

Whitchurch-on-Thames Annual Parish Meeting 8th April 2014

Report from the Whitchurch Bridge Company

Understandably, there's a lot of attention on the Bridge and the Whitchurch Bridge Company at the moment. The closure of the Bridge is causing disruption for many people particularly commuters and those doing school runs, and we all know that this will be going on for a lot longer than originally planned. I've said it many times before, and I'll say it again, the Whitchurch Bridge Company regrets and apologises for all this inconvenience.

Building the first Whitchurch Bridge was an initiative of local residents some 220 years ago, and the Whitchurch Bridge Company was formed by its own Act of Parliament in 1792. Back then, people who were prepared to build a Bridge over a river were lauded in the same way as those who founded schools or hospitals, and Parliament was keen to encourage Bridge-builders by giving them the right to charge tolls and giving them exemption from some taxation. It also put certain obligations on the Company, one of which was to provide a Bridge in perpetuity. The Company still operates under the 1792 Act and the updating 1988 Act.

Since 1997 the Company has retained Oxfordshire County Council – specifically their Bridges department – as its professional engineering advisers. This was at their suggestion, and a contract is in place for them to provide these services to us at agreed hourly rates. They carried out a programme of inspections of the Bridge in the same way as for their own Bridges, and it was on their recommendation that the Bridge is now being reconstructed.

We began planning for this about 10 years ago, and in 2005 we got more accurate cost estimates for the works, which turned out to be more than we had previously thought. This led to the 2008 Toll Application to increase the cash Toll from 20p to 40p. This triggered a vigorous campaign by objectors and a Public Inquiry was held in June 2009. The Inspector listened to all the arguments and then granted the Toll Application, so this got the funding for the 4th Bridge sorted out.

We then embarked on the Planning process: we submitted Planning Applications to SODC and WBC in May 2011, and finally got all the Applications approved by May 2012. We also in parallel consulted the Environment Agency, as they control access to the river and specify when the river could be closed to enable the reconstruction works to take place.

We then, through a competitive tender process, appointed Atkins to produce detailed engineering design and tender documentation. Because of the nature of the project and the constraints involved, a particular type of Contract Model was chosen to ensure we would attract serious bidders and minimise the cost of the project. The chosen model was a NEC3 Option C contract, which incorporates a degree of risk sharing between the employer and the contractor, and encourages a collaborative approach between both sides to complete the project successfully.

We invited 6 companies who had expressed an interest in this Contract to bid. During the tender process 1 Company withdrew because of the risks they perceived, and another effectively withdrew for the same reason because of the way they qualified their bid. The remaining 4 were evaluated in accordance with the NEC3 process.

The clear winner was Balfour Beatty, and we remain satisfied that we made the right choice. There are of course contractual issues that crop up all the time during a project such as this, but there are NEC3 processes for resolving these and these having been working fine.

We put in place a strong project management team: OCC's Principal Bridge Engineer is our Project Manager, and Atkins are responsible for the Designer and Contract Supervisor roles – the latter person is full time on site looking after our interests. The reconstruction works are being managed in the same way as they would be for a county Bridge.

As I said earlier, we are a long way behind where we wanted to be by this time. The delays have been caused mainly, but not only, by the exceptional river conditions over the winter. I think we could and should have been further ahead by Christmas. We are pleased by how Balfour Beatty have mobilised and got going since the resumption of works a couple of weeks ago, and at this stage our plan to re-open the Bridge in September remains on course.

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