



ENGLISH HERITAGE
SOUTH EAST REGION

Mr T Wyatt
South Oxfordshire District Council
Planning & Building Control Services
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Our ref: L00106522

6 September 2011

Dear Mr Wyatt

**Notifications under Circular 01/2001, Circular 08/2009 & GDPO 1995
WHITCHURCH BRIDGE, HIGH STREET, WHITCHURCH-ON-THAMES,
OXFORDSHIRE
Application No P11/E0745/LB**

We have received amended proposals for the above scheme.

Summary

A convincing case that reconstruction is necessary in order to maintain the current usage of the bridge has yet to be made.

English Heritage Advice

David Simpson's letter of the 4th August argues firstly that the proposals would not amount to substantial harm to the significance of the structure are in accordance with government guidance as set out in PPS 5 and secondly that reconstruction is necessary as the existing structure cannot be maintained at its 7.5t capacity. With respect to the degree of harm to the significance of the structure we do not agree with the conclusions of Oxford Archaeology that the harm is 'less than substantial'. As their report points out the main significance of the bridge is its graceful aesthetics. The additional piers proposed are much more substantial than the existing piers the proposals would substantially alter the appearance of the structure, with much of its grace and lightness would be lost. Additionally the bridge is not without historical and evidential value, which, as stated in my letters of 23rd and 28th June would be compromised.

With regards to the technical aspects of the proposal we remain to be convinced that repairing the bridge without reconstruction is not feasible. The two key factors here are the condition of the column heads and the capacity of the lattice girders. We agree that the load capacity of the lattice girders is a key consideration and the issue was raised as long ago as 1993 in the Howard Hughes report on the bridge. Martin Brain argues



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in his letter of the 28th July that in order to maintain a 7.5t weight loading these components have to have a condition factor of 1.0, in other words to be in perfect condition, and that this perfect level of condition cannot be maintained indefinitely. However, we do not see why, if regularly maintained and repaired, with the replacement of individual elements that have been damaged or lost section through corrosion, it would not be possible to maintain a condition factor of 1.0 and for traffic to continue to use the bridge as it does now. As with any historic structure, its integrity is dependant on regular and timely repair and maintenance. It should also be possible to strengthen the girders so the maintaining a condition factor of 1.0 was not critical. This was suggested in the Howard Hughes report on the bridge of 1993, which suggested strengthening the U-shaped uprights. Alternatively it may also be possible to strengthen the top or bottom plate.

With regards to the column heads Martin Brain, in his letter of 28th July maintains that it is necessary to replace the column heads in their entirety and that this would not be feasible. However, the heads of the north columns were strengthened by with the addition of steel plates at some point before 1973 and are apparently stable, with no further cracks being noted in recent inspections. While not an aesthetically pleasing repair it appears technically successful and preferable to complete reconstruction. It is difficult to see why a similar approach, along with a slip membrane to allow for thermal movement, could not be introduced at other column heads. We requested that the paint to be cleaned off a column head to allow its condition to be properly assessed and for a fully informed assessment on the feasibility of adding a slip membrane to be made at a pre-application meeting that took place on site on 30th September 2010. This has yet to take place and we could not accept demolition until this issue is properly investigated.

Even if it was proved necessary to replace the heads the costs of jacking the bridge up (estimated at £0.6 million) are considerably less than the cost of rebuilding the bridge in its entirety. Whilst it would involve closing the bridge to traffic and has associated risks to both cost and duration this is also true of the proposed reconstruction. A proper comparison between the estimated costs of replacing the heads and maintaining the lattice girder with a condition factor of 1.0 and total reconstruction needs to be presented before this option can be ruled out.

Recommendation

English Heritage remains of the opinion that the case for complete rebuilding in order to maintain the current 7.5t weight limit and two way traffic has yet to be made. It is recommended that a strategy of repair in situ is pursued.



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We would welcome the opportunity of advising further. Please consult us again if any additional information or amendments are submitted. If, notwithstanding our advice, you propose to approve the scheme in its present form, please advise us of the date of the committee and send us a copy of your report at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely

Richard Peats

Historic Buildings and Areas Adviser

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cc. Jamie Preston, Conservation Officer, SODC



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