

Leigh Ornithological Society

Leigh Ornithological Society currently has 100 members and was founded in 1971. From that date and up to the present day, its members have actively recorded the birds in an area stretching north from the Manchester Ship Canal to the Bolton moors and from Billinge in the west to Whitefield in the east.

The section of the current HS2 consultation on which the Society is focussing is that from Manchester to Bamfurlong and the details of our concerns about that part of the route are set out here.

The route north from Manchester across the Ship Canal seems to have been chosen partly because the required 5km of embankments would be a fine repository for the minimum of two million cubic metres of spoil which will be extracted from the 11.9km twin tunnels into Manchester and their lead-in cutting. In our view the route and embankment wrecks an open stretch of the Mersey Valley between Birchwood and Cadishead. The existence of other high-level crossings (M60, M6) cannot be seen as any sort of justification.

Alternative access routes to Manchester exist which would not generate as much spoil. Equally, local assessment of HS2's claimed benefits from this route suggests they are clearly wrong and would have a Benefit to Cost Ratio of around 0.4, which is usually the death knell for any scheme. Also, local railway knowledge has very well demonstrated the greater practicality of joining the WCML from Crewe and looking for an HS2 depot nearer Manchester, with classic compatible trains perhaps having a depot next to the WCML at Bamfurlong on a brownfield site. That site is next to the Bryn Marsh and Ince Moss SSSI which is surrounded by railways, but depending on what is proposed, the SSSI should be less affected than the Abram Flashes SSSI.

The Society completely opposes construction of the Golborne spur and the Rolling Stock Depot adjacent to the through line, particularly their close proximity to the Abram Flashes SSSI. The intrusion into greenbelt associated with this part of the scheme is especially damaging for the way in which it bisects attractive open countryside and effectively increases the likelihood of future development - associated with the Government's intention to leverage service providers into the vicinity of depots like Golborne.

The greenbelt which would disappear under the HS2 line and associated Rolling Stock Depot at Golborne is a very attractive and significant slice of Wigan Council's designated Greenheart Regional Park. The Park concept is strongly promoted by the Council and supported by this Society, whose chairman is a member of the Greenheart Board. The HS2 development is entirely inappropriate in this location. The journey time savings to Preston and Scotland are miniscule.

While the actual boundaries of the SSSI have been avoided, construction of this vast industrial landscape effectively ruins the entire ecological context of the Hey Brook Valley at this point and is unacceptable. On current plans the depot and through-line are 1.8km long and 175m wide plus a 650m lead-in, with the whole complex containing an unknown number of buildings of unspecified sizes. The area stretches from 160m south-east of Byrom Hall right across to the WCML. This valley is a major part of the Manchester Wetland Partnership Local Nature Improvement Area which covers 40,000 acres stretching from Wigan and Bolton to Woolston in the south and Salford in the east. A £3.7 million programme benefiting nature improvement, local communities and the local economy is under way. One of the aims is to show that commercial developments can go hand in hand with nature improvement (and not be smashed through significant landscapes like this). Another key aim

is to maintain/create wildlife corridors to link the key sites and form larger protected areas – not have them neutered by HS2 and sidings. Having a maintenance depot at an HS2 dead-end, which generates a 40 to 50-mile round trip for HS2 rolling stock making a maintenance or cleaning visit, is further evidence that Golborne is possibly the worst location that could have been chosen.

Further, the ruination of the context of the Grade II Listed Byrom Hall and complete isolation of Grade II* Listed Lightshaw Hall are akin to vandalism. Byrom Hall would lose tree cover and some garden, while being cramped by convoluted viaduct-borne line crossings entering the RSD and by re-alignment of current roads on to relatively high bridges. Lightshaw Hall is destined to be left lurking in a car park in the sidings and its ancillary buildings would be demolished. Wigan has only 31 Listed Grade II* Buildings. They form a body of local heritage worthy of protection. Demolition of the Grade II Listed Newchurch Rectory in Culcheth is merely classed as a moderate impact, but it would be a third blow and a piece of local history lost forever.

The through-line and rolling stock depot will be c200m from the closest point on the perimeter public footpath of Pennington Flash Country Park. Some of the lines will be in cuttings, but others will be on viaducts and will impose negative visual and noise burdens on visitors, as will the re-routed local roads. The prevailing wind will carry the sound towards visitors. The sheer volume of traffic accessing the depot, plus through trains, will impart a 24/7 industrial feel to the Country Park and the surrounding area in contrast to its rural nature at present. No estimate appears to have been made of noise levels associated with the volume of rolling stock going to and from the depot. The farmland here is one of few examples of the small field systems of yesteryear, priceless for wildlife, but disappearing from our countryside. The depot and the through-line are clearly in entirely the wrong place. Alternatives do exist.

Just south of Byrom Hall, the line apparently passes through a former waste tip 6.7ha in area, with currently unknown contents or operational dates. It is rated as a medium risk but there is confusion in the HS2 text over where the impacts of disturbing it might be felt. Local people have experience of the site producing copious quantities of gas in the past. The text suggests an impact at Rixton Clay Pits SSSI 9km away, but omits Abram Flashes SSSI which is just 2km away and might get drainage from the disturbed tip, as might Hey Brook.

Abram Flashes SSSI was notified in 1990 and is of particular significance for its breeding waterfowl and waders. Several species breed in the wet grassland which is itself a nationally declining habitat and possibly here at its only site in Greater Manchester. The site is also a Greater Manchester Site of Biological Interest, Grade A, covering a slightly larger area than the SSSI. Many of the bird species present are UK Biodiversity Priority Species. Approximately three-quarters of the SSSI is a Lancashire Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve (Lightshaw Meadows) in conjunction with Red Rose Forest and comprises a well-visited wildlife venue for the general public. Having the RSD and through-line only 70m away will ruin visitors' enjoyment and limit the site's use by breeding wildfowl and waders, even though there might remain some attraction for feeding, loafing or roosting birds. Users of the canal bank footpath/cycleway, a key recreational route, will also be subject to the same detrimental impacts.

The line is in a shallow cutting for the approach from the east, but emerges on to an embankment exactly at the closest point to the main waterbody. This will destroy the character of the SSSI and eliminate feeding, display and breeding grounds for some of the species outside the SSSI. It is not remotely acceptable. The suggestion that tree planting can be used to soften the impact of the line is absolutely out of the question because of the open terrain requirements of key bird species. Over 140 bird species have been recorded in the SSSI with over 60 species breeding in and around it.

In our view, noise from the through-line and the maintenance depot, coupled with 24/7 operation and lighting as well as the likelihood of overhead power lines along all of the sidings, is likely to defeat the tenacity of breeding birds here – especially Barn Owls, a Schedule 1 species. A large percentage of their hunting area will be eliminated.

The HS2 line and the depot are on the break of slope on the south side of Hey Brook Valley and ideally placed to project the greatest possible volume of noise across the valley on the prevailing wind while being a highly visible and constantly working industrial site with dozens of train movements daily.

The through line and the depot will presumably be fenced with 2m high fencing which will be visually intrusive and form a continuous insurmountable barrier for larger wild mammals unless extensive underpasses or bridges are provided. This issue concerns us throughout the HS2 route, but there certainly seems no practical possibility of usable animal accesses across the 2km of the depot and through-line.

North of Edge Green between Golborne and Abram there is a small wetland complex which may be affected by works to widen the WCML as part of HS2.

Farmland south of Lightshaw Lane which has a significant community of arable farmland birds will be partly lost under the depot. Losses will also include the right of way along Lightshaw Lane and the noteworthy mature hedgerows, trees and ponds there. Part of Lightshaw Meadows Nature Reserve will also be lost. The Grade A SBI – Marl Pit Ponds South of Lightshaw Lane – holds elements of the same breeding bird community as the SSSI and the two areas will be split by the depot, probably resulting in losses because of isolation from each other. The ponds here and at another Grade A SBI farther SW have breeding Great Crested Newts which are specially protected. Appropriate measures to safeguard them during and after construction would be needed as well as mitigation for any habitat losses.

Little has been said about maintenance access to the HS2 route, but it is understood to be general practice that a vehicle track runs alongside the railway line wherever possible – increasing the width of the finished line. Roe Deer in particular can be expected to get into the fenced corridor at some stage.

The massive water main south of the East Lancs Road and the major gas pipeline and compound/relay station lying in and across the rolling stock depot and WCML junction along Lightshaw Lane do not appear to have been considered in choosing this route option. Considerable costs are likely.

The prospect of utilities being included in the HS2 easement has superficial appeal, but will lead to even more disturbance along the route and may require it to be widened beyond the enormous land-take currently needed. It is not currently favoured by the Society. The location of electricity booster stations at 11km and 50km is postulated but it is not known whether separate accesses and/or power supplies to the line will be involved until locations are known, so we cannot take a view at present. Likewise, all the necessary construction compound locations along the route have yet to be identified.

The dispersal of drainage from the permanent way and the RSD are of concern if the quality of the field and valley watercourses and ponds is to be maintained. Oil contamination and water with an altered chemistry derived from the track seem possibilities. Equally, management of waste and effluent from train cleaning will need specific attention, together with lubricant build-up on the site.

Farther south along the route at Culcheth the linear park will be all but obliterated and two wildlife sites will be affected: Silver Lane, Risley, lies between Risley tip and Franks Farm. The habitats include restorable BAP grassland (MG), undetermined grassland (SNG), fens and accessible natural greenspace. HS2 cuts straight through the site - a mitigation scheme for the adjacent massive landfill which is still establishing. After-use of the landfill site itself is being focussed on conservation and recreation, but will not be enhanced by a busy railway running through the edge of it.

The second site, Eleven Acre Common, lies just to the south of Kenyon Golf Club and right next to the edge of the route. It holds Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland and Unimproved Grasslands which are floristically diverse. Adverse impact seems very likely.

Adjacent to the M62, we believe there remains a prospect of damage to Holcroft Moss SSSI/SAC, despite assurances to contrary and Natural England saying Appropriate Assessment is not necessary. It could arise from peat excavation, haul road construction, the compound for M62 crossing, construction of embankment, drainage from the embankment, oil residues or run-off from concrete. That apart, an embankment would preclude any possibility of Holcroft and Risley Mosses being joined in future by a further wetland corridor across Glazebrook Moss, as part of the Manchester Wetlands initiative.

A separate initiative seeking a link with HS2 is being pursued by a small private group (Transport for Leigh) wanting a station at the HS2 intersection with the Liverpool-Manchester line, with a loop to and from that line in a cutting. The proposal would almost certainly lead to the loss, to development and car parking, of the farmland corridor separating Lowton and Culcheth, together with its associated wildlife. A station at the former Kenyon junction and/or in Golborne would be infinitely preferable if it does not spawn additional development. The private project is looking to include a relief road for the congested East Lancashire Road and there is general agreement that it is needed. Leigh Ornithological Society does not support the Transport for Leigh station proposal, but believes sensitive design and execution might produce an acceptable road scheme through this area, providing that it avoids facilitating building developments in the farmland corridor.

In conclusion, Leigh Ornithological Society firmly believes that the Golborne spur should be abandoned and the alternatives re-examined, with a view to routing HS2 through Warrington.

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