

*The Thinking Woman's Railway
Centre of the Campaign for Real Railways
Home of the Camping Vans, TOAD & TADPOLE*

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Dartmoor National Park Authority,
Parke,
Bovey Tracey,
Newton Abbot
TQ13 9JQ

RAILWAY RECONSTRUCTION

Dear Sirs,

**An Objection to the
Application for Outline Planning Permission
by Baker Estates Ltd., Newton Abbot,
for the Erection of Forty Dwellings
at Moretonhampstead Station.**

Nearly twenty years ago, I objected to the proposal for house-building at Moretonhampstead Station on the grounds that the place would be needed in future for its original purpose. My objection stands.

At the time, there was some pressure to use the station instead of the proposed Betton Way greenfield site, which has since been developed and will probably before long expand west, fulfilling any local need.

Although it is the applicant's choice what he calls his site, in 2002 I wrote to the National Park Officer to request that in future planning applications the historic use at former railway stations should be emphasized.

Typically paying no heed to this, in 2014 the complex of railway and railway-associated buildings at Ashburton Station, the subject of a masterplanning exercise, was given the name of a nondescript road.

And again we have "Land at Station Road, Moretonhampstead." The function that gave the road its name, the largest installation on the road and the reason why today there is a development site cannot, must not, should not be named, as it surely would if it had been such as a castle, a mill, a factory or an ecclesiastical pile.

Is this out of fear of arousing interest in its potential? Is it ignorance of history? Is it denial or expunging of history? Is it embarrassment caused by a generation that has been gifted the remains of a multi-million pound, highly-engineered route from Newton Abbot choosing to fling cars and coaches and heavy lorries along what is little more than a cart track in places, while using the old railway as a footpath?

It is almost as if certain terminology has been eradicated or deemed inadmissible. There is talk of conveying lorries to save fuel but no mention of freight trains. In future there will be shared or on-demand

vehicles, we are told, but this is not the same as public transport. In the promotion of the electrification of the road network, claimed to be the great escape from carbon dependence, there is no mention of the only vehicles that can use power direct from the generators, trains and trams.

Let us be clear: like Chuley Road was in fact Ashburton Station, the "Land at Station Road" is part of the former Moretonhampstead Station.

This is of course a token objection, made merely so that it is recorded that someone at the time spoke up for the railway. A new approach and new thinking may be just around the corner and then it may be asked: "Did no one point out the folly of building houses on the station site? Did no one understand what railways can do?"

It is a useless objection because, despite many appeals for action, there is still nothing in planning guidance that allows meaningful protection of abandoned railway infrastructure by local authorities. The transport section of the draft Local Plan has failed sufficiently to explore the options for car-free travel demanded by government, but anyway could never go as far as to support even the principle of branch line reconstruction.

Nationally, electrification of the lines that have always been understood to be the most deserving has been dropped effectively in favour of flooding the roads with battery-electric cars. And between Newton Abbot and Heathfield, the £30-million widening of the A382, reminiscent of 1970s' transport policy, is going on to cope with the forecast increase in traffic, some of which will no doubt originate at Moretonhampstead.

The sudden emergency which has been creeping up on us in full view for fifty years has excited schoolchildren to protest outside County Hall and their exasperated seniors to take the issue to the seat of government. But what many or most people hope is that nothing need be done and nothing much need change. If anything really does need to be done, it will be in the cities, not the countryside. And nothing will ever happen in Dartmoor National Park.

So it will only be the court jester who is fool enough to suggest that Moretonhampstead could one day be reconnected with the national rail network as part of a massive resurgence of sustainable public transport systems brought about to help avoid a catastrophic breakdown of civilization.

Thompsons, a firm whose influential industry lobbyists did so much to destroy the rail freight system and swing spending in favour of roads and self-centred transport, bought the closed station for a modest sum and has operated profitably from it for many years. Now having rationalized the business, the firm seeks to cash in on its surplus land by making probably the first of two housing estates, a satellite of the town, where residents would in future make every journey by car, even from there to the town's shops and facilities. And, for good measure, to scorch the earth, the development would obstruct the return of the railway to Moretonhampstead.

Commendably, in 2004 it was determined that it was much too premature to contemplate losing the employment use of even a proportion of the site. I would think that this position would now be harder to hold, even if the authority was minded to adopt it. As pre-application advice has been sought, it would seem that the authority is now in favour of some residential use, even though it would sit uncomfortably in its surroundings.

