Dunsmore, Wendover and Halton

GRIM’S DITCH
HS2 references: Area CFA10 - Unique ID DWH008

Summary:
The destruction of this section of Grim’s Ditch, a Scheduled Ancient Monument, could be avoided by the construction of a full tunnel under the Chilterns. The destruction of any Scheduled Monument is most regrettable and should be avoided if at all possible. As things stand, we assume that it will be excavated to the highest standard.

We are also seriously concerned, however, with the totality of the context of this somewhat mysterious earthwork and how this reflects the history of land use and settlement across almost 3000 years of history. For this reason:

- excavation to the highest professional standard is essential not just for the earthworks of Grim’s Ditch itself, but also along the length and breadth of the 350 metres of its former line across the area designated to be a major HS2 spoil heap, and
- this investigation must also include analysis of the historically important hedgerows that border the Ditch.

Assessment:
The Environmental Statement (ES) recognises Grim’s Ditch as ‘the most substantial land boundary in the Chiltern District’, noting that ‘dating the monument is difficult, although it may have an origin in the 1st millennium BC.’ (Appendix CH-001-010 page 11 paragraph 3.3.12) The numerous surviving sections of Grim’s Ditch stretch for 18km.

The construction of HS2 will destroy roughly one-third of a 350-metre section of Grim’s Ditch at Cottage Farm, one mile due north of Great Missenden, where the rail line cuts through the monument. (see map number CT-06-034a)

The ES recognises this section’s archaeological importance, saying it ‘survives well as a visible earthwork along most of its length and provides an insight into the nature of territorial land division in the Chiltern Hills. It will contain archaeological evidence for the manner of its construction as well as environmental evidence of the landscape in which it was built. The archaeological evidence may include artefacts or scientific dating material from which to determine the period of its construction and the duration of its maintenance as an active boundary.’ This summary concludes that the earthwork is ‘of considerable importance for the analysis of settlement and land use in the Bronze Age and Iron Age’. (Appendix CH-001-010 page 11 paragraphs 3.3.32 and 3.3.33, and Appendix CH-002-010 page 4 item DWH008).

The ES Gazettere adds that the setting of this section of Grim’s Ditch ‘lies ... on the eastern slope of the Misbourne Valley, an agricultural landscape which is not likely to have changed notably through history. Its setting makes a contribution to its value.’ (Appendix CH-002-010 page 4 item DWH008).

So it is not surprising that the Heritage Value of this section of Grim's Ditch is rated as 'High'. (Appendix CH-002-010 page 4 item DWH008)
The HS2 rail line will be in a cutting where it crosses Grim’s Ditch (map CT-06-034a). About 150 metres of the monument will be completely removed. The ES impact assessment states that this section will be ‘totally altered and the setting comprehensively changed’. The impact of construction is defined as ‘Permanent High Adverse’ and the Effect ‘Permanent Major Adverse’. These are the highest ratings possible. (Appendix CH-003-010 pages 2-3 item DWH008)

Strangely, the removal of the ‘historically important hedgerows’ which border this section of Grim’s Ditch are classified as only ‘Medium’ impact and ‘Moderate’ effect. Nor, though their removal will be just as complete and irreplaceable as that of the Ditch, are the impact and effect result considered ‘Permanent’. (Appendix CH-002-010 page 2 items DWH001 to DWH005)

Another omission from the ES is to the north-east of the rail cutting, where the line of Grim’s Ditch continues across fields to the north-east until it joins a further surviving section of earthworks. Here any original ditch and bank has been ploughed over, and any survivals will be below ground. As part of the construction of HS2 about 350 metres of the former Ditch will be covered by part of a huge spoil dump (see map number CT-06-034a).

It is currently impossible to know just how far below the ploughsoil remains from this former section of Grim’s Ditch might be. What is certain, however, is that the heavy machinery necessary to construct and manage such a spoil heap will totally destroy any archaeological remains to a much greater depth than any plough.

**Our concern:**

Of course we would prefer Grim’s Ditch to remain untouched by HS2. The best solution would be an extended Chilterns tunnel, running to from the end of the present planned tunnel north of Amersham to emerge north of the Chiltern escarpment beyond Wendover.

If this section of Grim’s Ditch cannot be saved, then as a Scheduled Ancient Monument it must be professionally excavated to the highest standard – not just the earthwork itself, but its total context, including its bordering hedgerows and its continuing line across fields to the north-east.

The significance of Grim’s Ditch is twofold: first in the way its initial construction reflected ‘the territorial land divisions in the Chilterns’ in the first millennium BC, and secondly in its effect on the surrounding landscape, agriculture and settlement over almost 3000 years of history.

For this reason:
- its destruction should be avoided if at all possible, preferably by a Chilterns tunnel which would also protect its context.
- excavation to the highest professional standard is essential not just for the earthworks of Grim’s Ditch itself, but also along the length and breadth of the 350 metres of its former line across the are designated to be a spoil heap, and
- this investigation must also include analysis of the historically important hedgerows that border the Ditch.