

## Report from the War Memorial Working Group

When The Ridges (B3348) reopens later this year (after being closed since March 2021 due to subsidence) traffic levels passing the Finchampstead War Memorial will return to 11,500 vehicles per day (FPC traffic data). The junction is the meeting point for vehicles travelling east - west and north - south through the Parish.

A high percentage of the traffic consists of heavy lorries carrying gravel and building material to and from the gravel workings in the south near Eversley and from Crowthorne and Arborfield where significant construction work is continuing.



The junction is physically too narrow for two vehicles to pass on the northeast side of the Memorial when travelling from the California Crossroads to The Ridges. Due to the topography and construction, the road has a blind bend where Jubilee Road and Rectory Hill meet to the west of the Memorial.

Collision data mapping reveals that it is the bend that is the major cause of accidents, combined with speed and vehicles crossing the central line as they approach the bend in the road travelling south and north.

In the period from 2000 to 2021 there have been 10 injury accidents involving 16 vehicles, 10 minor injuries and 2 serious injuries (reported traffic accidents). Anecdotally there have been more that have gone unreported, as non-injury accidents are not recorded.

On foot you cannot safely approach the Memorial junction from the north as the footpath from the California Crossroads ends at Spring Gardens, and the road from there is narrow with banks, and has a high volume of traffic. The footpath from The Village to the Memorial is less than 1 metre wide and only suitable for single file walking. Heavy and articulated lorries, vans, and passenger vehicles pass at speed dangerously close to the kerb due to the narrow width of the road. In the other direction, from The Ridges in the east, the only section of footpath is between Dell Road and the Memorial and is less than 0.8 metre wide.

The War Memorial was dedicated on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1920 on the escarpment facing south overlooking the Blackwater Valley and the fields of Manor Farm, in between the historic houses of North Court and East Court whose staff would have resided in The Village and many of whom died in the Great War. Finchampstead village as we know it today was a small rural hamlet, it's occupants either serviced the big houses like East Court or were farm workers.



The road junction where the War Memorial stands was designed for horse and cart. There were open fields where the Memorial Park and Memorial Hall, dedicated to the memory of those who died in the World Wars, now stand, and there were just a handful of dwellings situated along that stretch of road – The Village.

### **Why is this relevant?**

Feelings among some parishioners are running high and they want the War Memorial to stay where it is.

Finchampstead is not a time capsule. The population has trebled since the 1970s and by 2026 there will be a further 1500 dwellings in the Parish (WBC 2019). The Village is now centred around the Memorial Park and Hall, where many community activities take place. This is a more appropriate and safer place for the War Memorial.

Your Parish Council has been concerned for over 10 years about the dangers posed to the Memorial, and pedestrians visiting it, from increasing traffic volumes and we have tried without success to find alternative junction designs in discussion with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC), the Highway Authority, with the Memorial remaining in place.

The high kerbs to the triangle of land on which the Memorial stands were erected over 10 years ago to protect it by reducing the risk of heavy vehicles mounting the kerb and causing damage. Over time, increasing heavy traffic volumes and the stability of the road at that point will undermine the Memorial's condition and sustainability. The main impediment to the improvement of the junction remains the Memorial as there is limited road width.

The Parish Council has therefore resolved to address the continuing risk to the Memorial and to pedestrians visiting it and tasked the War Memorial Working Group to determine a plan of action and implementation.

### **Consultation and opposition**

Councils cannot ignore such risks. We fully understand the feelings of residents who have known the Memorial throughout their lives and for which, in its current location, holds a special place in their hearts and minds. That has not been ignored. However, following detailed investigations by and a report from the Working Group your Parish Council decided that in principle The Memorial should be relocated. That decision was made, to be subject to the results of an official consultation sent to all households in the Parish in June/July 2021. A separate individual consultation at the same time was conducted with two of the families of named soldiers on the Memorial as they were traceable and known to us. Both were supportive of relocation.

To aid the consultation the Parish Council considered five potential relocation sites and resolved, that subject to the results of the consultation, the Memorial would be relocated adjacent to the Memorial Park in full visibility of passing traffic (lest we forget) but in a safe place that would allow the Memorial to continue to function as a focus for remembrance.



The Parish Council's consultation undertaken in 2021 was properly conducted, was entirely factual and invited comments, and the results are published on the Parish Council's website. All comments received were considered in detail to ensure that there were no overriding arguments put forward which had not previously been considered. There were none and 555 households agreed with the removal of the Memorial from its current position, 529 of those households agreed that it should be relocated to the proposed site.

It is important to note that this was a consultation exercise and not a referendum. The Parish Council is legally empowered to maintain, repair and protect the War Memorial and to make decisions accordingly.

The Council is also empowered to allocate resources (from the Community Infrastructure Levy – CIL) to improve infrastructure because of increased housing provision in the Parish. In the light of those powers as custodian, to ensure the Memorial's protection and sustainability, to address the road safety risks to pedestrians, and importantly in the light of the positive consultation outcome, the Council resolved to relocate the Memorial. Planning applications were submitted and were approved by WBC in February 2022. Work is progressing on the restoration, removal, and relocation of the Memorial to the verge adjacent to the Memorial Park for completion in Autumn 2022.

A previously unnamed group latterly calling themselves the "**Save the Memorial Team**", attended the Parish Council meeting on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022 to present the results of a survey leaflet circulated widely to individuals and households within the Parish during May 2022. The leaflet was aimed at stopping the plans for relocation. One member of the Team presented his personal objections to the WBC Planning Committee in February 2022, but no approach had been made to the Parish Council to open dialogue either during or since its own consultation in 2021. Had this been done, inaccuracies in their leaflet would have been pointed out and the disrespectful littering of the Memorial with posters and banners by the Team may have been avoided, along with the unauthorised signage at and near the junction causing a potential distraction and hazard to motorists.

At that meeting the spokesperson for the Team presented the results of their survey on a spreadsheet with offers that the Parish Council could scrutinise the raw data.

The Parish Council agreed to examine the data and to respond in due course. It should be noted that the Council was only made aware that an anonymous leaflet calling for a vote was being circulated by the fact that many residents called to say they were disturbed by the leaflet they had received, at the anonymity of those distributing it and its biased content. As a result, they chose not to engage, as they had already responded with their view to the Council's official consultation on the issue. We are aware of a substantial number of residents who shared that position.

On 8<sup>th</sup> June 2022, a full report from the seven private individuals forming the Save the Memorial Team was received by the Chair and the Clerk of the Council detailing the results of their survey exercise and their continuing objections to the decisions taken.

The report makes guesses about cost estimates of improving the road junction where the Memorial currently stands. It will be an expensive exercise however we do not know and neither do they what the cost of the junction improvements will be or its configuration as that will be a matter for WBC as the Highways Authority. The traffic accident data above speaks for itself and given the danger to life and limb and to the Memorial itself from increasing traffic volumes, the cost to make the junction safer for all will be the subject of detailed discussion in the fullness of time.

Referring to more detail in the Team's report the Parish Council does not accept the criticism made about the official consultation. It further rejects the inference in the quoted comment made by Councillor Jukes to the reporter who



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took the “I don’t care” comment out of context. It was subsequently removed from further editions as it could be misinterpreted as indeed the Team’s report has done. The comment by Councillor Jukes related to his direct response about an individual member of the Teams personal views and their consistent opposition to the relocation plans and not as suggested in the report about the Memorial or the people of Finchampstead.

Turning to the Team’s leaflet promoting a vote, its content is misleading.

The designation of the Memorial in the leaflet as a Wayside Cross is a case in point. Many war memorials were styled as “Wayside Crosses” at that time of great mourning in our history. Such a designation, which has medieval origins, has no official, statutory or ceremonial function and the Finchampstead War Memorial is not so designated in the official Grade II listing. However, the fact that the Memorial will be relocated to the “wayside” adjacent to the Memorial Park was a factor in the new location being chosen, given the high visibility of the location.

With respect to the results in the Team’s report, the data states that 496 people (as opposed to households) voted for the Memorial to remain in its current position, compared to the 555 households who responded positively to the Council’s legitimate consultation. The two exercises are not comparable but if this were a referendum, then clearly the “Save the Memorial Team” would have lost by 59 votes. If the biased nature of the Team’s leaflet is taken into consideration and the fact that many refused to engage in this unofficial exercise, then a substantial number of the population of Finchampstead are supportive of the Councils decision to relocate the Memorial and not as implied by the report that a majority wish it to remain where it is.

The solicitor’s letter in the appendix to the report will be considered by WBC, the Highways Authority, and does not contain any additional information that has not already been presented and considered by the Borough and Parish Councils. Equally the note from the Memorials Trust was discussed by the WBC Planning Committee at the time the planning applications were considered, and permission was granted.

There is no need to go into further detail on the data, the validation process or indeed to comment on the lack of accuracy of the Team’s leaflet contents, the extent of its circulation or the accuracy of the results it purports to represent. The report while welcomed as an expression of views is not credible and the Council rejects its contents and conclusions.

As a Parish Council we fully accept that there will always be those who disagree with decisions taken by a fully accountable elected body. We support the right of residents to voice alternative views and to campaign lawfully. However, the decisions taken by your Parish Council in this matter prevail and are made for the health and safety of the living, the preservation of the Memorial and in remembrance of those who gave their lives to protect our democratic way of life.

As reported at the Parish Council Annual Gathering on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2022 to the packed hall of residents in attendance, the work to relocate the Memorial will commence shortly to the planned schedule and we plan to have it in its new location in the Autumn for a rededication service, and thereafter to be the focus for our Remembrance Day Parade and Service in November. In the meantime, we are progressing discussions on a renewed junction design with WBC as a matter of urgency and as soon as the Memorial is relocated, we will re-apply for Grade II listed status as we did in 2016 to record our heritage for the future.

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