Abbey-Chesterton Bridge on the Chisholm Trail

Introduction

Cambridge Cycling Campaign has been developing proposals for the Chisholm Trail, a cycling and walking route linking north Cambridge and the Science Park to Addenbrooke’s Hospital and south Cambridge, since 1998 (see... www.camcycle.org.uk/newsletters/17/article15.html ). This would more or less follow the line of the railway but also use sections of the cycle path along The Busway, with a new bridge over the river Cam between East Chesterton and Barnwell (in Abbey ward). The route would enable many trips to be made on foot or by bike that are currently difficult unless they are made by car. Cycle trips from new developments at Trumpington to the Science Park would take around 30 minutes even at a gentle pace, as would trips from Orchard Park to Addenbrooke’s. Shorter trips, on foot or bike, to open space, local shops or schools would also benefit from the route.

Both the existing and the draft Cambridge Local Plan (summer 2013) propose to protect much of the land required for the Chisholm Trail alongside the rail corridor through Cambridge, and the Chisholm Trail is included in the Transport Strategy for Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire. A feasibility study has already been carried out by Atkins, in September 2009, as part of the Cycle Cambridge scheme.

At the City Deal’s board meeting on 28 January 2015 the Chisholm Trail was included for prioritisation in the first five years of Greater Cambridge City Deal projects, with £8.4 million for the project approved unanimously.

The route (see also map on next page)

Although details of the precise route are still being developed, the central part of the Chisholm Trail would connect the two cycleways which run alongside the Busway track. Near the Science Park it would start at the end of the Busway, crossing Milton Road to link to the railway station under construction at Chesterton sidings. It would then run close to the railway, where possible on both sides of the track through Abbey and Petersfield, to rejoin the cycleway along the Busway near Cambridge station.

There is scope to create a ‘linear park’ in some sections, adding greenery to the area, and providing opportunities for leisure as well as utility trips both on foot and by bike.

The north and south sections of the route already exist, as the cycleway alongside the The Busway currently connects Northstowe and Orchard Park to the Science Park area, and from Trumpington Meadows, Clay Farm and Addenbrooke’s Hospital and the Biomedical Campus to the Railway Station area.

The proposed bridge over the river between Chesterton and Barnwell is an integral - and essential - part of the route. The Atkins feasibility study says “it is considered that the construction of any other discrete sections of the proposed routes would yield few benefits for cyclists and pedestrians without a new crossing of the river Cam. These sections would provide routes with a higher proportion of off-road cycleway, but with only slight reductions in journey lengths.”
The Green Dragon Bridge is narrow and already inadequate for the number of pedestrians and cyclists it carries. It is also not on the desire line for the Chisholm Trail or easily accessible from the Chisholm Trail. The proposed bridge would make a journey between Fen Ditton and the Science Park almost a mile shorter.

Benefits of the Chisholm Trail

The Chisholm Trail - and hence the bridge - will bring benefits to large parts of Cambridge, not just residents of Abbey and Chesterton wards. It will

- Provide a quicker, largely off-road, route linking Addenbrooke’s and south Cambridge to the new Science Park railway station, Chesterton and north Cambridge.
- Provide improved access to employment at Science Park, Business Park and Cowley Road for people in Fen Ditton and Ditton Walk/Barnwell and the Wing development (near Marshall’s).
- Improve access to the railway stations for people in Fen Ditton and Barnwell and the planned Wing development.
- Improve access to schools and colleges north of the river from the Barnwell area.
- Improve access to Ditton Meadows for people in Chesterton and Milton and elsewhere.
- Relieve pressure on Green Dragon Bridge.
- Encourage more people to cycle by providing a pleasant, safe off-road route connecting railway stations, major employers, such as the hospital, the biomedical campus and the Science Park and schools and colleges.
- Encourage more people to cycle which will reduce motor traffic on the city’s already congested roads and hence reduce pollution and congestion and benefit the economy.
- Encourage more people to cycle which brings health benefits.

As Councillor Kilian Bourke said in the *Cambridge News* (March 2014) “The Chisholm Trail is a vital project for the city and South Cambs. It would run all the way from Addenbrooke’s Hospital to the south of the city to the Science Park in the north, alongside the railway tracks. It would link up many key centres of education and employment, including the existing railway station and the new one in Chesterton too. This would enable massive numbers of people who are currently too scared to cycle to work on our busy roads to do so, by creating a safe, convenient route for them.”
The proposed bridge

The proposal is for a bridge at the obvious crossing point along the Chisholm Trail, near where the railway line crosses the river.

A consultation exercise in summer 2014 suggested various options for the location and appearance of the bridge but did not go into much detail regarding the connections between the bridge, access cycle routes and the wider cycle (and pedestrian) network.

Following this consultation the County Council is proposing a bridge close to the existing railway bridge, 30-60 metres away, and on the eastern, out-of-town, downstream side. A bridge on the western side was ruled out because of lack of space on the Chesterton bank for the access ramps. The ramps need to be 80 to 100 metres long, as they should not be steeper than 1 in 20, and because there are houses and less space on Fen Road to the west of the railway bridge.

The details of the bridge design are not known, nor have the alignment of the access ramps or the routes to and from the bridge yet been seriously considered or consulted upon.

Environmental aspects

Ditton Meadows is a historic area of unspoiled land alongside the river, managed for grazing, with lovely views and rich in wildlife. There is no question that this area must not be spilt or developed, and that it needs to be preserved for future generations. While Fen Ditton itself is a conservation area, the Meadows are not included as much of the meadow area is in Cambridge city.

Cambridge Natural History Society surveyed Ditton Meadows monthly during 2008 and over 370 plant species were noted, as well as over 50 invertebrates and 40 birds. The most interesting was the sighting of a water vole near Fen Ditton. A full report is under ‘field studies’ at www.cnhs.org.uk. At this stage, an environmental impact assessment has not yet been done, but one will be necessary as part of the planning process. This will identify areas and wildlife that need particular protection and measures to ensure that they are not harmed.

The bridge itself, being close to the existing railway bridge, will not affect the views significantly and should have little impact on the Meadows. Indeed it can be argued that it will enable more people to enjoy views of the Meadows and access to them for recreation.

However, the access routes - the cycle and pedestrian paths leading to and from the bridge - must be carefully designed and constructed to avoid disturbing existing wildlife habitats and their inhabitants. In particular, lighting can have a major impact.

More seriously, construction could damage ground and destroy habitats, though they would recover. However, if carefully done, the impact can be minimised, as was the case when works were carried out on the Sheep’s Green bridge in spring 2014. The construction compound shown on some drawings looks unnecessarily and unacceptably large and a less intrusive location should be found. Because of the
sensitive nature of Ditton Meadows and the immediate vicinity - Fen Ditton and Chesterton are both communities with a long history - construction work must be very carefully planned to minimise the impact on both the environment and the inhabitants.

Would the bridge be value for money?
Yes. Good cycling infrastructure encourages people to cycle, reducing road congestion and bringing the benefits of cycling. Cycling is a mode of transport well suited to the journeys many people make in Cambridge, causing little pollution, using fewer resources (no hydrocarbon fuel, much less metal), making people healthier and enabling them to enjoy the natural environment. Investment in cycling infrastructure elsewhere in Cambridge, such as Riverside bridge, has led to greater than predicted numbers of cyclists.

Conclusion
Cambridge Cycling Campaign believes that the Chisholm Trail will bring great benefits to many people in and around Cambridge. A new pedestrian and cycle bridge crossing near the existing railway bridge is an essential part of the trail, and if done sensitively, it will enhance the character and enjoyment of Ditton Meadows for many people.

23 February 2015
Cambridge Cycling Campaign

Further information/references
- Cambridge City Council draft local plan
- Transport Strategy for Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire
- The reports of the feasibility study carried out by Atkins are available on the Campaign’s website at www.camcycle.org.uk/campaigning/cycleroutes/chisholmtrail/
- Cycling Vision 2016, published by Cambridge Cycling Campaign to highlight key projects that could be delivered, that would make a significant difference to cycling in the region.