

The Cambrian Railways Trust is an objector to the applications for a supermarket and cinema on the Richard Burbidge site, and the trustees are disappointed that the developer does not seem to have taken their views into account. The Trust now leases the railway through Oswestry, and has firm plans to reopen it – not only for steam trains, but for a community rail service between Oswestry and Gobowen, and perhaps stone trains from a reopened Blodwel quarry. Two main points directly affect the Trust’s charitable objectives concerning railway heritage (regardless of the principle of where if anywhere a new supermarket should be, which of course is outside the Trust scope to comment on).

Firstly, the scheme shows “New pedestrian/Cycle routes delivered as part of the development” on the line of the existing disused railway track. A larger scale plan has been produced since, which still ignores the fact that the railway will have trains running on it! Between Gobowen and Llyncllys generally, there will be little difficulty in providing adequate safety clearances from the railway and fitting in a cycleway, and the Trust is happy to work with anybody who is designing such a scheme – but is concerned when drawings are produced which deny the existence of the railway. Alongside the Burbidge site, there seems to be plenty for space for a cycleway on former railway land, and a good opportunity to construct it at the developers expense, but there would have to steps down to Whittington Road To continue northwards alongside the railway, a second bridge deck would need to be put beside the single-track railway bridge. To the south, however, it will probably be necessary for the cycleway to pass over what it now McLarens car park and then across the village green – it certainly cannot pass between the two platforms of Oswestry station, because that space will be full of railway tracks.

A footpath/cycle route is also shown across the railway at the south end of the Burbidge site. This is an existing crossing with restricted rights, and not a public route, and for safety reasons the Railway Inspectorate will not allow it to remain open for traffic so close to the new level crossing serving the medical centre. It is possible that permission would be given for pedestrians and bikes, and the developer has accepted responsibility for any costs involved in this – but there is no guarantee it would be permitted at all.

These cycleways are outside the boundary of the application site, but appear to be an integral part of the justification for the scheme. So it would seem that a lot more detail would need to be agreed before the scheme could be granted planning permission.

Secondly, the Trust’s other main concern is the future of the grade II listed railway workshops which once constructed and repaired steam locos, carriages, wagons, and many other items. Independent studies state that Oswestry’s “station buildings and the works are the best surviving examples of their type in the UK...”, categorising them as “Nationally Significant Features The main buildings (including the station, goods shed, signalbox and works...), the platforms, trackbed, footbridge and associated features ... all survive in a unique group. The buildings are handsome and generally in good condition, contributing a major townscape feature.... Although in disparate ownership the potential of the Oswestry site to illustrate the scale and complexity of a regional railway headquarters remains.”

However the developer's "Heritage Statement" utterly fails to recognize or address the importance of the works, and uses a convoluted and misleading argument to categorise the proposed demolition of large parts of the listed buildings as "alterations" instead of demolition. It describes the 1904-built bays 1 and 2 as "modern" and proposes, without explaining why, to completely replace them with new buildings of a similar size and shape but incongruent appearance.

The Heritage Statement is also very dismissive of the detached Sheet Room and Gasworks buildings at the rear of the main works, and gives misleading descriptions of them. The sheet room in particular is a substantial and interesting building which could be converted to various other uses (not dissimilar to the Ironworks off Church Street) – but instead it is proposed to demolish it to "improve access", with the plans actually showing the site used for car parking.

A short distance away from the works is the former loco running shed. Not many people realize it still exists, because it has modern roof cladding and recent sheds added each side, but the steeper roof pitch gives it away. In fact it is a large and interesting structure (approx 20 x 61m) built about 1860 of decorative brickwork with rows of round-topped windows. It is within the curtilage of the main works, and is therefore protected by the same grade II listed status. But instead of making use of the potential of this important and historic building, the developer proposes to demolish it and use the space, again, for car parking.

It is hard to see how Listed Building Consent could be granted without a lot of changes to the developers proposals!