal an important infrastructure development. For example, it can hardly be considered an important transport link between Robertsbridge and Bodiam/Tenterden: even supposing that there is a large body of people who currently commute or otherwise regularly travel over this route, a seasonal and off-peak service – which RVR would be – would hardly be very useful. I therefore believe that the justification for CPOs for this project is non-existent.

### 1. **The crossing of the A21**

I find it extraordinary that there could ever be permission granted to install a level crossing across this busy, main, trunk road. The particular stretch affected – the Robertsbridge by-pass – carries very high volumes of traffic during peak times, and continuously large volumes at almost all other times. On summer weekends, probably the busiest time for the RVR service, there is an almost constant flow of heavy traffic down to the coast (and back). Traffic on the by-pass is frequently (if not always) very fast, and for north-bound traffic the crossing would not be visible for the first few hundred yards, so that the probability of there being high-speed collisions becomes significant.

RVR's assessment of the effect on traffic flows on the A21 is surely flawed; however favourably they calculate it, having the crossing down during busy times will certainly cause additional tail-backs and delays on an already busy and frequently overloaded road.

The SRNDP says:

#### **Policy EC7: Tourism (extract)**

*“ [Business development in the Parish will be encouraged where] 3. It will not cause or exacerbate any traffic problems and will promote **sustainable transport**”*

### **Policy LE3: New facilities (extract)**

*"[Proposals for new and/or improved community facilities will be supported subject to the following criteria] 3. The proposal would not have unacceptable impacts on the local road network and will actively promote access by sustainable transport..."*

#### **2. The impact on traffic and parking in the village**

RVR estimated that up to 50,000 visitors to the railway per year will come to Robertsbridge via the main line from London (my apologies if this figure is no longer the correct one). This is surely a gross over-estimate, and optimistic in the extreme. But even if the numbers were as high as 20% of this, and given that it is highly speculative that *all* of those would come to Robertsbridge via the national rail line, it is inconceivable that the village would not be hugely strained with higher traffic volumes and increased parking, to the great detriment of local residents.

The SRNDP says:

### **Policy EC5: Tourism (extract)**

*"3.1.5 .... It is also extremely important that a balance is kept so that tourism development does not have an adverse effect on local beauty and tranquillity."*

### **Policy IN2: Loss of parking**

*"Development proposals that would result in the overall net loss of existing on-street and/or off-street parking will not be supported"*

### **Policy IN3: Maintain and improve existing infrastructure (extract)**

*"[New and/or improved infrastructure..... will be encouraged and supported in order to meet the identified needs of the Parish, subject to the following criteria] 3. The proposal would not have significant impacts on the local road network"*

#### **3. The increased risk of flooding in the village**

RVR's development plan would take the railway across the flood plain. In general terms, for any development, this is a bad idea; but in this particular case it is hard to see how the project could not but increase risks to property and land were there to be

another flooding event. Reporting on their commissioned study, RVR said that the rise in flood water levels caused directly by the new railway would be around 1mm. Firstly, given the minimal flood avoidance measures that they propose (see later) I do not believe that this can possibly be the case. Secondly, whatever their method of calculation, such a degree of resolution in flood heights is not only impossible but also meaningless. In answer to questions about the nature of the flood avoidance that they will adopt, RVR said they would have frequent culverts in the railway embankment. It has been pointed out that at best this would divert the flood waters elsewhere, not discharge them away safely: in other words it would become someone else's problem. The SRNDP is specific on this point:

**Policy IN8: Reducing flood risk (extract)**

*“Development will not be supported in flood attenuation areas where that development would reduce the ability of these areas to alleviate flooding. Proposals to use culverts simply to pass the potential to flood to elsewhere, i.e. not as part of a viable SuDS strategy, will not be supported.”*

**4. The realistically possible benefits are far outweighed by the severity of the problems**

It is only right that the objections raised above are considered in the context of any benefits that the creation of the RVR railway might have for the village. RVR's estimates for the benefits to tourism I believe are wildly optimistic. In one of their submissions they said that they believed many of the visitors to Robertsbridge would come straight down from London and catch the RVR train to Bodiam and/or Tenterden. This seems likely, since there is not a lot in the village for visitors to see or do. Thus the major part of any money spent would not be to the benefit of the village. RVR also cited the extension of the Bluebell line to East Grinstead as an example of the benefits to the local economy of this type of project. There are significant differences between the two situations because of the vast difference in population and consequent large difference in the provision of infrastructure: the population of East Grinstead is around 24,000, that of Robertsbridge around 2,700. In East Grinstead there are at least 10 inns or pubs and 8 restaurants within walking distance of the railway terminus. In Robertsbridge and

Salehurst there are 3 pubs and 3 restaurants. In East Grinstead they have a theatre, cinema, town museum, sports centre with swimming pool, many more shops than Robertsbridge, 9 banks/cashpoints, and a National Trust property. Thus the appeal to, and support of, visitors to East Grinstead on the Bluebell Railway is far greater than would be the case for the Robertsbridge proposal. In summary, the comparison is invalid and unhelpful.

A few words in summary. I am not opposed to the reinstatement of heritage railways; indeed I am a life member of the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway. Further, I am not demonstrating 'nimbyism' - the idea of a steam train running through Robertsbridge is quite appealing, were it not for the significant and serious issues which it raises, and the problems which it creates. The human, environmental and safety costs are simply far too high.