

20TH NOVEMBER 2019

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COW LANE BRIDGES

SPEAKER: RUTH LEUILLETTE

Ruth Leuillette, a Senior Sponsor for Network Rail, talked about the upgrade and redevelopment of Reading Station, of which Cow Lane was an integral part.

From December 2011 to November 2019 the whole upgrade took 8 years to complete at a cost of £85 million. Over the years, those of us who live in Caversham will have spent considerable time, and frustration, waiting at the traffic lights at the Cow Lane bridges, so the fact that there is now two way traffic through the new, and enlarged, bridges is a great relief. However, it was not just the bottleneck at Cow Lane that was the problem; it was far more that Reading Station had become a major bottleneck itself and lacked capacity to allow more passenger, as well as freight trains, to pass through. With the expected growth in Reading's population the need for an enlarged station had become necessary.

Ruth's talk not only dwelt on the reasons for the upgrade and the need for 5 more platforms, but was equally concerned with the difficulties and complications surrounding the whole enterprise. Regarding the bridges, these had to be renewed while trains were still using the lines. New signalling and tracks, to say nothing of major electrification of the system, were also being installed. In addition 23 underground electric cables were identified and had to be traced and neutralised, a means of preventing flooding under the bridges by installing pumps had to be developed and work had to be stopped to allow several Reading Festivals to happen.

The most fascinating and novel part of the talk was seeing how the new bridges were built off site and then brought to Cow Lane and manoeuvred into place using amazing lorries, cranes and dozens of workers. 2000 cubic metres of concrete had to be laid and 500 tons of reinforced steel were needed to strengthen the bridges, all of which had to be in place by key times. Despite the disruption, the great benefit of this upgrade is that passenger capacity has increased by 24% and a radical new timetable was launched at the beginning of December.