

***An Objection to the
Application for Outline Planning Permission
by Millwood Homes, Newton Abbot,
for the Erection of Eighty Dwellings
at Moretonhampstead Station***

Reference: 0743/00

The Objector

It is the long term aim of the Exeter & Teign Valley Railway to establish a complete, sustainable public transport system for the district of East Dartmoor, the backbone of which would be the two branch railways, Exeter to Heathfield and Newton Abbot to Moretonhampstead. A network of bus routes would radiate from stations and light lorries would serve the surrounding countryside. The railway would encourage a degree of self-containment and a reinvigoration of communities within the district, and would attract local industry and commerce to its linesides. It would, as far as possible, use renewable energy in both its rail and road operations.

There has been no effective railway lobby since 1939 and no pressure group could have hoped to achieve for rail what the string of moneyed organizations has achieved for road transport over the years since the last war. Today, in campaigning on behalf of rail and other public transport generally, instead of concentrating entirely on its own domain, the E. & T.V.R. is absolutely unique. It is a lone voice in a wilderness of devotion to road transport. No other private railway, no part of the denationalized railway, has anything to say.

Protection of Moretonhampstead Station for Future Transport Use

No doubt the authority, like practically everyone else, considers Moretonhampstead Station to be no more than the relic of an outdated, outmoded and outclassed transport system. The railway will never return and therefore the old station is just a "brownfield" site begging exploitation by rapacious developers. The only question for the authority to decide, then, is whether it is appropriate to insist upon the continuing use of the station for employment purposes or allow it to be turned into another uniform housing estate. There can be no consideration of future public transport use.

This is the easy, convenient, short-term view, typical of democracy, whose control by the simple and small-minded ensures that only what exists can be considered, not what could be; and that only incremental change occurs, for step change would be far too unsettling. Thus, the great lumbering dinosaur that is modern road motor transport can scarcely be criticized, let alone tackled. The feeble actions, and the retreat from action, of the present government proves that, even served with warning after warning, with evidence piled upon evidence, democracy is utterly incapable of dealing even with problems of its own making.

Moretonhampstead Station is the country terminus of the 12-mile branch railway from Newton Abbot, 4½ miles of which is still operational for freight traffic. The remainder, including that commandeered for road bypasses, should be looked upon as a dormant, highly-engineered length of guided transport infrastructure which would cost a multi-million pound sum to construct today. In the Wray Valley, the line of railway is never far from the A382, no better than a cart track in places, over which mammoth road vehicles elbow their way to and from Moretonhampstead Station, for the time being a haulage yard and distribution centre.

The presence of lorry depots at disused stations is an insult to the railway industry, for it has always given the quite wrong impression that one system of transport is succeeding on equal terms where another failed; the simplistic view that the road industry has always believed and propagated.

It is now a matter of historical record that, at the time Moretonhampstead Station was closed, the emphasis was on providing for universal car ownership and for a vast increase in road freight, and it was fully intended that the ascent of private road transport should correspond with a systematic run-down of the public modes of transport, principally rail.

Road transport was able to supplant the railway from Moretonhampstead because it operates, and continues to operate, under totally different conditions from the railway, not because it is inherently

superior. These conditions have been created by administration and could, by the stroke of a pen, be made more hostile or more favourable to one or the other mode, depending on the strength of the prevailing influences.

If rail had enjoyed a fraction of the resources thrown at road transport over decades, in provision of road infrastructure and development of vehicles; if there had been equitable methods of costing; if the true impacts of each mode had been determined; if regulation had been as stiff for each; then the great earthworks and structures of the Wray Valley would today not lie derelict but would carry electric trains, running silently and swiftly, towards Moretonhampstead.

But this is not a straight comparison, for whereas the red monster with the elephantine rubber feet would most likely be taking traffic to Moreton as part of a process of carting goods around in circles, the train, using a tenth of the energy and having far less impact, would be carrying traffic to and from Moretonhampstead town and its rural hinterland.

So-called “food miles”—the huge distances covered by nearly every consumable today because of artificially cheap road and air transport—will not be possible in the future. There must be a return to more local production and demand; local economies must be revitalized; there must only be necessary movement of goods.

At the many stations like Moretonhampstead, orderly hubs on the heavy transport system, fringe development would allow trading and industrial activity to concentrate where it is best placed. The spacious, freely accessible station yard at Moretonhampstead would suit many different businesses, the established kind and the kind that will come into being after the demise of wasteful road transport.

Vague guidance exists on the protection of disused railways. This has been proved worthless because, in order for any development which would hinder railway reinstatement to be opposed, firm plans must have been deposited by a national railway undertaking.

In the absence of any authoritative guidance, though, the authority can effectively protect Moretonhampstead Station by insisting on its continued use for the generation of employment, and the type of function which could be readily accommodated or displaced by rail transport development in the future.

Unnecessary Residential Development

The proposal for such a large number of homes in Moretonhampstead is objectionable, regardless of where development may occur. Although opposition by the railway must be confined to the proposal for the station site, the proposal for the Betton Way site is equally inappropriate.

There is gentle, steady, structured growth around or within the existing nucleus, and there is the abomination of eighty homes being thrown up on the edge of town, a satellite development designed in the main for car commuters, who inevitably would work in Newton Abbot or Exeter and probably have little to contribute to the local community or the life of the town. The housing estate would appear from the approaches and from vantage points as a “North American” enclave, an outpost of suburbia, as an unwelcome intrusion into any rural landscape, not just the priceless one of the National Park.

Moretonhampstead is apparently suffering a decline, like so many settlements in Devon. There are fewer shops and businesses and less employment than there was once. Even what remains is not secure. Young people are leaving and only the gravedigger is busy. It is claimed that only an increased population can arrest decline.

But the reality is that no amount of “dormitory” housing is going to provide sufficient new patronage for shops and businesses. The school may benefit from additional places but people—active or retired—who move to Moretonhampstead because the motor car makes it easily accessible would more than likely work, shop and find entertainment in the centres.

Moretonhampstead is not dying for want of greater population, but because of how the existing population behaves. If some were listened to—the landlords of Princesshay in Exeter for example—the big city is dying also: despite its vastly increased population since the pedestrian precinct was built, so many apparently are bombing up the motorway to shop for their knick-knacks at the likes of Cribbs Causeway, outside Bristol, that Exeter’s retailers are feeling the pinch. Again, the problem is transport being too cheap.

The future must hold a general reduction in energy and material consumption. There must be less mobility and the cost of servicing homes will mean that the number of people per dwelling rises. In a reversal of the modern trend, population density will increase without new homes being built. Development must be more mixed, with functional premises mingling with homes as before.

Building a sprawling, car-dependent housing estate that is almost fenced off from the town is unsustainable in the long term. Bovey-style residential development is unnecessary and should not be contemplated anywhere within the National Park.

A Plea to the Authority

The consequences of wanton extravagance in energy and materials are now obvious; the writing is on the wall. Yet there has been no real change in the set thinking of decision-makers and the same parroted statements are heard.

Alchemy is not needed to effect a railway resurgence, as many believe. Given a changed national will, a huge expansion of the railway system could be administered, without mystery, in exactly the same way that the road transport revolution was done.

Moretonhampstead needs reliable, affordable, general purpose public transport and it needs the capacity to serve itself. The town does not need a vastly increased itinerant population.

Notwithstanding the tendency of developers to get what they want through the appeals process, here is a chance for the Dartmoor National Park Authority to make a bold, principled stand, to take the long view and use some imagination by determining to protect Moretonhampstead Station for future transport use.

The Exeter & Teign Valley Railway is owned and operated by Colin Burges.