

Network ~~RAIL~~ **HELL!**

THE ONLY ROAD INTO OXFORD FROM THE WEST, BLOCKED FOR 600+ DAYS / PHOTO BY NETWORK RAIL



**OXFORD CUT IN TWO
OUR COMMUNITY BLIGHTED**

EDITED BY JULIAN LE VAY

INTRODUCTIONS

by Layla Moran and Baroness Deech



The contributions in this book reflect the many conversations I have had with residents in my surgeries, the people and businesses I have met on visits, and the emails in my inbox over the last two years. Network Rail's shambolic mismanagement of this project has caused profound disruption to the people and businesses of West Oxford and beyond, and I am so pleased this collection has drawn together their experiences.

When Botley Road was first closed in April 2023 I, like so many people in our community, raised serious concerns. Local residents told me they were worried about safety, confused by the unclear signage, and concerned for those with limited mobility. Over a year and a half later, the road is still closed and many of those questions have gone unanswered. Moreover businesses have since folded, people have been cut off from vital services, and we still don't have an end in sight.

This project has laid bare the complete lack of accountability and transparency in many of our institutions. For too long residents' worries and anger fell on deaf ears, with no access to the real decision makers at Network Rail or the Department for Transport.

I hope this book will arrive on the desks of those decision makers so they can properly understand what residents and businesses have been asked to endure. It is up to Network Rail now to convince our community they have a credible plan to finally get this project finished.

LAYLA MORAN LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MEMBER
OF PARLIAMENT FOR OXFORD WEST & ABINGDON

This important little report is not just a story about the disaster that has hit West Oxford and its residents. It is a message for the whole country and for the politicians, Ministers, rail organisations and construction companies to let them know that the decisions they take at their computers and behind their desks are mechanical, impersonal, incompetent, unfeeling, and just plain wrong in this case, because they do not heed the needs and daily lives of those affected.

We see this in many areas of our national life, ranging from financial to educational to health matters. These damaging decisions are taken and carried out regardless, in part because those who take them have vested interests, but also because they do not walk the walk (literally, in the case of station-bound West Oxford residents!) and they do not come and see for themselves, and experience the results of the decisions they take on real people, whether they be disabled, or business people or people who live and love the city and find their lives and emotions utterly disrupted. 'Nothing to do with me' says one official or one department to another; 'not my responsibility', says one branch of government to another; 'can't help it', they all say to the businesses that are ruined, the patients in pain, the friendly people whose social life is blocked by their actions.

We are a democracy. The only way to make the decision-takers responsive is through the law courts and by showing our opinion at the next possible election. The revolt against ideological and remote official control has started in Europe and will gather pace here. This report is a valuable contribution to understanding how our country runs; it has given ordinary people a voice, and we must do all our best to put this account in the hands of those who run us.

RUTH DEECH BARONESS DEECH

- 2 **WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY IT MATTERS**
- 10 **THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS**
- 20 **THE IMPACT ON BUSINESSES**
- 30 **HOW DID THIS PROJECT GO SO WRONG?**

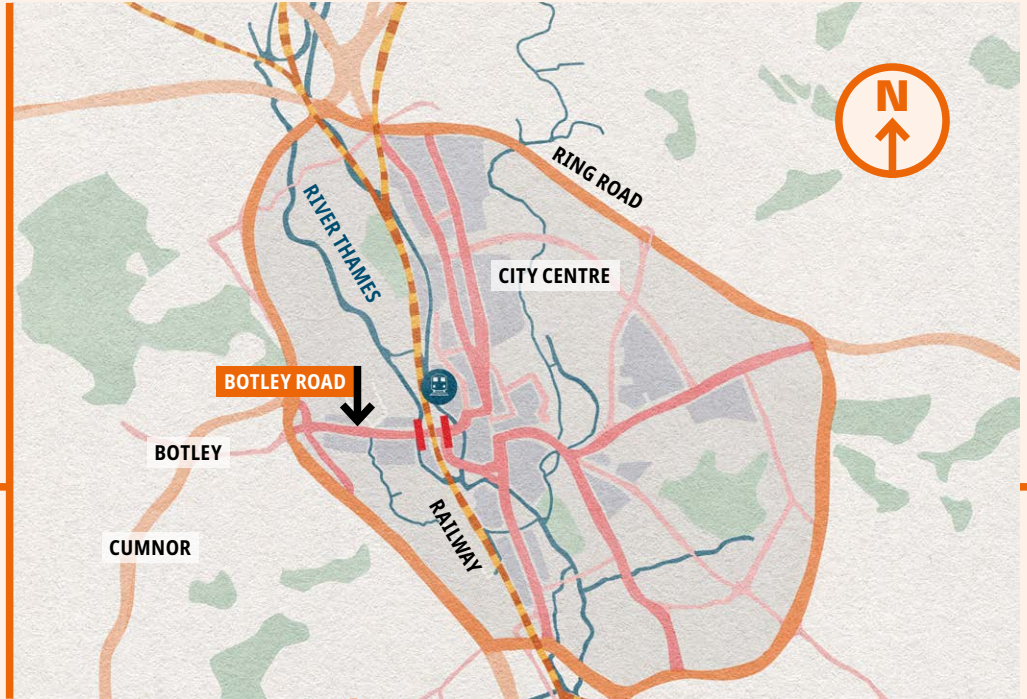
WELCOME TO OXFORD



WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY IT MATTERS

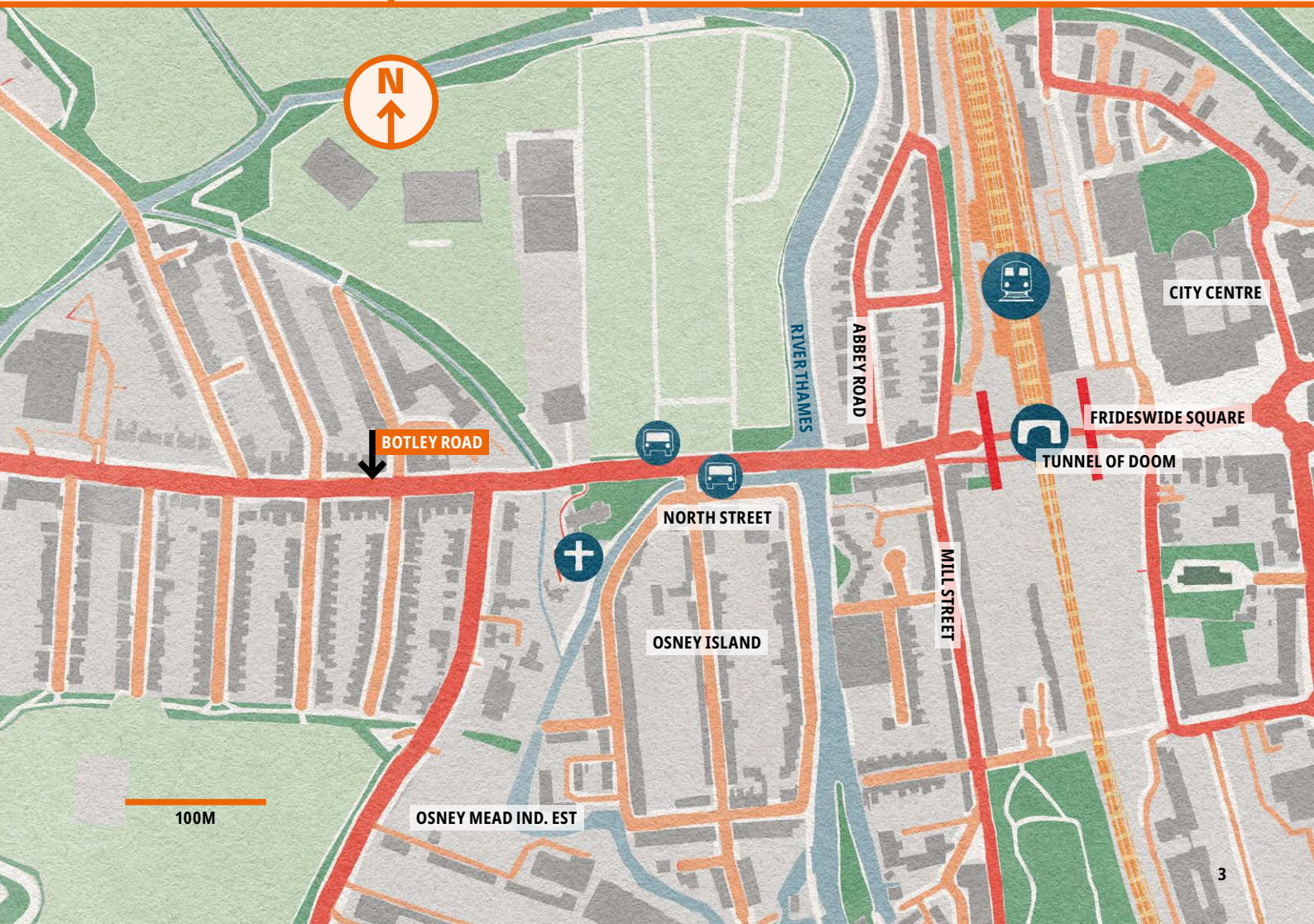
To make sense of what follows, you need to know that by quirk of geography, the western half of Oxford is joined to the rest of the city by a single road — *Botley Road*. If that road is closed, the city is cut in two — there is no other way through. The only alternative for vehicles is to go right out of the city and drive miles round the ring road.

Pedestrians face a 450 metre slog from the bus stops on the western side to the station and bus stops on the eastern side, through a crowded, narrow, poorly lit, badly maintained tunnel under the railway, known unfondly by locals as the *Tunnel of Doom*.



BOTLEY ROAD THE ONLY ROAD INTO THE CITY FROM THE WEST

THE ROAD IS BLOCKADED UNDER THE RAIL BRIDGE



WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

For at least the last seven years, Network Rail has been working on a project to expand the capacity of Oxford station.

In 2022, they added a proposal to widen and deepen Botley Road under the bridge, implying, wrongly, that buses to fit underneath had to be specially made, and that electric buses couldn't do so.

➤ see P30

HOW DID THIS PROJECT GO SO WRONG

On 22 July 2022, Network Rail submitted its proposals to the city council and proudly (if ungrammatically) stated:

... the Botley Road bridge has been carefully considered to reduce the timeframe of disruption of the project to the highway network and has been able to reduce the closure of the road to just 4 days!

That was the basis on which the city council gave approval to the project, at the meeting of the planning committee on 9 November 2022.

As time passed, 'just 4 days' became three months, then six months. Then Network Rail said the closure would start on 9 January 2023 and last for 12 months. Then that was cancelled, and when the road actually closed on 11 April 2023, Network Rail said it would stay closed for six months, April–October 2023, then re-open, and then close another six months April–October 2024. In September 2023 Network Rail said the road would not be reopened in October 2023, after all, but stay closed until October 2024. Then in July 2024 Network Rail announced the road would not reopen in October 2024, and that it had now no project plan or timetable, as the whole project is being reviewed.





THE TUNNEL OF DOOM, THE ONLY WAY INTO OXFORD



At the time of going to press, the Department of Transport is still reviewing the whole project and it is not known whether it will be cancelled, or curtailed, or when the road will reopen, or when the project will be completed, or what it will cost.

At this point the road has been closed for over 600 days. An overrun on time of 1500%—surely a record, even by Network Rail standards.

The cutting in two of our city has done immense damage to individuals and to businesses, which Network Rail and the Department of Transport have resolutely ignored, and on which the county and city councils have offered very little help.

When local people talk about the closure, they often say that the hardest thing to bear—apart from Network Rail's extraordinary incompetence—is that no one, not Network Rail, nor Kier (Network Rail's contractor), the Department of Transport nor the city nor county councils, is listening to them, or accepting any responsibility, but instead just point the finger at each other.

The purpose of this is give those who have suffered from this disastrous project a voice, and to allow them to say what this horrible intrusion into their lives has meant for them.

The road had been closed for over 600 days. An overrun on time of 1500%!

CYCLISTS WHO WON'T DISMOUNT TERRIFY THOSE WITH MOBILITY PROBLEMS

WHO'S AFFECTED?

Not everyone is equally affected by the closure. If you're fit and mobile, and never have any need to drive into the rest of the city, and don't run or work in a business in the western half (and also, you aren't too fussed about what happens to neighbours who have different needs to yours), then the closure may not matter much. But there are broadly four categories of people who are seriously affected by the closure.

1

PEOPLE WITH MOBILITY PROBLEMS

Many of those with no or limited mobility cannot manage the *Tunnel of Doom*. The narrow tunnel, and the walkways on either side, are at peak times extremely crowded with hurrying people, and made much more scary for those with mobility problems by people pushing—and sometimes riding—bikes, motorbikes, cargo bikes and e-scooters through the crowd. It does not help that the surface is very uneven. There is also a problem when coming out of the city, as the bus stops for services going west lack seating and shelter, and are often so crowded that pedestrians are forced to walk in the road. Many cannot afford taxis into the centre, or to the hospitals on the other side of the city, as they must drive miles round the ring road.

A selection of statements by people affected in this way form the first section of this report. There were way too many to print them all.

2

LOCAL BUSINESSES

Local businesses have been affected in various ways. Most obviously, by being suddenly cut off from all their customers in the rest of the city. And by difficulties in delivering into Oxford, since journeys previously measured in hundreds of metres have become miles around the ring road, adding to time and cost. Deliveries into businesses have also been affected. Businesses also fear permanent loss of custom, as customers turn elsewhere. Business people also bitterly complain that Network Rail's repeated last minute changes to plan have constantly thwarted their efforts to mitigate the effects of the closure.

Of course, with businesses there's seldom just one challenge, and it's a difficult time for retail. But whenever asked, owners have said it was quite clear, the drop in business started the day the road closed, and has been catastrophic.

Neither Network Rail nor the city or county councils have shown any interest in trying to quantify the economic damage that is being done. However, looking at the figures for reduction in business given by some businesses, I estimate that the economic loss due to the closure to date is likely in the order of £15–25 million, plus over 100 jobs.

Statements by business owners form the second part of this report. (National chains were reluctant to speak on record, but some talked off record).

Then there are two other groups who have been affected — but may not know it.

3

THE WIDER CITY

One is businesses and people in the rest of Oxford. Botley Road is the only way into the city from the west, unless you go miles around the ring road and enter from the north or south. The closure of one major arterial route has increased pressure on the others, particularly since at the same time, there have been months of very long delays on the ring road, due to work on the Botley interchange (a feature of this saga has been the contribution by other incompetents – National Highways, Thames Water, British Gas). On top of this, as the managing director of the Oxford Bus Company explains below, the introduction of ‘local traffic networks’ (LTNs) in east Oxford has pushed traffic off minor roads onto the main arterial roads, thus increasing congestion.

The county council intended to deal with this by introducing ‘traffic filters’ to prevent private cars entering the city centre, which they hoped would divert car users onto buses, bikes or foot. Whether this would have worked remains

a moot point, because it has been impossible to introduce traffic filters as long as Botley Road is closed. Thus the LTNs have become another source of increased congestion. The director of the Oxford Bus Company says in his statement that journey times have increased on one route by 50%.

The combined effect of all these pressures must have significantly reduced numbers coming into Oxford, to shop or for entertainment or for business, below what they would otherwise have been.

I’m not able to quantify this loss to the city as a whole, and the city council shows no interest in doing so. But for sure, it is real and significant.

To this must be added increased subsidies paid by the county council to bus companies to offset losses due to the Botley Road closure, currently at least £150k a year — so less money for other hard-pressed services. Or for compensating small businesses.

4

TAX PAYER

Finally, there is one other person affected but who doesn’t know it—the taxpayer. The original budget for the project, mostly funded by the Department of Transport, was £161 million. Of that, just £13 million was allocated for highway work when it was thought the road closure would be a few months at most. Network Rail have already spent over £120 million and yet, ironically, the work on the station itself has barely begun (though the entire project was due to be finished by now!). This includes: lowering ground on the western side, then relaying the existing access road, demolishing the western part of the station structure, laying a new track and building a

new platform, constructing pedestrian access tunnels under the whole station, building a new ticket office and office complex on the west side, together with a cafe, not to mention replacing two entire rail bridges, one to the north and one to the south of the station. It is a reasonable guess that completing the entire project would involve an overspend of well over £100 million.

This report focuses on giving local people who’ve been badly affected by the closure a chance say their piece and to have it put before those in power.’

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

When asked, people say:

1

RE-OPEN THE ROAD — SOON!

Not next year, or next autumn, but soon. But any plan must be credible — no one believes now anything said by Network Rail. A new plan must be guaranteed by Ministers, who must be personally, publicly accountable for delivering it.

2

COMPENSATE VICTIMS

Family business are being ruined, families are suffering. They can't hold on much longer. They should not pay for Network RAILS endless incompetence. Government did this, Government should compensate them. It'd cost a tiny fraction of the project's £100+ million overspend.

3

IMMEDIATE PRACTICAL HELP

So much could and should have been done to help people out during the closure. Both Network Rail and the county council spent 18 months thinking up reasons for inaction. Only now are they slowly beginning to acknowledge their neglect. What about seating and shelter at bus stops, widening the pavement, resurfacing the Tunnel of Doom, safe access for the disabled, enforcement of prohibition on dangerous drop off and pickups, more buses from West Oxford to the centre and to hospitals?

4

AN INDEPENDENT INQUIRY

An independent inquiry is needed not just because of the damage done to us, and the vast overspend, but because the Government propose a huge expansion of Network Rail's responsibilities. Yet Oxford is just the latest in a history of massive Network Rail project failures. We need to understand what is so wrong with it, and put it right.

THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS

The endless road closure has drastically reduced the quality of life of many people with mobility problems. Many say they no longer go into Oxford, can no longer shop there or visit friends or go to cinemas or even get to their GP or hospitals.

Rose Simms

SOUTHMOOR VILLAGE

I've lived the past four years in Southmoor village. The S6 had been a great bus service from the village into Gloucester Green [city centre] and back. We frequently visited Botley Road shops and the city centre. But with it stopping now opposite Osney Island, it has put us off going into Botley Road or Oxford itself. I have had two knee replacements over the past few years and an ankle operation and am unable to walk far. So to walk from Osney Island to city centre is sometimes not doable. Trying to get back is a nightmare! The queues at the bus stop at Osney Island spill all over the pavements, so dangerous, it makes me feel very unsafe. We now tend to go to Abingdon: although buses are not as frequent, they go right into the town. I have spoken to many other people who feel the same. I knew before the announcement that the road would never open in October! Now they are not even giving a date when it is opening! Absolutely fed up, like so many other people. Sheer incompetence! Someone should be made responsible for all this!



Sheer incompetence! Someone should be made responsible for all of this!



Mike Magee

MILL STREET

Since the closure of the Botley Road I've had to change my GP, based in Jericho, because what was a £14 taxi fare there and back now costs £40. I have had to go to the John Radcliffe hospital several times over the last 15 or so months. That's a round fare of about £50. I am disabled and don't feel confident enough to navigate the pedestrian tunnel on the Botley Road without help. The noise of the construction has also affected me.

NOTE: VERY SADLY, MIKE HAS DIED SINCE HE WROTE THIS. HE WAS A VALIANT FIGHTER AGAINST THE INDIFFERENCE OF NETWORK RAIL AND TOOK THEM TO THE SMALL CLAIMS COURT FOR THE COSTS OF TAXIS TO HIS GP AND THE HOSPITAL.

Zoe Mulcare

OSNEY ISLAND

My biggest frustration is not being able to go to a gym that we had joined just before all this started. I just really need to swim and get fitter, but cycling hurts my knees and getting all the way to north Oxford is not easy for me. Consequently, I rarely go and my membership is largely wasted.

I feel depressed at the idea of walking into town, to be quite honest. So often the tunnel is crowded, or someone is cycling through the pedestrians. I feel cut off from the city that we especially bought our home to be close to the centre of. Hospital appointments have become much harder to get to. The Botley Flyer has been too infrequent to be useful. My daughter had gone out less, as we can't pick her up easily when she's out in town, and taxis are much too expensive to get round the ring road. Friends from Oxford and from outside visit less.

It feels as though we are cut off from the city.



CITY OF DREAMING SPIRES

Walking the extra distance under the tunnel is a real problem for me, with the uneven surface ... the 10% of cyclists who insist on riding through are a real danger.'

Name withheld by request

WEST OXFORD

My husband and I have lived in West Oxford for the past 13 years. We are both very keen musicians (chamber music, choral singing etc). Our lives have been very badly affected by the difficulties of getting in and out of Oxford. I think I'm very typical of elderly women over here, many of whom no longer attempt to go into Oxford at all.

I'm a woman of 80 with serious arthritic problems with knees and hips, also loss of sense of balance, so I need to use a rollator. I do not drive and need to use the rollator for stability, which causes me a lot of pain. Walking the extra distance under the tunnel is a real problem for me, with the uneven surface and the possibility of falling. Most people are very patient, but the 10% of cyclists who insist on riding through are a real danger.

Getting into the city is important for me as I used to do a lot of volunteering, which I've had to give up, and my husband and I used to go to college dinners and concerts in the city, but with the S1 service now re-routed via the north of Oxford, we now have a much poorer bus service in the evenings, particularly on Sundays, making concerts and theatre trips impossible. Doing such activities is important for all of us psychologically and we have had so many restrictions in the past few years.

I also used to shop happily in Witney with a through service from our road, but now the E1 service breaks at Eynsham, making it difficult for me to do it alone (also there is no bus shelter while waiting). I have sent several emails to Stagecoach but never a reply.

My message is that we are all tired out, fed up and not seeing an end to this. The local authorities should be taking all this much more seriously and an inquiry into what has gone wrong is overdue.

Name withheld by request

BOTLEY ROAD

As a disabled person, my life has gone from being active and social to being virtually house-bound. My journey from work has increased in miles from 2 miles to 7 miles around the ring road. In time, it has increased exponentially. Driving in stop-start traffic, sometimes for hours, causes added pain and mobility issues. I had to negotiate working remotely with my employers, which has been extremely stressful.

My elderly parents who live in the city are not able to visit me any longer and I am only able to visit them at specific times when traffic is at its lowest. My mother had a fall in January and needed to be in hospital. My elderly father, who has memory issues, was alone for 3 weeks. As a result of the road closure I was not able to be there as often as I needed and we had to hire carers.

In Spring 2023 I had to give up the opportunity to continue my studies on a qualifying postgraduate course at Oxford University as I was no longer able to access the course due to the road closure. This has had a profound impact on my career development and my income.

I have not been able to socialise or attend cultural events in the city and friends have to visit me at my home. The professional, financial, physical, emotional and social negative impact has been beyond measure.

Network Rail and Oxfordshire county council say they put in place mitigating measures for the disabled during the closure including an audiobook, to explain how to access the city, and a bus once a day on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 10.45am [recently increased to one each weekday]. To call this inadequate would be an understatement.

Our MP, Layla Moran, facilitated a meeting with Network Rail and Kier Transport, specifically about disabled access. I made a number of suggestions for improving access. No actions have come from it other than producing the Mitigations Report—it was shockingly inadequate.

The professional, financial, physical, emotional and social negative impact has been beyond measure.'

Jennie Botham

BOTLEY

The closure has had a big impact on me. I work in South Parks Road and live in Botley. My arthritis makes walking difficult. The walk from High Street is too much for me.

My commute takes twice as long, is double the length. I cannot use the bus to get into the city centre because I cannot walk through the tunnel. I don't have a blue badge as I don't qualify as I can walk a bit—but it causes a lot of pain.



SO DEPRESSING

✓ **This has had a disastrous effect on our quality of life. It has become impossible to maintain many of the activities we enjoyed formerly!**



Neil and Ruth Cameron

BOTLEY

We are in our 80s. We retired to Botley in 2012 precisely because of its combination of self-sufficiency and convenient access to Oxford via seven bus lines. And now? Seven bus lines stop at Osney and the Rat Tunnel!

This has had a disastrous effect on our quality of life. It has become impossible to maintain many of the activities we enjoyed formerly, and rendered those we can continue difficult at best, making 'pleasure' unpleasant. One bus has become several, plus a bleak long walk. At our age, time is critical. We can ill afford to waste it. Here is a list of activities either curtailed or prevented:

Neil: Shareholder in the Ultimate Picture Palace (Cowley); concerts; political meetings; lectures at e.g. Rewley House.

Ruth: Lectures; book group; art classes.

Both: Now it's from hard to impossible to access the following which used to comprise our quality of life: GP Surgery in Beaumont St; JR & Churchill Hospitals; Railway Station; Gloucester Green Bus Station, especially when collecting foreign visitors unfamiliar with local transport; Gloucester Green Market; Botanical Garden; museums & galleries; Oxford Literary Festival; major shops; Oxford friends.

In addition to the violation of our lifestyle, we have suffered financially, as we've had to use taxis, which we never did in the past.

We feel that Network Rail have demonstrated utter contempt for all of us: local inhabitants, other users of the Botley Road, and our elected representatives. True, they have staged 'consultations', and issued frequent mealy-mouthed updates, but these fail to acknowledge their catastrophic planning and operational procedures.

WE ARE ABANDONED.

Jude Carroll

OSNEY ISLAND

I'm a 75-year-old woman, living alone on Osney Island, with no car, a bus pass and a love of walking. I go through the tunnel most days and, on the face of it, might seem unlikely to be affected. But I am affected.

Plus side?—lower traffic levels, noticeably better air quality, and at last, something being done about a sore/eyesore in the Botley Road world.

The negatives:

- The closure is just one of 4 major projects in close proximity. The impact is cumulative and I feel besieged.
- Bus stop arrangements mean too many people, too little space, too few seats, detrimental effect on the churchyard and at times, chaos. There is no thought about pavements as thoroughfares for us folk who live here. It's awful.
- The tunnel is often intimidating and unpleasant. I have been shouted at, sworn at, passed too close by delivery bikes, halted by groups occupying the whole space. This happens regularly.
- I accompany a blind friend through the tunnel and to and from the rail station regularly. He is an independent cane-user, but has been made incompetent by lack of notice on changes, strange reconfigurations in station access and more. His cane proclaims his visual status but vest-wearing 'helpers' have not once got off their phones and suggested a guiding arm.

These problems could have been foreseen and ameliorated. By ignoring them, even now, two years in, by assuming people will trudge on, by not caring who is affected, offering endless and meaningless apologies 'for the inconvenience'—in so many ways, Network Rail show they view us all as of no value.

I object!

The layout of the junction of Abbey and Botley Roads is an accident waiting to happen.'



PAUL SPENCER-LONGHURST

Paul Spencer-Longhurst

ABBEY ROAD

Life in Abbey Road has been seriously and increasingly eroded. Particularly irksome are:

- The gross inconvenience of not being able to drive to other parts of Oxford except via the ring road, which is often solid with traffic and was for weeks virtually inaccessible due to road works at the Botley interchange.
- Very poor provision for pedestrians and cyclists to navigate the tunnel under the bridge: it is too narrow for the motorbikes that use it and the pathway is uneven. This should at least have been relaid with smooth asphalt on a level surface, to help those with mobility problems or poor eyesight. The marshals should have power to compel cyclists etc to dismount.
- The layout of the junction of Abbey and Botley roads is an accident waiting to happen. The timing of the lights does nothing to prevent cyclists from speeding over the bridge towards pedestrians. Cars stopping and even parking right at the corner of Abbey Road to drop off or pick up travellers are invisible turning in from the main road until the very last minute. Enforced no parking or stopping for at least 50 yards of each side of Abbey Road would greatly reduce likelihood of an accident.
- The path by the Sheepwash Channel is a vital pedestrian route to Jericho especially when the alternative via the Botley Road is curtailed. It is a major problem to residents that it has been intermittently out of use for very long periods, even when no visible work is being done.

All this has gone on for far, far too long, with one completion date after another abandoned at the last minute, and still no definite timetable or programme of work in place. The combined effect has been to make local residents and businesses feel under siege, isolated and ignored. Those of us with physical disabilities feel particularly vulnerable, with greatly reduced freedom of movement and quality of life.

Network Rail, the city and county councils, Thames Water and other authorities all combine hopeless lack of foresight, gross inefficiency, little mutual communication and appalling arrogance.

Grant Nightingale

WEST WAY

My name is Grant Nightingale. I am retired and in my 79th year. The ongoing closure of Botley Road is an inconvenience to me. It doubles the number of bus journeys it takes for me to traverse the centre of Oxford. In addition, the length of the walk between buses leaves me tired.

✓ **Network Rail has no sympathy whatsoever for anyone living west of the bridge!**



Sarah and Paul Pritchard

BOTLEY

We are Sarah and Paul Pritchard. We're in our early 70s. Not that old, really, however we are struggling with the walk, and I am struggling with low blood pressure. It has severely impacted on us—the dread of getting off the bus at Osney, trying to manage the walk and hoping that I don't faint. We are pensioners and used to enjoy going into Oxford, maybe stop and have a coffee and a walk round the shops, or we would meet friends and have dinner and a drink. All these things have now changed, and it has to a certain extent alienated us from our friendship group. Our main doctor's surgery is in Beaumont Street we therefore can't get there as the walk from Osney is too much for us. Network Rail have no sympathy whatsoever for anyone living west of the bridge.

Catherine Byrne

MILL STREET

Living in Mill Street is not pleasant. There is a constant barrage of noise and dust and a huge increase of vehicles and people.

Traffic management is chaotic. The signage is confusing and the Traffic Marshalls (TMs), a lot of them, seem unclear as to why they were there. 18 months on, they are just as ineffectual.

Night working has been nearly unbearable: rhythmic pounding following by high-pitched drilling between 9pm and 3am. Three times, at around 10:30pm, I talked to the Night Manager, who told me living here would have sent him mad. The Day Manager made a similar comment. I have lodgers from the theatre staying for short periods. They pay me to live amongst the chaos, dirt and noise.

The pedestrian walkway and tunnel is a horrible experience. Pedestrians, including the bus passengers who've walked from Osney, share the walkway with cyclists and scooters. The TMs have given up asking people to dismount. They are completely uninterested. There are many minor accidents. Marshals trying to stop people crossing at the end of Mill street are ignored. People duck under their arms or skirt round them. Dangerous situations are frequent. Driving out of Mill Street is hazardous; bikes and scooters race towards the walkway entrance, cutting across your path as you creep out into Botley road. You hesitate before you drive anywhere—likely there'll be nowhere to park on your return. You drive slowly, only to be overtaken by an electric bike. Most cyclists and scooters ignore the temporary traffic lights.

Mill Street has become a turning area for drivers who are lost, and a short stay car park for private cars and taxis. They park on the pavement—it's rare if there isn't a car park right up against my fence, they turn in the road and occasionally hit cars that are legally parked. It's a horrible place to live at the moment and most distressing of it all, there's no foreseeable end to it.



'I rarely go to Oxford now due to the necessary walk through the construction site.'

Janet Pottle

CUMNOR

I am a pensioner and I've lived in Cumnor for 57 years. I appreciate that the Botley Road had to be closed for a period to alter the rail bridge but the length of time this has taken and the continuing postponement of the date for completion shows incompetence. I rarely go to Oxford now due to the necessary walk through the construction site. I'm sure I am not alone. Trade, work, theatres, cinemas, shops and restaurants must all be facing prolonged difficulties. What an ongoing adversity it is for us all.

Elaine Flint

CUMNOR

I run a scheme called Cumnor Contact which takes people from Cumnor parish who can't drive or use public transport to medical and other appointments. To get to the hospitals, Jericho podiatrist or the doctor's surgery in Cornmarket with Botley Road closed, involves longer, more expensive journeys, and a longer commitment of time for our wonderful volunteer drivers. To get to the Cornmarket surgery is particularly difficult, especially for people who have difficulty walking even short distances.

Jennifer Wade,

BOTLEY

I'm a Botley resident in my early 80s. My husband died unexpectedly in June 2022, but by spring 2023 I was beginning to rebuild my life, with frequent outings in the city centre for shopping, meeting friends, going to lectures etc.

Then Botley Road was closed. Overnight, my world shrank. I always used the bus to go into town. Although I am physically capable of walking from the bus stop through to Frideswide Square, I find the walk through the tunnel terrifying: cyclists who don't dismount, people in a hurry with wheelie luggage, motorcycles being pushed through with scant regard for other walkers. All my older friends feel exactly as I do. My expeditions into town are now limited to dental appointments and the like.



'Overnight, my world shrank.'



Andrew Horsfield

ST. FRIDESWIDE CHURCH, BOTLEY ROAD

From the outset we have had serious concerns about the impact of the closure.

In the winter of 2023/24, there was a danger of people falling and injuring themselves on the slippery mud which had developed on the church grounds next to the bus stop. We spread sacks of bark chippings there. Later Kier moved their barrier to stop passers-by walking through the church grounds. This solved one problem but produced another. The space available to pedestrians to walk past the bus stop is now very limited. There is a risk of serious accidents involving pedestrians and passing traffic, especially if there's a parked bus blocking their view of traffic. We wrote to Layla Moran MP asking her to talk to Kier and Network Rail about these issues. The response to her letter was that none of the parties were willing to act. So the situation remains unresolved.

Baroness Deech

BOTLEY

The walk to the station from where the buses stop short is about a quarter of a mile through many impediments, made dangerous by the cyclists who do not dismount, and the congestion, unevenness and darkness of the passageway.

I live on the west side about 2 miles from the station. This closure has caused me distress, exhaustion and disruption of my daily life. My arthritis has been badly affected, and I go to sit in the House of Lords less than I did before the closure because of the difficulty of travel and especially the return late at night.

The impact assessment carried out by Network Rail before the work started has many shortcomings. The closure might just have been manageable for a few weeks during the summer when schools are closed. However, the lack of progress, with no end in sight, is blocking access to the station, to the city, to doctors' surgeries and hospitals, placing restrictions on social life, shopping, sport, entertainment, all the normal habits of everyday life that depend on getting to the station and the city centre. No reasonable adjustments have been made by Network Rail or the county council or the builders for disabled and other vulnerable people. The Botley Flyer only runs 3 times a week [now once every weekday] and does not stop at the station. A trip around the ring road is £50 taxi fare return.

The closure ... is blocking access to the station, to the city, to doctors' surgeries and hospitals, placing restrictions on social life, shopping, sport, entertainment, all the normal habits of everyday life.'

When I get back (from visiting the hospital) I just lie down and cry, it's so painful ...'



Anonymous

A WOMAN I CAME ACROSS WAITING IN OBVIOUS PAIN AT A BUS STOP IN BOTLEY ROAD

I've been unwell and unable to walk since March 2023. I had a partially torn Achilles tendon, and then this year I've had cancer. I can't get to the GP even, the GP used to be in this road but now it's in Jericho and the bus that is supposed to take us there is so infrequent that I just can't go. They think I've got arthritis, it's painful, and I should have a blood test, but they can't get anyone to come to the house and I can't get to the GP.

Q So what do you do?

A I just don't go. I just put up with the pain. Taxis cost a fortune and I'm not working, I just can't afford it. If I really have to go to the hospital, I will go, but by the time I get to hospital, I'm in tears with the pain and when I get back, I can't do anything, I just lie down and cry, it's so painful. There's nothing else I can do, there's no alternative.

Q What do you think about the people in charge?

A Well, it's so difficult to know who's in charge, that's the problem, isn't it, who's to blame? The railway people don't seem concerned in any way. There's no one as far as I can see who's prepared to take responsibility, the council blame the railway, the railway blame the council. It is just so unfair to people who are disabled.

Rosemary Preston

MILL STREET

I'm 80, my husband is 88.

We now have four simultaneous, large scale construction projects going on in a single, very narrow, dead-end residential street, all of them dependent on entry to Mill Street, and with no turning space.

Resident parking spaces are taken, houses and cars are damaged, sometimes seriously. Cars turn into Mill Street and stop to let off passengers off going to the station or city centre, or else stopping with engines running to pick them up. Then there is a steady stream of misdirected vehicles who end up at the south end of Mill Street. They then spend ages with polluting engines running, working out where they are, how to turn and how to get out. We residents have become guides to get them back on the A34.

Here's an example:



The satnav of the fourth or fifth large lorry of the late evening had seemingly directed the Doncaster-bound driver to Botley Road, so he got stuck in Mill Street. This was after smashing the window of a legally parked van on the corner and knocking out the wall on the corner opposite, before coming to a dead stop, diagonally across the road. There were no marshals on duty and the police weren't going to come. It was left to us to work with him so he could reverse back to Botley Road, in the end it took half an hour. It's been like this on many nights.

The thought of another two years like this is untenable. It must stop!

THE IMPACT ON BUSINESSES

Businesses big and small have suffered major loss of trade, though the impact on small businesses has been especially severe, as they don't have the reserves of national chains. Some have been driven to closure, like Pickle and Lime, a family business for 40 years, or have moved out of Oxford. Others are hardly making a living — and with family businesses, it's families who suffer. Small businesses are a vital part of the life of our community, so this is damaging our whole community.

PICKLE AND LIME

GREENGROCER + TAKE AWAY / BOTLEY ROAD

Joe This has been a family run business since 1975, and my business for almost 40 years now. In that time, I've been through some very difficult times, seen many changes and faced challenges that have hit us really hard—floods, fire, Waitrose opening, COVID lockdowns—so when we heard of the Botley Road closure and were told that it will be closed for six months, reopen and then another six months the next year, we had to think to ourselves, it will be tough, but we could keep pushing on and get through it. But who could have guessed just how the road closure was going to affect our small family-run business.

The business suffered from the very first day. We lost our customers from Summertown and Jericho, people who just stopped coming, there was also the road works on the Botley interchange which just about finished people off. People didn't want to have to drive miles out and then sit in traffic for an hour to come to us. The businesses had a huge drop, 40% or more.

Theresa This business has been Joe's life and to see it fall to what it is now is so very sad. We work very hard and there's now only the two of us working as the business doesn't support us having other staff anymore. You have to put so much effort into every day and we get very little return. Wastage is huge, we give away what we can't sell but we still have a lot of waste—fresh produce is so difficult to turn over. We are so tired of this battle, every day, the long hours for no return. The Botley Road is no longer a place for businesses to flourish, it's a place of despair with empty shops and traffic signs saying 'ROAD CLOSED'.

Joe We tried talking to Network Rail and to the council. Mr Maxwell from the city council told us they had no money and couldn't help, David Paull from Network Rail was so rude, he just said that we were welcome to try claiming from them, but it would take years, and we would lose. For all the talk about communication, no one seems to be listening to us. Network Rail suggested making a video, a complete waste of time, it wouldn't generate any business—our customers know that we're here, but getting here has become impossible. Our MP Layla Moran has been very good, she came to the shop, and she was so easy to talk to and sympathetic. I know she's really tried, but she was unable to get any help for us. People talk about reducing business rates, but for us that would be loose change.

Theresa It's the constant changes in plans that is soul destroying. All summer we've been hanging on, hanging on, thinking the road would reopen in October, then we might get a good run up to Christmas, get some of our old business back. Now, we've no confidence that the road will ever reopen. Network Rail just don't seem to know what they're doing.

Joe I've had enough. I don't enjoy it anymore. If we had a decent offer, I'd sell up tomorrow. We just want to have a life again.

Joe Devlin and Theresa O'Rourke Owners

NOTE: THIS FAMILY BUSINESS HAS NOW CLOSED, DUE DIRECTLY TO THE NEVER-ENDING ROAD CLOSURE. CITY AND COUNTY COUNCILS, NETWORK RAIL AND DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT ALL REFUSED FINANCIAL HELP

The Botley Road is no longer a place for businesses to flourish, it's a place of despair with empty shops and traffic lights and signs saying ROAD CLOSED!



JOE DEVLIN AND
THERESA O'ROUKE

KNEAD ME

MESSAGE THERAPIST / BOTLEY ROAD

I've lost about 35% of my business. I used to have customers from all over Oxford. Many still come, but what is so difficult is building up new clients, which is so important to a business. People enquire, look at the map, then don't come. It's very inconvenient for me, too, it used to be 5 minutes from the city centre, now it's all the way around the ring road.

I've had no help. Network Rail said they'd make a video, if they did, I never saw it, I didn't see how it'd help. I just don't understand why the council has allowed deadline after deadline to pass, and just always agreed to Network Rail endlessly extending the delay. All we get is sweet talk, no action.

The residents of West Oxford were never consulted about this project.

Ferhat Durmusoglu



The closure made a big impact ... takings were down 18% ...!

SRIHARI BODI



PACK AND SEND

SHIPPING / COURIER SERVICE / BOTLEY ROAD

We took on this franchise in 2011. We chose this place for its location [at the eastern end of Botley Road, just the other side of the blockade from the station]. The closure made a big impact. Over a whole year, takings were down 18%—but in our busiest period, May-August, they were 24% down.

People can't get here with the things they want to send, taxis won't come round the ring road or are terribly expensive. And if we went to collect them, trips to the centre used to take 5 minutes, people would ring and say, I'm ready to go now and we could be there very quickly. Those trips now take more than half an hour. So customers look for other options, and it is difficult for us to be competitive on cost and time. And because collections take much longer, we've had to take on extra staff, which of course increases cost and prices.

I contacted Network Rail. They said, talk to Kier. Kier said, talk to the council. The council said, nothing to do with us, try Network Rail. It just goes round in circles. It is very disappointing. You're really made to feel that you don't have any voice, that you don't count. We're holding on because what else can we do – the franchise is a 10 year agreement and in normal times, this is a good site.

I feel angry. There's no one to talk to, every time, they just pass the buck to each other.

Srihari Bodi Franchise Owner

HOLYWELL PRESS

COMMERCIAL PRINTER / OSNEY INDUSTRIAL ESTATE

We're a family firm, we've been printing in Oxford for 134 years. Many of our clients are in central Oxford, the university departments and the colleges. Generally, we go to clients rather than vice versa. The big problem for us is delivery. Print is bulky and heavy. We did get a bike with a trailer but that's only useful for small jobs. Mostly we have to drive around the ring road. For example, delivery to the Said Business School [just on the other side of the closure] used to take a few minutes, now it's a major expedition—especially when the A34 is jammed. It's a significant extra expense in terms of time, which of course equates to money. At the same time, road closures in east Oxford are quite a problem.

Oxford needs to embrace business, and that must mean allowing proper access to the city. If not, they'll drive people away, people will find other locations; Aldens has already moved most of its business out of this site, and out of Oxford. But for us, because our client base is in the city, we haven't much choice.

Ben Burrows Managing Director

RAINBOW AND SPOON LADIES FASHION BOUTIQUE / FRIDESWIDE SQUARE



The Network Rail works have impacted my business totally and this latest delay in re-opening means I am now unable to plan for the oncoming Christmas season (our most important time of year, 'the golden quarter').

The devastation of our businesses started in March 2023, when with NO warning the square outside my business was dug up for investigation works by Network Rail, Openreach, SGN and Kier—some of those works are still there today (15 months later!!)—impacting access and blocking the walkways for pedestrians.

The lack of information, help and assistance from Network Rail and Kier has been utterly appalling.'

It was immediately obvious that the closure of Botley Road was impacting my retail business as at the beginning of a new season (April 2023). I didn't see a single one of my West Oxford/Cumnor Hill customers and still haven't.

I do the Blenheim Palace Autumn Fair [about 8 miles north], which is usually pretty straightforward, I would normally bring my car from Botley Road, under the tunnel, park on the Square, load the car and then return back to Botley Road. In the autumn of 2023, I was unable to do this—instead, I had to pick up my car from Botley Road and drive along the A34 and around the ring road in order to get my car in the right place to load up—costing me a lot of time and money in fuel etc. Similarly for the Tap Social Christmas market at the Curtis Industrial estate, Botley, I had to do the same A34 ring road journey again in order to load and unload my car. This journey usually takes about ten minutes—it now takes between 30 and 50 minutes.

And then ... they changed the walkway!!!! The ultimate kick in the teeth. There was absolutely no warning that this was going to happen. David Paull (Network Rail) gave us no clue about this, and since day one, every single person coming from Botley Road now exits the walkway on the North side of the Square and we have seen our footfall drop to practically ZERO!

Just to make sure they really hammered the nail into the coffin they then decided they had to lay new pipework that meant closing off our side of the Square from the public completely—if people did want to find us they couldn't see us anyway. This was supposed to take one week, but it did in fact take four weeks to complete.

The new walkway is the biggest disaster that could have happened to us, I and the other businesses on the Square are terrified of what this is going to do to our businesses.

Due to the scheduled replacement of the railway bridge between July 27th—July 31st I decided to close (not something I do lightly in the middle of tourist season) as I was told it would be loud, dusty and noisy, and there seemed little reason to be open at this time. This work was then cancelled, but I had made plans and it was too late to change them, so I was forced to close regardless!

The lack of information, help and assistance from Network Rail and Kier has been utterly appalling, with absolutely no regard or acknowledgement of how this has affected our businesses. Network Rail were reluctant to help getting signage we've requested. They refused to talk to the businesses on the Square, and would not engage in a professional or helpful manner at all. The lack of honesty, timely information and willingness to listen is exasperating, thoughtless and completely unprofessional.

We have been in contact with Layla Moran MP, Annaliese Dodds MP, Susanna Pressel (city councillor), all to no avail so far and Network Rail refuse to give us the contact information of any one in charge of this fiasco.

I am now left in the situation of having a shop full of unsold seasonal spring/summer stock, whilst already taking delivery of new season autumn/winter stock. If they'd been honest about the finish date 2 months ago, I might have been able to do something about it—too late now. Again!

The longer this road closure goes on, fewer people will make the effort to come into the city and this will affect every single business in Oxford and particularly those on Frideswide Square, Botley Road and Park End Street.

Amanda Suliman Bell (Owner)

HOW TO KEEP SHOPPERS AWAY / FRIDESWIDE SQUARE



ALDENS

MEAT AND FISH WHOLESALER AND RETAILER / OSNEY MEAD INDUSTRIAL ESTATE

The road closure had a big impact, cutting footfall by maybe 10%. To an extent, we recouped that in prices. But in addition, delivery is such a problem now—we used to just nip down the road to customers in Oxford, so if the customer added to the order, someone could get down there quick with whatever it was. But taking everything all the way round the ring road has added so much cost—in petrol and drivers' time.

We've had other problems as well—risk of flooding had increased for example, and our rent was nearly doubled. But the road closure was a major factor. So we've moved most of our business to Bicester. About 80 jobs went with it. Of course, that means a long drive into Oxford all the way from Bicester. It's just retail now on this site. We've had no help. Both the council and Network Rail made it clear early on that they'd do nothing for us. We put in for business rates relief—but it's been incredibly slow. We still haven't heard.

Ashley Deakin

Income is about 50% down. I couldn't pay staff so I've had to do everything myself. It's been hard to pay bills and I've had to refuse treats for my kids ...!

HERA SALON

HAIRDRESSER / BOTLEY ROAD

I've always been a hairdresser. We set up here in 2021, just after the COVID lockdowns. We slowly built up a clientele, the way you do. We were doing well, we had four chairs, we had a beautician in four days a week and another hairdresser three days a week.

The road closure had an immediate impact. I used to have some customers from north Oxford who would shop at Waitrose and then look in here and get their hair done. Of course they stopped coming, as it meant £40 for a taxi right round the ring road.

Income is about 50% down. On top of that, prices are rising, but we couldn't really raise our own prices, for risk of my remaining customers going elsewhere. Obviously, I couldn't pay staff, they had to stop—this was hard, as I know they've got family too, and we are close, like family.

So I've had to do everything myself. For example, I have to answer the phone when it rings, even if I'm in the middle of doing someone's hair, and sometimes customers don't like that. I haven't been able to take a holiday, until very recently. It's been hard to pay bills and I've have had to refuse all sorts of treats for my kids, that's so difficult.

I like to stand on my own two feet, that's how I am. I don't go through life looking for handouts. But I thought I might get some help, given how much my income was affected by the closure. The city council were not interested, they just blamed Network Rail. We pay very little in business rates, so business rates relief is no help really. Network Rail refused to help. They said there would be a bus from Botley to north Oxford, but only twice a day and only on a couple of days a week, that's no help for people coming here for a hairdo. They say they made a video, but I never saw it.

Our MP Layla Moran has been great, she's come here and spent time here, even sent her mother and sister as customers! And I know she's tried hard in Parliament, but without results yet.

When we heard the reopening is again being postponed and no new date given, it was very disappointing. I'll carry on as best I can, but it's very hard. I just don't think Network Rail care in the slightest about the effect they've had on us and other businesses.

Hera Rahmay

We've moved most of our business to Bicester. About 80 jobs went with it ...!



We're down about 20% by volume ... We had to downsize. As a result I have to work much longer hours, up from 45 hours/week to 60.'

FIRST STOP SPANNER WORKS

GARAGE / FERRY HINKSEY ROAD

I've had this garage for 10 years now. In fact, it's the oldest garage in Oxford and now, the only one in the city centre. We're a general garage, we do MOT, repairs, servicing, tyres.

The closure had an immediate and serious impact. Of course, we get no business any more from people in town. For example, we used to get breakdowns from the Westgate car park, which is only 400 metres away, but since the closure it's become a 9 mile drive. We used to get people coming from as far as Witney and High Wycombe, who don't come any more. I'd say we're down about 20% by volume. We no longer open on Saturdays, that was when we'd get business from the Westgate.

The closure has other consequences. Deliveries are much slower. Deliveries are usually planned on the basis of multiple stops at perhaps 10 customers, and we'd be one. But now they have to plan a single journey to reach us. As a result, we have to carry higher stock. We had to downsize, from 4 staff to 3. As a result, I have to work much longer hours myself, up from about 45 hours a week to 60. Of course that has consequences for family life. I've also had to postpone new investment on replacing old machines etc. Obviously, that's only short term, you can't carry on doing that.

There's been no help at all. Network Rail say they have these wonderful customer care policies and that they'll reply within 5 working days but often I've contacted them and got no reply at all, ever. When I have met them, they haven't seemed at all interested. They said they'd make a video of my business but I don't see how that could help: customers know where I am, it's just that they can't reach me.

I did try to persuade Network Rail to be more innovative. For instance, they and Kier have vehicle fleets we could have helped maintain, they have vacant retail sites in the station that could have been used by West Oxford traders directly, or to advertise our services. But they just weren't interested. Network Rail is a huge bureaucracy, in many ways they are less open and less accountable than a private company would be.

The constant changing of plans and deadlines by Network Rail, usually at the last minute, makes things even more difficult. Small business needs to plan around 12 months ahead, obviously that's now quite impossible, we don't know what the next month will bring. We've no idea at all now when the road will reopen. It's just so very, very frustrating. It feels like we've become an island cut off from the rest of the world. The powers that be just don't have any interest in small businesses. But small businesses are really the life of a community. For example, during COVID when we dropped off a car, we'd also pick up groceries for customers.

I don't think the impact is just on West Oxford businesses, it's the whole city, because of the knock-on effects of closing a major artery. And I think it will have long term effects, because customers get into the habit of going elsewhere and of writing off central Oxford.

Zach Iqbal



OXFORD BUS COMPANY

OXFORD

We are a commercial business, therefore if we lose income, we're in trouble. We were making good progress in recovering from COVID when Botley Road closed.

There's been a significant decline in passenger numbers and income, around 7 to 10% on the affected routes. That's equivalent to approximately £400,000. In addition, because routes that were previously run cross-city are now cut in half at the bridge, you need more buses to run the same route, as well as more drivers. And there are other problems. There is nowhere on the western side of the city for drivers to have their rest time—which we're obliged to provide—so we've had to buy extra cars to drive them via the ring road to our main depot.

When we were told the road wouldn't re-open in October 2023 as planned, we told the council we'd have to drastically reduce services, and they agreed to subsidize some of the affected routes in order to maintain frequencies and hours of operation.

Network Rail have been difficult to work with. It is challenging to get a straight answer out of them; we have found that we have been dealing with a rather larger level of 'surprises' than we would have expected.

As well as the road closure, we're also struggling with slower journey times, as a result of LTNs, which funnel a lot of traffic from side roads onto the main arteries, which clog up. For example, peak time journey times for the ST1 to Harwell [15 miles south] have risen from 51 minutes to 77 minutes. Transit times on Abingdon Road are up by an average of 17%. The county council has devised the 'traffic filter' scheme to help with this, but of course the filters can't be put in as long as the Botley Road is closed. In fact, the county council have a commitment in their Enhanced Partnership agreement under which they undertake to increase bus speeds in Oxford city by 10% by March next year, but if Botley Road is still closed and the traffic filters aren't in, that's not going to happen.



Network Rail have been difficult to work with. It's challenging to get a straight answer out of them ...'

We've spent £30m investing in a huge electric bus fleet and recharging points. Unfortunately, the combination of very slow traffic speeds and the Botley Road closure means that we're not able to deploy them efficiently within the city.

One of the justifications for increasing the height of the rail bridge was because bus companies were having to buy specially made lower height buses. In fact, many new buses are manufactured in this lower height, low height buses are used in many parts of the UK, and we have other low bridges on our network, which require these. Due to the uncertainty around the completion date of the bridge works, when we bought the new electric fleet we decided to keep these vehicles to the same reduced height. So there was no urgent need to increase headroom under the bridge.

Next year is looking very difficult commercially. If the Botley Road is still closed and thus the traffic filters can't go in, traffic speeds are going to remain reduced in areas like the Abingdon Road. My concern is that customers form habits, if they stop taking the bus because it's so slow, they may not come back to it when speeds eventually pick up. And there has been significant and long-term damage done to bus patronage on the Botley Road itself.

If you look at how this has all panned out, the never-ending delays and repeated changes of plans, you just feel that it must have been possible to make a better job of it than this.

Luke Marion Managing Director

THE OXFORD WINE COMPANY

BOTLEY ROAD

The road closure had a huge effect on us. Sales are down by 40-50%. We used to get a lot of sales from people leaving Oxford, after work - they could pull in and park just outside.

The other thing is delivery into Oxford - our vans have to go all the way round the ring road. We've spent a lot of money on extra fuel and staff time, driving round the ring road—when it's working, that is.

The latest delay is a disaster. A short while ago I was asked about my lease, and I thought, in the autumn the road'll reopen, then we can have a good run at Christmas. So I signed for an extension. Now, out of the blue, we're told that it won't reopen, and no one knows when it'll reopen.

And beyond that we've got traffic filters, so customers in Jericho and so on will be much less likely to come out here.

We've had no help. The council wouldn't help. Business rates relief doesn't help because we were already on very reduced rates post COVID. As for Network Rail, they never even replied to my request for a discussion. Never replied. I just despair.

Ted Sandbach Owner / MD



People came here from north Oxford and Jericho. All that just stopped dead. Anyone looking forward to a special night out, they're not going to want to trudge through the grimy pedestrian tunnel.'

THE PORTERHOUSE

GRILL AND ROOMS / MILL STREET

We set up here in 2017. There was an opportunity here around the development of the old power station by Said Business School.

The closure of Botley Road affected both sites, but the Porterhouse more. We're a destination restaurant—people come here from north Oxford and Jericho. We'd get perhaps 5 taxis a night. All that just stopped dead. Taxis just didn't want to come and it's a long way around the ring road and very expensive. And anyone looking forward to a special night out, they're not going to want to trudge through the grimy and graffitied pedestrian tunnel. So we lost 15 or 20 covers a night. Like for like, we're down about 10% on both sites.

But it's not just the loss of income. With a new restaurant, you have to work really hard to establish your name, to get the repeat business. I'm worried that even when road eventually reopens, we'll have to do all that again from scratch.

No one offered any help. Network Rail said, claim on our business insurance but that's a total non-starter and a total waste of time, since the closure had been trailed for years. Neither Network Rail nor the council were willing to talk about compensation. We looked into business rates relief, but it's a lot of paperwork for not very much money. Network Rail suggested making a video to advertise us, I thought this was just having a laugh. Our former customers know exactly where we are—the other side of the blockade!

It's just ridiculous in this day and age and in this country, that they can just cut you off from your customers for years without any compensation or help in any way whatsoever. Network Rail are without any care at all for the people who live and the businesses here in West Oxford.

Tom Rainey Owner
(also owns 'The Punter' pub on Osney Island)



TAP SOCIAL

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE / CURTIS IND. ESTATE, BOTLEY

We've been on the site since 2017. We offer employment and training to prisoners on day release, and ex-prisoners, and our Botley tap-room is very events-driven.

Closure of Botley Road had a massive impact on footfall. We are often completely empty on days when we would have been heaving. We used to get a lot of people from east Oxford but now it means 2 bus journeys and an unpleasant wait in between, people can't be bothered to come out here. On top of that, it is now much more difficult getting to and from Eynsham and Witney, you have to go back into the centre of Oxford and catch another bus from there, so the journey time is doubled. And they no longer run a night bus, so late events are impossible if you live over that way.

Revenue is about halved, so the amount of employment we can offer is reduced and we've got less money to hire local music performers and run events.

At first we tried to talk to Kier about support, but now they no longer respond.

We understand projects don't always go to plan, but overall, the whole thing's been a complete mess, with a lack of support for local businesses. Very basic things like providing publicity in the form of banners has taken nearly two years and they're still not available and they don't really tell you what's available or where things are.

There should have been a taxi rank this side of the blockade, it's ridiculous that people have to go right into Oxford to get a taxi. We would have expected the council to help out but they've done nothing. The impact financially is devastating, it's difficult to remain viable.

Tess Taylor Director

WESTGATE / RIVER HOTELS

HOTEL / BOTLEY ROAD

Our problems are different to other businesses since we're so close to the train station, access for customers is less of a problem.

Basically, we are in the middle of a building site and the worst issue is the noise, particularly work at night. If guests can't sleep, they walk out and we have to refund the guests for their stay. Because we're only a few yards away, it doesn't take much to disturb guests, a digger reversing or just groups of so-called traffic marshals hanging around, chatting and playing music.

We're trying to keep occupancy rates up by not raising our prices, even though we face record inflation. The high turnover rate has additional costs for us, for example, more bedding changes and cleaning. There's also management time spent in dealing with Network Rail. Then there is reputational damage—people leaving poor reviews online.

From the outset, Network Rail claimed that because this was a government project, they were not liable for any damage to our business. Dealing with them on practical problems has been a nightmare. Even when they agreed to take action, it always takes forever for them to do anything. For example, there were too many wardens hanging around with little to do overnight, they would sit and chat all night and play with their phones. It ended up with their friends coming on site to have a little party and they were keeping our guests awake. Network Rail first claimed that because they were under contract from a third party, it was nothing to do with them. It took a long time for them to reduce the numbers and deal with the rowdy ones.

Another example, they put up barriers right outside our windows to dig a hole, but then the barriers were left there, even after the work had been done. I couldn't get any action from above, until we talked to the workers on the ground—they took them away at once.

Another example, they set up generators to power the temporary lights, right outside our front door. There's no reason it has to be right outside the front door but despite numerous requests, nothing was done. After months of requests, we eventually managed to have the site foreman move the generator and he suggested that there had been no discussion about the generator from their office.

Similarly, the pumps in use to keep water out of the works run 24/7, even Network Rail admit that it's old equipment and very noisy. They said they would use soundproofing but the barriers were left in the yard for a week until we complained, then once installed they moved the pumps away from the soundproof barrier and ran them with the engine hood off, showing total disregard for their neighbours. Again, the pumps were left running even when there were no workers on site, until I insisted and they were finally turned off. The blame is always shifted from one contractor to the other.

Network Rail is so badly organised. Different teams seem to work in complete isolation from each other. It's the opposite of hands-on management. I'm a manager myself and I know how you get a problem sorted, you need to be on the spot and give clear instructions and then check that it gets done. For example, I once called them to the hotel because of noisy working overnight, but the guy who came didn't even know there was anyone working overnight because he was from a different branch. There's also this thing where you get completely different explanations for things at different times. It doesn't seem to matter to them what explanation they give you. This happened when I asked why they were doing the preparatory work for piling, which is much less noisy during the day, but doing the piling itself, which is extremely noisy, at night—why couldn't they do it the other way round? I never got an answer. Nor on why they don't use more modern piling machines which are less noisy. It just doesn't seem to matter to them, cut costs and leave somebody else with the problem.

They agreed to inform us when the noisy work would be scheduled so we could properly inform our guests in advance. This was frequently done on the day, or on the day after the overnight work commenced.

The latest delays have left us in an impossible position, not having the slightest idea when the work will finish and when the road will reopen. We just can't continue another year in this way. We were forced to reduce room rates, to maintain occupancy, for what we were told would be two summers. The disruption has now been constant since April 2023 with no end in sight. We cannot continue operating at a loss.

The whole project is such a shambles, it would be laughable if it didn't have such dire consequences. I'd like somebody independent to come in and look at what Network Rail is doing and the damage they are doing to the city and rethink the whole thing. Better than these constant postponements, then a new plan, and then that's postponed, and so on and so on. I really don't think Network Rail care at all. It just doesn't register for them what their impact is on local business.

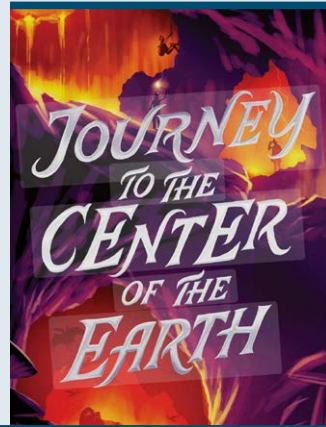
Andy Jones Manager

Dealing with Network Rail on practical problems has been a nightmare ... They are so badly organised. It's the opposite of hands-on management.'



HOW DID THIS PROJECT GO SO WRONG?

A proper independent inquiry is needed, because of the harm done to us, waste of public money and Network Rail's history of poor project management. And because the government wants to hugely expand their role. But over the years it's become clear that there have been a number of things very wrong about this project from the start.



TO THE CENTRE
OF THE EARTH?

The tail is wagging the dog. And it's not even the dog's tail

This is a *railway* project, about upgrading and increasing capacity at Oxford station, and it's been undertaken by a *railway* company. But somebody suggested that while they were digging around the bridge, they might make improvements to the highway as well: deepening the roadway under the bridge, and improving pedestrian and cycle paths. This highways work, specifically deepening the roadway, has completely taken over the project, swallowed much of the money and caused nearly all the delay. Which begs the question ... who asked for this?

Where's the customer?

It's a mystery who actually *asked* for the highways work. When I spoke to the highways people, they didn't recall asking. The requirement is there in the Department of Transport Business Case, and in Network Rail's submission to the city council. But the Department of Transport don't think it was them. The county council always talk of this as Network Rail's project and Network Rail's responsibility. There is a peculiar distancing of the highway authority from a major highways project, one that is having a catastrophic effect on the council's own transport strategy. There is fundamental lack of ownership of the highways work, and that is particularly so when it comes to the spec. for deepening the roadway ...

It's a mystery who actually asked for the highways work!

Deeper still, and deeper

The roadway has to be slightly deepened, because the width (east/west) of the bridge will increase. But Network Rail's submission and business case say that a more radical deepening of the highway under the bridge is necessary, because standard model buses can't get under it, so the bus company has to have special models built, just to squeeze under this bridge. Fair enough: except, it's not true. In their comments on the draft proposal, which I've got a copy of, the highways people say, very clearly, that existing buses are standard models and *did* pass under the bridge just fine. This is confirmed by the statement in this book by the MD of the Oxford Bus Company—who ought to know. Still, the county council thought a much deeper roadway a good idea. Why?

Buses, and the future evolution of homo sapiens

In the paper, the highways authority people said that it would be a good idea to have a much deeper roadway under the railway bridge, even though buses passed under the existing one OK, because in the course of the next 100 years, it is possible that human beings might grow taller and thus need taller buses. Yes, I know, incredible; and yes, I have the proof. Is this why the project ran out of control—because someone in the highways authority had a thought about the course of the future evolution of our species? Surprising. Talking of which ...



HIGHER AND
HIGHER, SAYS
HIGHWAYS
DEPARTMENT

ORIGINAL PROJECT PLAN (APPARENTLY, IT'S ALL FINISHED!)

	START	FINISH	2020				2021				2022				2023				2024			
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
GRIP 5 DESIGN																						
GRIP 5 design—Main station area/Botley	OCT-21	NOV-22																				
GRIP 6 CONSTRUCTION																						
Grip 6—Main station area/Botley road	Nov-22	DEC-24																				
Roger Dudman Way realignment & sheepwash bridge	Nov-22	SEP-23																				
Botley road pedestrian bridge	DEC-22	MAR-23																				
Botley road bridge and highway works	APR-22	DEC-23																				
Platform 5. Buildings and canopy	DEC-22	NOV-24																				
Western entrance construction	NOV-23	NOV-24																				
Entry into service		DEC-24																				

Every day, a fresh surprise

A consistent feature of this project has been that everything in the real world takes Network Rail by surprise. And every such surprise leads to a project extension. One can see this right from the outset, when Network Rail's submission to the city council included many hundreds of pages of detail and technical drawings about the railway work, but only the merest outline of the highways work. Indeed, the whole of 2022 was taken up with Network Rail and Kier beginning to learn about what they had taken on. And the answer was a succession of problems which they had not foreseen. They were astonished to find so many utilities under the road (one might ask why hadn't the highways authority got accurate and comprehensive details of what was there?). Then they were surprised to discover that they haven't got legal power to compel utilities to work with them. Then there was the Victorian structure underground—which contrary to some reports, Network Rail *did* know about beforehand, they didn't know how big it was.

This characteristic of constant surprise and repeated delay is evident in other parts of the project, too. For example, the replacement to the pedestrian bridge from Mill Street into town over the railway. This was billed to close on 26 July 2023 and reopen 9 days later, on 9 August. In fact, Network Rail/Kier found 'unexpected' things, like drug paraphernalia, as a result of which the footbridge was not reopened until 16 October, a time overrun of nearly 900%.

I'm familiar with major construction projects. Yes, unexpected things do crop up. But you minimise them by the fullest possible research before you start, and by a project plan which can respond to the unexpected without being thrown entirely off course. Neither seem to be the case here. Network Rail, whose business is managing projects, don't seem to be terribly good at ... managing projects.

When is a contract not a contract?

I suspect this is closely linked to the type of contract between Network Rail and Kier. Basic elements of effective contracting are a clear definition of what is required and by when at what cost, penalties for non-compliance, clear arrangements for monitoring and measuring progress, and for dealing with problems and agreeing solutions as they come up. In essence, a division of roles: the contracting authority states what's to be done, and the contractor then delivers.

We don't know what the contract between Network Rail and Kier looks like, but it must be rather odd, because every time Kier have a problem they just add to the time scale and add to the cost. Moreover the boundary between the two is not clear—at times Network Rail seemed to have been using Kier more as its own labour force than a separate contractor charged with getting things done. My guess is the contract looks like a very old fashioned 'cost plus' contract, which pays the contractors' costs stage by stage, whatever they may be, plus profit. The obvious drawback to such a contract is that if the contractor finds something difficult or novel or just more difficult than expected, they can bill you extra and add to the timescale. There is therefore no incentive to keep costs down or to keep to timescale. Quite the reverse!

WE NEVER EXPECTED THAT!



The highways authority that disappeared

The county council has always viewed the whole project, including the highways work, as somebody else's problem. And here there are a couple of curious legal ambiguities. Network Rail is a 'statutory authority' which means it has a statutory right to work on roads but this is limited to the purpose of 'maintaining and operating railway infrastructure'. And I wonder whether the work of widening and deepening the highway, done explicitly for 'highways' and **not** 'railway purposes', is really covered by this power, particularly since that work extends hundreds of metres away from the railway?

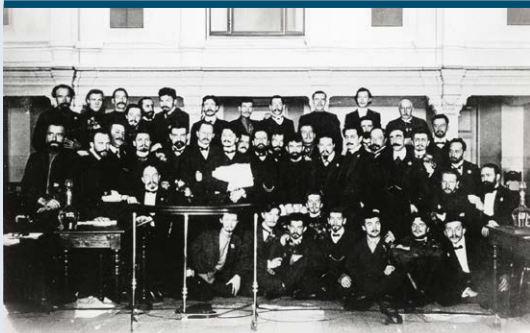
And any utility proposing to make a permanent alteration to the highway must form a section 278 agreement (under the Highways Act 1980) with the highways authority, in which the proposed changes are set out in great detail. Now, the county council told me last year that they would 'shortly' agree a section 278 agreement with Network Rail. But as of August this year, they still have not done so. That seems legally interesting. If, for the past 18 months, Network Rail/Kier have not been making a permanent alteration to the highway, what exactly *have* they been doing?

What the county council is certainly responsible for is safe road management. Yet they have allowed a chaotic mish-mash of temporary bus stops, lights, crossings, barriers and diversions to sprout up that are unsafe and are increasingly ignored by a fed-up public.

All through this saga the county council have insisted they have no power whatever over what Network Rail do. Those were precisely the words to me before the closure of the road by Andrew Gant, county council Cabinet Member for Transport Management. That seems to imply if the Network Rail starts work on the highway and then never complete it, they can just go on and on for ever, which is what they appear to be doing. I'm not a lawyer but I don't believe that is the case. Surely the highways authority could and should have robustly challenged NR's work plans?

All in all, the highways authority seems to have been strangely passive.

What the council clearly is responsible for its road management - yet it has allowed a chaotic and dangerous mish-mash of lights, crossings, barriers and closures to grow up which are increasingly ignored by a fed-up public.'



THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF NETWORK RAIL

Network Rail — the last Soviet state

All organisations have their own culture. Network Rail's is very strange indeed. Although notionally a company, its style is more bureaucratic than commercial (e.g. see Andy Jones' statement). It is secretive. Every construction project nowadays gives the name and contact details of its project manager outside the site, for all to see (as Kier did). Network Rail refused even to identify their project manager. Indeed, there doesn't seem to be any one person in charge, more like a big bureaucracy.

They are poor at working with others—the county council Cabinet Member for Transport Management told me they were extremely difficult to work with and did not share information. Several of the statements in this report make the same complaint. That is also my experience, in our neighbourhood association.

They are the opposite of open. Network Rail refused to attend a public meeting at the start of the project, walked out of meetings with the community because they felt criticised, and took well over a year even to answer requests from small businesses to meet them. They also gave undertakings which they did not honour.

Network Rail is not publicly accountable. In theory, is it accountable to Parliament through the Minister. But it is very difficult for an MP to get a debate on a local issue involving Network Rail—there've been only two debates of this kind in the near quarter century of its existence, and strikingly, on both occasions MPs have complained of its arrogance and lack of proper accountability. Our MP asked to see him in July; she finally got to see him in December. 5 months!

Moreover the Minister, Lord Hendy, was until a few months ago ... Chair of Network Rail! How can you be accountable to yourself?

In organisations, lack of openness and accountability is often associated with failure.

Noises off

It is clear that Network Rail was fully capable of making a complete mess of the project all by itself. But it's been helped in this endeavour by a number of other large corporations making an equal hash of things on Botley Road. For example, the water supply to Oxford runs underneath the bridge over the Thames, near the station. In 2021 an Environment Agency boat managed to steer into the pipe and break it. Ever since then there's been a temporary pipe. It's taken 3 years for Thames Water to start doing something about it. This is taking the form of imposing one way working on the river bridge, just yards in front of Network Rail's barricade under the railway bridge. This has been maintained for full year—even though no work was done in summer, at the Environment Agency's insistence. Thus drivers encounter 3 sets of traffic lights within a space of little more than 100 metres. To add insult to injury, for much of the summer no work was done, and the closed lane was used only for parking the private cars of Thames Water 'workers'.

Getting into the spirit of things, National Highways announced that the interchange where the western end of Botley Road is connected to the ring road was in need of repair, and they reduced that to one way working for 6 months, which had the effect of backing up traffic at peak times into queues several hours long on the bypass. Yet the work was only done at night! Therefore all day every day the traffic was being held up, without anybody actually working on the site. Big corporations, public or private, seem indifferent to the chaos they cause.



BEFORE

AFTER — GIVE US OUR ROAD BACK





Edited by Julian Le Vay

Design by Charles Watkins
➤ charles.w.watkins@gmail.com

Digital by Tom Carwardine
➤ info@adart.design

Maps by Adam De Vere
➤ adam.dvg23@gmail.com

© Copyright Julian Le Vay 2025

Image Credits

COVER Gas main work at Botley Road, Oxford by Network Rail.

INTRODUCTIONS 1. Portrait of Layla Moran MP © House of Commons / Kate Noble licensed under CC by 3.0. 2. Portrait of Baroness Deech © House of Lords / photography by Roger Harris is licensed under CC by 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

P4-5 Gordon Stokes

P5 Top right; Sue Clarke

P11 Mike Magee

P14 Left; Neil and Ruth Cameron; Right; Jude Carroll

P16 Sarah and Paul Pritchard

P18 Portrait of Baroness Deech © House of Lords / photography by Roger Harris is licensed under CC by 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

P19 Bottom right; Rosemary Preston

P23 Amanda Suliman Bell

P26 BN24 ZXP Oxford Bus Company 769 Wright Street Deck Electroliner is licensed under the CC by 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

P31 Public Domain

P32 AI generated image, Pixabay, under Content License

P34 Public domain

P35 Top; Gordon Stokes

P36 Eduardo Calatayud

OTHERS Julian Le Vay

@networkhell
info@networkhell.co.uk
networkhell.co.uk

- 1 RE-OPEN THE ROAD — SOON!**
- 2 COMPENSATE VICTIMS**
- 3 IMMEDIATE PRACTICAL HELP**
- 4 AN INDEPENDENT INQUIRY**