

## **In the matter of London Luton Airport Expansion - Replacement of Wigmore Valley Park.**

### **Statement to the Planning Inspectorate regarding Historic Use of fields adjacent to Wigmore Valley Park.**

- 1.** My name is Alan Craig. I am a Luton resident, who has lived in the town since August 1981, and in my current home, in the Wigmore area, since April 1988.
- 2.** I am providing this statement in support of representations to the Planning Inspectorate by Friends of Wigmore Park, regarding historic use of the fields adjacent to Wigmore Valley Park (hereinafter referred to as the 'Park').
- 3.** These are the fields that Luton Rising has earmarked for both airport expansion and to establish a new Wigmore Valley Park on to replace the existing Park by that name, that has been in place for generations.
- 4.** My wife and I brought up our two daughters in Luton. Over the years we have visited all the town's open spaces, but the Park is the only one within reasonable walking distance of where we live. We have owned dogs for most of the last 40 years and we have always used the Park and the adjacent fields for dog-walking, recreation, exercise and for maintaining our family's well-being.
- 5.** During our children's school years, the Park and adjacent fields were a great place to visit and to teach them about the different species of trees, plants and fauna which thrive in the area. We are now doing the same thing with our three grandchildren.
- 6.** On average, we used to visit the Park and the adjoining fields at least once every weekend with our children. I, however, as the main family dog walker, would visit the Park a further three or four times a week, at all times of the day and year, which I still do to this day with our third dog in succession. On these occasions I always walk variations of the much wider fields system, which Luton Rising wishes to develop. To be clear, I have been doing this for 40 years.
- 7.** During my regular forays to the Park with our dogs, I always walk first around the upper and lower levels of the Park, enjoying its beauty, and then go into the fields beyond to extend the distance covered. I am referring here to the field system bounded by the crushed brick path that leads to the airport crash gate, the northern airport perimeter fence, Winch Hill and Darley Road.
- 8.** Going back 40 years these fields were under crop, but there were always well established footpaths around all the field margins, as well as across two of the fields; the first from Grid Ref 51°52'53"N 0°21'39"W to 51°52'54"N 0°21'17"W, on to 51°52'49"N 0°21'12"W, then on to 51°52'56"N 0°21'01"W, and the second from Grid Ref 51°53'07"N 0°21'40"W to 51°53'04"N 0°21'17"W, both joining existing rights of way.
- 9.** During the 1980s and 1990s the Wigmore housing areas were expanding fast, and the Park was seen as a huge leisure asset to residents, as well as a sound

and sight buffer to the airport. Thousands of people moved to the area, aware there was an airport nearby - albeit then much smaller – but could never have predicted it would expand so vastly, far less there would be plans to eventually move it right to their doorsteps. The prevailing view among those who will be affected is that if Luton Borough Council were not owners of the airport, they would be vehemently against any such plans on health, social welfare and environmental grounds.

- 10.** Even in those early years, it became increasingly common to see people using all the field paths beyond the Park. I confirm that whenever I met a farmer, or a farm worker - usually in an agricultural vehicle, which was quite often during sowing, harvesting or ploughing - there was always a courteous acknowledgement and exchange of greetings.
- 11.** Once, when I spoke to one of the farmers, whilst he was out on his tractor, he said that he could not possibly visit the fields often enough to deter fly tipping and incursions by travellers and the presence of walkers helped to reduce the incidences of such happenings. Indeed, over the years, I have disturbed many potential fly-tippers about to discharge rubbish from their vehicles into the fields from laybys along Darley Road and Winch Hill, not to mention at the TUI car park, during times when the Tidy Tip is closed.
- 12.** Back when the fields were farmed - after the harvests were gathered and before ploughing commenced - people would also walk freely across the fields in toto. There was no reason not to and it added to the enjoyment of the area and the ability for people to exercise their dogs in the open fields. Once again, I am talking here about the entire field system bounded by the crushed brick path that leads to the airport crash gate, the northern airport perimeter fence, Winch Hill and Darley Road.
- 13.** It is a matter of fact, therefore, that I and countless others have been walking these fields for decades - fields which Luton Rising are now trying to prevent the public from using. This is despite them having owned, or ostensibly controlled, the fields for the last eight years, without seeking to limit access until now.
- 14.** During those eight years the arable use of the fields has been scaled back and the only maintenance of the fallow areas now seems to be tractor mowing of the grass and wildflowers once or twice each year.
- 15.** This clearance, where carried out, means that walkers - particularly those with dogs - are now able to always roam freely across all parts of the fields, and many people now do so. In addition, the informal paths around the margins and across the fields have more established. In fact over the years two new routes; the first from Grid ref 51°52'44"N 0°21'26"W to 51°52'50"N 0°21'12"W, and the second from 51°52'54"N 0°21'17"W to 51°52'59"N 0°21'16"W have opened up, linking with well-established perimeter paths and public rights of way, and are regularly walked.
- 16.** If Luton Rising had ever visited the fields, aside from during contractor mowing, they would know that the use of the fields has always been popular throughout their tenure. On a typical summer weekday, I easily count ten other

walkers during an hour spent in the fields and perhaps twice that number at weekends.

- 17.** These are people who walk across the whole area, not just people emerging from the Park for a look, or straying slightly from the public footpaths, or even parking at the entrance to the crash gate and letting their dogs out for a quick stretch. I am talking about people purposefully walking the entire field system.
- 18.** Dog walkers tend to be 'all-weather' types and they use these fields at all times of the day, in all weathers, even at midnight. I sometimes do late walks to avoid other dog-walkers and see other people doing the same. Not many less people use the fields in the winter months, although the hours of use are shorter.
- 19.** On average, there could easily be up to 280 people using the fields each day at weekends in the spring and summer, when the days are longer: perhaps half that number on a weekday and not many less during winter. I have little doubt that in a typical year, the field system will have upwards of 70,000 visits by walkers.
- 20.** I should caveat that during the covid lock-down, when everyone was being encouraged to take a one hour 'health walk', the paths were so highly trafficked that it was sometimes difficult to go more than 200 metres without encountering someone. The Park and fields were simply 'awash' with people, some for whom the mental health benefits of a long walk, may have proved lifesaving.
- 21.** For the many local people who found solace making long walks in the Park and fields during covid, and used them to salve struggles with their emotional health, there will be nothing as accessible to use in the future. An immature new park, built partly on fields they once enjoyed as an adjunct to the Park, will not be a substitute.
- 22.** Any visitor to the fields cannot help noticing that the field paths I have referred to are not narrow tracks but are wide. In places they are two or three metres across, with worn flattened grass, or bare earth from all the foot traffic. This indicates to anyone possessed of any country-lore, that the paths are extremely well used and that they have been created during many years of use.
- 23.** As a regular user of the fields, I was aware as soon as the 'No Trespass' signs were emplaced by Luton Rising. I was not a little bemused by the timing, just before the current Planning Inspectorate Hearings. I admit I was also very confused by the signs on several fronts.
- 24.** Firstly, most of the signs were simply attached to trees or existing poles that support public footpath signs, and none gave any indication of the areas that were being put out of bounds. There were no maps to show the delineated areas being referred to, nor any map references, which one would have thought should be provided if the signs were meant to be a serious attempt to stop trespassing.
- 25.** At least two of the signs I saw, were placed on land that was part of the Park, which was entirely wrong to do. Whilst these were eventually removed, I am unaware of any public apology for the mistake, though perhaps that was to avoid the obloquy that would have been caused.

- 26.** Furthermore, almost immediately after the signs appeared, some of them were changed to indicate a reassignment, of the, once again, delineated areas, to show recreation land for public use. Many walkers I spoke to thought Luton Rising had done this. The fact that the signs then remained like that for weeks, before being amended, shows how infrequently Luton Rising visits the area.
- 27.** I do not recall seeing any media releases about the signs going up from Luton Rising. It all looked to have been done in an unseemly hurry, with the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing.
- 28.** Many of the walkers I met after the signs went up were equally perplexed by what was happening and proffered the view, they would continue using the fields as they had always done - many of them, like me, for generations.
- 29.** There was also a very strong feeling from people I spoke to that Luton Rising appeared to be playing a cynical game and that if they controlled the land, they obviously did so with council taxpayers' money.
- 30.** As the previous farm owner, or owners, had been unconcerned about the fields being walked, there was a consensus from people that they were not going to be prevented from accessing them by a council quango who we, residents, were bankrolling.
- 31.** There are, of course, ancient rights of way on and around the fields that are marked as such on the relevant OS map of the area. These have not always been kept in the best condition but have always been used and many intersect with the informal paths I have referred to.
- 32.** For instance, the public footpath that runs along the northern airport perimeter fence is now mowed regularly, whereas it was once very overgrown. What is most telling about this, however, is that when that public footpath is cut, the grass swath, forming the gap between the stand of trees leading into the, now claimed private, field is also mowed to make a link between the right of way footpath and the established (by long usage) path around the field perimeter. This is at Grid Ref 51°52'45"N 0°21'28"W.
- 33.** This would seem to be a clear indication that before putting up dubious signage, Luton Rising viewed both paths as having permitted use. It also suggests Luton Rising accepts that this is exactly what all the field paths are - i.e. long permitted walking areas, which it had no intention of preventing access to.
- 34.** This is because all of them have had this permitted use for generations (at least 40 years to my knowledge), and that since 2015, that use has extended across the entire surface areas of the fields as well.
- 35.** The question is, therefore, what must have changed to occasion the sudden emplacement of the 'No Trespass' signs.
- 36.** One view must be that there was a late realisation by Luton Rising that they had obtained land that already used for recreation and which they had allowed increased use of under their stewardship. That is, perhaps, until some advice was given to them to try to redress matters with signs.
- 37.** Irrespective of the signs, however, the designation of some of the fields as a site for the new Wigmore Valley Park in the airport expansion plans, is

disingenuous. It is not new access land at all, but countryside that people have enjoyed using for generations. The land has always been a natural walking extension of the Park for people wishing to venture further than the perimeter of the Park itself.

- 38.**I, for one, regularly walk a route from home, around the Park and through the fields, of some eight to nine kilometres, depending on the exact route taken. I have done this since we acquired our first dog in 1983.
- 39.**What concerns me greatly is that the loss of the Park will disadvantage two groups of Luton residents. The new park will not be accessible for those who are wheelchair bound, those with walking difficulties, those who have infants in prams and young children in tow, and by older children whose parents will not allow them to be so far from home, as the new park will be.
- 40.**At the same time, those residents who already use the fields regularly will lose the pleasure of walking in the established Park and gain nothing more from the new park, which they did not already enjoy, as the new park area is currently used as recreational land anyway. Also, access to the new park will be by way of an urbanised corridor, which will be a disincentive to a lot of people, but particularly to dog walkers, who will have to perambulate close to traffic.
- 41.**Added to all of this will be the huge differences in the amenity values between the existing Park and the new park. They will not be comparable in any way at all.
- 42.**The existing Park is a mature haven of mixed diversity. There are mature trees and hedges, an abundance of wildflowers, including rare orchids and the area is home to foxes, badgers, two species of deer, rabbits, bats, invertebrates and various birds, including barn and tawny owls.
- 43.**Even if it is properly planted and managed, the new park will take 30 years to mature, and the former wildlife may never return. It will present as a barren aesthetic that many people will not think it is worth visiting.
- 44.**It could not, therefore, possibly be described as an area of amenity value that will have equal or greater value than that which already exists.
- 45.**Also, for the reasons I have cited, it cannot possibly be described as 'new' access land, no matter what is claimed by Luton Rising, since the public already has a putative right of access to it, which is akin to that of a prescriptive easement.

This statement five pages is true.

Alan Craig  
Wigmore resident  
and council taxpayer.  
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