

OUR STREET

A discussion of issues and options for traffic management in The Street, Ewelme, Oxfordshire, and adjacent thoroughfares.



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Introduction

“The Street” is the main thoroughfare in Ewelme, a charming village within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is a pretty roadway flanked by old houses and cottages, many of which are listed, with some more recent infill. The whole of The Street, and many of the houses alongside it, are within a Conservation Area. Ewelme School, on The Street, was founded by Geoffrey Chaucer’s grand-daughter Alice, Duchess of Suffolk in 1437, and is said to be the oldest school building in England still used as such. Other historic sites are the church and alms houses (also founded by Alice), Ewelme Manor (once the site of a Palace visited frequently by royalty), the King’s Pond (where Henry VIII is said to have bathed) which is the source of the Ewelme Brook, and old cress beds on the brook itself. The brook flows along the side of The Street for much of its length, and is a crystal clear waterway inhabited by wild brown trout. The old cress beds are owned by the Chiltern Society and are managed as a nature reserve; many rare birds and other fauna and flora are to be seen within a few yards of the roadway.

Despite the inexorable increase in traffic, The Street remains a relatively safe and pleasant thoroughfare for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders. There is no footway for much of the length and all forms of traffic mingle in a generally safe and civilised manner. With the village pub at one end, the school, church and children’s recreation ground at the other, and the community-run village shop, village Hall and pre-school in between, there is significant pedestrian traffic at all times of day. The writers live on The Street and frequently enjoy sitting in their front garden and chatting to passing neighbours (and indeed visitors to the village). On a summer’s evening there can be few more pleasant village scenes in England.

So what is the problem? On the basis of “if it aint broke, don’t fix it”, why does anything need to be done?

The concern is that the present situation, while very acceptable, is fragile, and once broken may be difficult or even impossible to recover. There is evidence that the present level of motorised traffic is at times close to the level where pedestrians no longer feel at ease mixing with other road users. Traffic has increased over the years, and with significant new housing development proposed for the area (especially in Benson and Chalgrove), it is likely to increase significantly further in the near future. There has been a marked increase in the level of commercial traffic such as delivery vans, whose drivers do not always appear to respect the mixed nature of the road use to the same extent that we see in local drivers. Many children and young people use the road; while we have thankfully experienced no serious accidents in recent years, a tragedy involving a child would devastate the village.

Any increase in traffic is also likely to have an impact upon the cress bed nature reserve, as the whole area lies within a matter of metres of the road.

What this document therefore sets out to do is consider the factors involved in local traffic of all sorts, and to consider ways in which the existing civilised comings and goings in the village can be preserved.



Figure 1. Map of The Street showing locations mentioned in the text.



Figure 2. Left:- Great white egret in the cress beds, photographed from The Street. Right:- Brown trout spawning alongside The Street.

Historical

It is likely that The Street has been used as a thoroughfare for thousands of years, running as it does alongside a stream with a reliable flow of clean water. For most of this time of course traffic safety would have been a minor concern, though congestion no doubt occurred at

times caused by animals and horse-drawn vehicles. In the 1960's and 70's problems were often caused by lorries and vans associated with the Honey Factory that was located near Kings Pond; this moved away to Wallingford and the site developed as housing. Old photographs show The Street almost empty of traffic. Many of the houses are built close to the road, leaving little or no scope for widening or provision of footways. Thus a road that evolved for pedestrian and animal traffic poses significant issues for modern-day traffic.



Figure 3. Looking NW up The Street, Ewelme, in about 1906. The house on the right is now known as Quiet Waters, and at the time was a shop and the village Post Office. Note the almost complete absence of traffic.

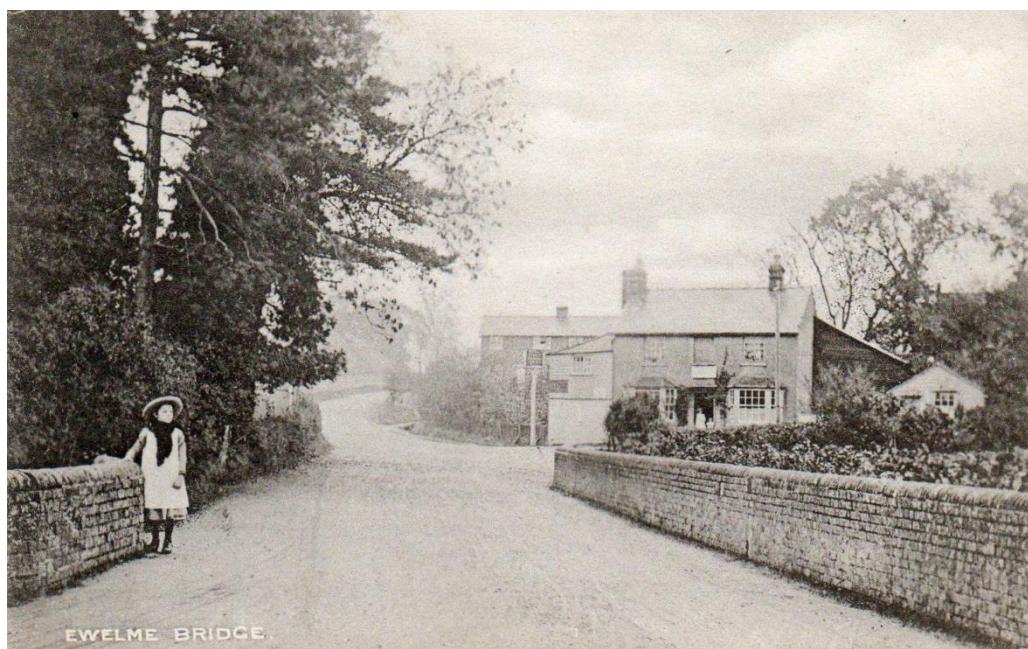


Figure 4. The Shepherds Hut Public House at the NW end of The Street in about 1910. The street runs across the front of the pub, and off to the right of the photo. Green Lane is behind the photographer.

Current road usage

According to Oxford County Council, no road use surveys have been conducted on The Street by OCC themselves; the closest has been in Green Lane, the road running SW from the NW end of The Street. This carries more traffic than The Street, associated with RAF Benson. Another survey has been conducted in Brook Street, Benson, the road running towards Ewelme, but which again carries traffic to RAF Benson that does not affect The Street.

The writers therefore conducted their own brief traffic survey, recording all road usage at various times of day and week outside “Quiet Waters”. While a total of only 13 hours was surveyed, this is enough to give a good idea of overall patterns of usage. In that time, 720 cars, 119 commercial vehicles, 4 buses, 4 tractors, 2 motorcycles, 153 pedestrians, 14 dogs and 180 cyclists passed. The busiest 30-minute period returned 42 cars and 11 commercial vehicles, equivalent to a total of 106 motor vehicles per hour. In the same period eight pedestrians were counted, equivalent to 16 per hour. Approximate estimates of total motorised traffic per 24 hours are 1000 on school weekdays, and 700 at weekends. No counts were done during school holidays. In addition, there are of the order of 120+ cyclists per day on weekdays, and 200+ at weekends.

It is stressed that the sample periods were short and quite possibly not truly representative of the whole 24 hour or week period. In particular, it is felt that pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists were under-represented, as indeed were horse riders (none counted, but often seen at other times). The accompanying photographs give some idea of the diversity of road usage.

No direct estimates were made of traffic speed. However, from experience of driving in The Street it would appear that most drivers keep their speed down to 20-25 mph; unfortunately a small minority drive significantly faster. The speed limit is 30 mph.

The OCC survey on Green Lane was conducted between July 14 and 22, 2014. The daily average traffic flow was 2570 motor vehicles, with an average speed of 30 mph (30 mph limit).

The survey in Brook Street, Benson was conducted during 2015 (dates not stated). The 12-hour volume averaged 2485 motor vehicles, with an average speed of 24.8 mph eastwards and 21.8 mph westwards; the speed limit is 30 mph.



Figure 5. Current road usage.

The issue of traffic volume

In the previous section it was suggested that weekday traffic flow in The Street is about 1000 vehicles per day, with peak hour levels of the order of 100+. This traffic mingles with hundreds of pedestrians and cyclists each day.

In a study conducted by the Transport Research Laboratory in 2003, it was found that at motor traffic flows below 90 per hour, pedestrians were prepared to mingle with traffic. When flows reach 110 per hour pedestrians used the space between frontages as if it were a normal road, ie they kept to the margins and treated them as if they were pavements. As there is no footway for much of the length of The Street, and there are often parked vehicles along the road, traffic separation at increased traffic flow could be problematic. It would appear that the situation is getting close to this. It would be most unfortunate if the inhabitants of Ewelme no longer felt safe and secure walking along The Street, and any reduction in the freedom of movement within the village would be a great and possibly irreversible loss.

The issue of traffic speed

Most drivers proceed at an appropriate speed through the village, especially when pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders are apparent. Some, however, drive at an unsafe speed; while they may be very able at handling their vehicles, they appear to make no allowances for unpredicted waverings of others.

There is also a potential problem with cyclists. Ewelme is on popular circular cycle routes around the Chilterns, and especially at weekends large numbers pass through often at high speed. A particular problem is fast individual or groups of cyclists overtaking pedestrians walking in the same direction. As their approach is virtually silent it can be great shock to have a cyclist suddenly pass within a foot your shoulder at 30 mph. A stumble or a sidestep at the wrong moment could lead to a serious accident.

The issue of parking

Many houses on The Street have little or no off-street parking provision, and there are many residents vehicles parked on the roadway. To these are added delivery and service vehicles, and those of trades working on houses and gardens during the working day. At other times, vehicles associated with events at the Village Hall, School or Watercress Centre are parked on the road.

While this may appear to be a problem it is suggested that the reverse is true. Gridlock is virtually unheard of in the village, and parked vehicles cause other motorists to drive slowly and to pay great attention to their surroundings. Increased transit times caused by parked vehicles may also have the desirable effect of encouraging regular through traffic to seek an alternative route. Traffic congestion around school drop-off and collection has the effect of encouraging other local traffic to avoid the area at such times.

Even where there is a footway alongside The Street it is generally narrow, and in places further constricted by overgrown hedges and vehicles parked partly on the pavement. There is generally inadequate width for prams, buggies or wheelchairs, and pedestrians often have to use the roadway even here. This is something of an issue even at present traffic levels.



Figure 6. Cars parked partly on the pavement, and encroachment by hedges, reduce the usefulness as walkways especially with children and prams.

The vision

The vision is to protect and enhance the current albeit fragile operation and ambience of this very special thoroughfare.

Possible management options

These include the following, either alone or in some combination:-

- Do nothing
- Provide a footway along the length of The Street
- Reduce speed limit to 20 mph
- Install hard traffic calming measures (such as speed bumps, chicanes and flashing speed signs)
- Install soft traffic calming measures such as changes in road colour and texture
- Adopt “Quiet Lane” status

These are now considered in turn.

Do nothing

This is the default option, and will inevitably lead to deterioration in the situation as traffic increases. As it is likely to be very difficult to recover the situation once this has happened, do nothing is not considered a satisfactory option.

Provide a footway

This is not considered a viable option as there is just not the space available for a footway without unacceptable encroachment on property and, in some cases, demolition. Further, the provision of a footway might allow and encourage increased levels of traffic and traffic speed seriously eroding the atmosphere of the village.

Reduce speed limit to 20 mph

This is a frequently-used option in towns and villages and one which has considerable appeal for Ewelme. It has the dual advantage of potentially reducing traffic speeds, and drawing motorists' attention to an environment where special care is needed.

The OCC website, under "Setting speed limits" says:-

20 mph limits and zones may be appropriate in residential areas or streets with high numbers of pedestrians or cyclists. DOT guidance on setting speed limits recommends that such limits should be self-enforcing, and so a 20 mph limit will typically only be judged to be appropriate where existing average speeds are at or below 24 mph, or where traffic calming or other speed management measures are provided in conjunction with the introduction of a 20 mph limit.

Although it would require further measurement it would appear that the average speed along The Street is close to the 24 mph limit stated; and further speed management measures are indeed suggested (see below).

Install "hard" traffic calming measures

It is suggested that hard traffic calming measures would be inappropriate in this situation, where we are trying to preserve an atmosphere of a quiet village of considerable charm. In any event such installations may be precluded from a conservation area such as this.

Install "soft" traffic calming measures

This is a recent development based upon driver perceptions of the need for caution. Such measures are generally based on modifications to the road surface such as a change in colour or texture. Particularly effective are markings that make the road appear narrower than it is, such as zones down each side that are of a different colour. A useful publication on this approach is "Traffic in Villages", prepared by Hamilton Baillie associates for the Dorset AONB. The following is taken from that report:-

Speed limits are not the only way to slow traffic. In many rural villages the limitations of policing and enforcement mean that formal legislation has limited effect. Research suggests that drivers choose speeds that appear to suit the characteristics of the road ahead. Reducing speeds therefore requires careful attention to the clues and information presented to drivers by the road and its surroundings.

The apparent width of the road is an important clue. It is worth paying careful attention to the distance between kerbs, and to measure distances between buildings. The narrower the road and its surroundings appear to the driver, the slower the likely traffic speeds.

When verges, drains and the gullies at the edges of the streets are renewed or maintained, it is sometimes possible to use a secondary material such as setts, cobbles, road paint or even reinforced grass paving to reduce the apparent width of the carriageway. Such “visual narrowing” is a good way to maintain slow speeds while coping with the dimensions of buses, heavy lorries and other large vehicles.

As a general rule, a clear width of 6 metres on straight streets allows two large vehicles to pass at low speeds. By paving the edges of the street with a different material to the carriageway, a visual width of 5 – 5.4 metres can be created which further reduces speeds, without the need for artificial bumps, signs and chicanes. Using a different surface tone or texture can achieve this effect.

It is suggested that this approach be actively explored further for possible application in Ewelme.

Adopt “Quiet Lane” status

In 2006 two shared use concepts were formally recognised in “The Quiet Lanes and Home Zones (England) Regulations”; of the two, quiet lane is the one potentially appropriate for The Street.



Figure 7. Quiet Lane road sign. The symbols reflect exactly the mixed use of The Street.

Quiet Lanes are minor rural roads or networks of minor rural roads appropriate for shared use by walkers, cyclists, horse riders and other vehicles. The aim of Quiet Lanes is to maintain the character of minor rural roads by seeking to contain rising traffic growth that is widespread in rural areas. There are three key elements to a Quiet Lanes scheme: community involvement to encourage a change in user behaviour; area-wide direction signing to discourage through traffic; and Quiet Lane entry and exit signs to remind drivers that they are entering or leaving a Quiet Lane, a place where they may expect people to be using the whole of the road space for a range of activities.

It is recommended that designated Quiet Lanes should have no more than about 1000 motor vehicles per day. Vehicle speeds should be kept to levels appropriate to the mix of uses and activities expected to take place, usually with the 85th percentile speed below 35 mph. Traffic calming and traffic management measures may be required to achieve these conditions; these should be designed to be in keeping with the local environment but must still be effective. Pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians should feel able to use Quiet Lanes safely from the time of designation.

A potential advantage of Quiet Lane status over and above the traffic calming measures involved is that it may be appropriate to use development controls, where the local planning authority (after consulting other stakeholders) considers it necessary, to control the generators or destinations of traffic to a level commensurate with the Quiet Lane concept.

A potential disadvantage of going down this route is that Quiet Lanes have not always proved popular where they have been introduced. This appears to be due to limited effectiveness in some situations, excessive signage, and a strong resistance to formal shared use schemes by charities representing the interests of the blind. The UK Guide Dogs for the Blind “Say No to Shared Spaces” campaign is supported by more than 30 other disability organisations.

In respect of this last issue, it is worthy of note that The Street is already *de facto* a “shared space” and it is the continued effective working of this that we seek to protect.

The way ahead

- 1. Seek concensus from inhabitants of The Street and surrounding thoroughfares with regard to the issues and potential traffic management measures.**
- 2. Approach OCC to discuss options for traffic management including speed limit, road markings and “Quiet Lane” status.**
- 3. Develop proposals for full consultation.**

The character of The Street is very important to the village of Ewelme. It is fragile and needs careful management.