

Meeting to discuss the stones across the River Wharfe at Burley in Wharfedale

Date: 10th May 2010

Venue: Queen's Hall, Burley in Wharfedale

In attendance: Jon Obank (JO) – West Riding Anglers
Peter Grinham (PG) – Save Our Stones
Danny Jackson (DJ) – Countryside & Rights of Way, Bradford Council
Kath Windett (KW) – Rights of Way, Bradford Council
Jo Griffiths (JG) – Clerk to Burley Parish Council
Sylvia Tilford (ST) – Burley Parish Council
Duncan Ault (DA) – Save Our Stones
Michael Bartholomew (MB) – Ramblers Association
Richard Todd (RT) – Highways Structures, Bradford Council

1. Introduction

Cllr Tilford opened the meeting and welcomed all those attending. Colleagues from Legal Services at Bradford Council were expected. The meeting had been organised to explore issues around the stones and discuss the way forward.

2. The stones as a Right of Way

KW advised that there is a pedestrian Right of Way across the stones on the Definitive Map from the early 1950s. There had been an appeal when the Right of Way was first proposed for inclusion on the Definitive Map but this had not been upheld. KW noted that the route to the Right of Way is a bridleway that then continues over the ford.

It was KW's understanding that BMDC had a responsibility to maintain the Right of Way in the condition it was in when first registered.

KW reminded those at the meeting that the stones are not originally stepping stones but a water control measure.

A query was raised if there were any photographs of the stones from the early 1950s that would confirm the condition at that time. JG had a photograph of repair work in the late 1940s that was passed round. KW would check with Legal Services if they had any photographs on file.

RT confirmed that BMDC has responsibility for maintenance of all of the stones regardless of the boundary between West and North Yorkshire.

3. Accessibility

Photographs of the stones taken last week, last summer and in the 1980s were shown to the meeting.

Discussion took place on the accessibility of the stones and the consensus was that the stones are now less accessible due to the amount of time during the year that they are covered by water.

RT confirmed that a survey in February 2010 had indicated that at least two stones were loose and required repair works.

JO advised that West Riding Anglers carried out work last summer to remove the tree trunks lodged on the weir and to remove silt and gravel that had built up on the right hand side of the river. This had been done using a mini digger and had required permission from the Environment Agency. The material excavated had been added to the island as there was no permission to move material away from the river site. The work had been done to improve the flow of the river on the right hand side. It was agreed that this work had been successful and the river now flowed more evenly but one consequence was that more of the stones close to the Burley side were less passable than previously.

4. Responsibility for maintenance

RT confirmed that BMDC are responsible for maintaining the existing line and level of the stones. In his opinion the river bed level has risen due to the drop out of sediment on the river bed. The drop out of

sediment is what the stones are designed to encourage in order to preserve the integrity of the weir and in that respect the stones are working as intended. The consequence of the raised water levels are that the stones are submerged for far more of the year. BMDC uses the 1977 survey of the stones as a basis for their measurements of river levels and the stones.

Discussion took place on the size and position of the island which was uniformly agreed to have altered in both size and shape in the last 20-30 years. It was felt that in the last 10 years in particular the island had extended much further towards the stones. The build up of silt was not only raising the river bed but reducing the flow of water around the stones and therefore reducing the amount of silt that is washed away by the river's normal flow. . It was particularly noted that a number of large blocks of dressed stone are now part of the island. It was agreed that it would be helpful to determine where the stone had come from. If it had come from the weir itself it might suggest that the integrity of the weir had been breached. It may however, have come down from further upstream during periods of flooding.

ST enquired whether BMDC's responsibility to maintain the Right of Way extended to ensuring that the level of the river bed did not impede access. RT advised that it did not and that maintenance of the river bed was the responsibility of the land owners (these were identified) and the Environment Agency. Any works would need to be carried out with the permission of the Environment Agency. JO confirmed that the work carried out by the Anglers last year was carried out in consultation with the Environment Agency.

RT was questioned as to whether the requirement to maintain the Right of Way in the condition it was at the time of the Definitive Map was a requirement to maintain the stones in the physical condition that they were in the early 1950s or the level of accessibility to the stones at that time. RT advised that it was the former. MB asked if a notice could be served on BMDC to the effect that the Right of Way was obstructed due to the level of water over the stones. KW was not aware of any similar actions, obstructions tend to be something that can be controlled by an individual and this was not the case with the stones.

JO confirmed that West Riding Anglers own half the river bed, the goit, the weir and subject to the proper consultation he could not see that it would be detrimental to the Anglers if more of the stones were uncovered.

It was suggested that removal of the accumulated silt and gravel on the river bed may help reduce the water levels and allow the stones to be further exposed.

5. Injunction

An injunction had been taken out in 1949 against Ilkley Urban District Council by Fison's (owner of Greenholme Mills) when it had attempted to raise the height of the stones. It had been hoped to gain further insight into the injunction from colleagues at Legal Services from Bradford Council. Unfortunately no-one was in attendance.

6. Impact of the Hydro Electric Scheme

Discussion took place on the likely impact of the scheme on the stones. It was JO's understanding that hydro-electric scheme was designed to maintain an adequate flow of water along the river bed so that it was unlikely that there would be a substantive drop in river levels at the site.

7. Future of the stones

DA asked for the Ramblers Association view on access across the river via the stones versus a bridge. MB advised that the Ramblers Association believe a Right of Way across the river is best protected by a bridge but that it is not opposed to improvements to the stones to increase access.

RT was asked for likely costs to repair/replace damaged stones. He estimated costs to be between £2,000 and £5,000 per stone. He advised that in the current climate and pressures on his budget the repair of these stones would have to remain a lower priority. ST asked if financial contributions towards these costs from third parties would be considered and RT thought that this might be possible. He would start the process of generating the scheme of work as it would require Environment Agency permission.

JO advised that West Riding Anglers had no current plans to carry out any further work in this area.

KW reminded the meeting that any work would need to give consideration to the bridleway and the impact of any work on access to this route.

It was agreed that ST & JG would report back to the Parish Council the content of the meeting and recommend that Burley Parish Council contact the Environment Agency to express concerns about the river bed and request that they carry out work to reduce the level of accumulated silt/gravel. For any work to take place a consultative process would need to be established between the Parish Council, the landowners, the Environment Agency and Highways Structures at Bradford Council. DJ would provide JG with a possible contact at the Environment Agency.

8. Any Other Business

JO was asked when the weir was last inspected. JO was unsure when this had last been done. MB asked if there was any reason why a handrail could not be installed next to the stones to give assistance to those crossing. KW and DJ thought the Environment Agency would be unlikely to give permission as it would form an obstruction in the river (a possible trap for debris). There were reservations that it would be inappropriate to add a handrail that might encourage people to cross when the river was dangerous.