



Ramblers have been campaigning here for around 20 years for through traffic to be removed from local roads (preferably with a tunnel) to make them walkable and crossable again. The landscape would stay the same. The aims can be summarised as

- Keep the Cotswold Way and Gloucestershire Way on their Authors' line
- Ensure safe footpath crossings
- Retain the landmark Air Balloon Inn – a meeting place for walkers

The current proposals

- Divert the Cotswold Way and Gloucestershire Way
- Extinguish footpath crossings
- Demolish the Air Balloon.

Ramblers' Charitable Aims

Defend footpaths, protect places we like to walk, improve access, let the public know what we do.

In March 2018 Ramblers rejected both options 12 and 30 but offered to work with Highways England to 'green up' Option 30.

Simplified or Greened Up Option 30 was evolved which

- deletes the direct link road to Birdlip (none of the tunnel options have a link road)
- keeps the roof on the tunnel as it passes below the Air Balloon car park
- uses green flanked bridges where possible along the route for gain in biodiversity interconnect

At no stage has taking the road below the Air Balloon site (using relatively low cost tunnelling methods such as at Hindhead) been considered as part of the consultation.

In January 2019 Ramblers became concerned about the direction of proposals for the scheme & agreed that landscaping funds should be used to 'green up' the new road in preference to the current one.

With the new road at depths of 30metres (100ft) HE option 30 could be said to be a tunnel without a roof.

Footpath (and bridleway etc) crossings of the current A417 have become increasingly difficult as traffic levels have increased. It was anticipated the scheme would incorporate bridges or underpasses of the new road to allow rights of way to be fully used again.

However it seems Highways England instead proposes extinguishing or diverting these routes. Other organisations are also showing their disappointment with proposals and have raised the prospect of delay until tunnel options are properly considered.

Background

The Cotswold Way is said to be a 'Jewel in the Crown' for Ramblers. It was first mooted following the passing of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, which made provision for the designation and creation of long distance paths.

The Gloucestershire Committee of the Ramblers Association submitted plans to the National Parks Commission in 1953. Gloucestershire County Council designated the Cotswold Way route using existing public rights of way and the scheme was launched during Footpath Week in May 1970.

On 24 May 2007 The Cotswold Way was officially inaugurated as a National Trail a 102-mile (164 km) long-distance footpath. It follows the edge of the Cotswold escarpment from Bath to Chipping Campden visiting many towns, villages and landmarks along the way.

Meanwhile traffic levels have been increasing along a cross country route from the M4 near Swindon to the M5 near Gloucester generally following the old Roman Ermin Street (or Way) from Gloucester to Cirencester and on to Silchester. The road has been upgraded to dual carriageway from the M4 at Swindon to Cowley Roundabout. Due to topology the old Gloucester to Oxford turnpike road (A436) has instead been dualled from the M5 as far as the Brockworth Bypass. The B4070 joining the two became very busy and led to creation of the single carriageway A417 Birdlip Bypass in 1995.

The roundabout on the A436 junction next to the Air Balloon Inn at Crickley Hill soon became notorious for congestion. This road scheme is to create a dual carriageway for the A417 missing link between Brockworth and Cowley Roundabout.

The Air Balloon Inn is an historic landmark. It's situated on the junction of the Gloucester to Oxford A436 turnpike road and the Old Bath Road from Cheltenham (B4070). The roads predate many of the towns and villages they link today. An indication is the site of Neolithic Emma's Grove round barrows close to the junction. The Air Balloon Inn is many hundreds of years old and was renamed after one of the first balloon flights from Berkeley on the River Severn by Edward Jenner (of smallpox vaccine fame) landed nearby.

In 2001 and again in 2004 Ramblers and other local organisations held 'toot for a tunnel' placard protests on the Cotswold Way outside the Air Balloon, with the aim to remove through traffic from local roads. A number of footpath crossings had become effectively impassable.

In 2014 Gloucestershire County Council instigated the A417 loop consultation, the tail end of which evolved a minimal tunnel, 150 metres, to pass a new A417 dual carriageway beneath the Air Balloon site.

March 2018 saw a Highways England consider 30 Options before offering two for public consultation. The consultation was flawed in a number of ways:-

- Option 12 was sometimes referred to as the 'dead duck' option as it included a tight bend with a camera controlled speed limit. Option 30 was in effect the only available Option.
- None of the options considered the short tunnel beneath the Air Balloon, instead demolishing the landmark Inn with a 30 metre deep cutting.
- Tunnel options were discounted due to the use of expensive tunnel boring machines rather than more cost effective tunnelling methods digging from either side.
- The two submitted options were referred to as surface routes, yet included the 30 metre deep cutting that was likely to have greater environmental impact than a tunnel at that depth. If the surface routes were said to be tunnels without a roof, the roof could be kept in place at key points along the route.

Gloucestershire Ramblers, in rejecting both options, offered to work with Highways England to 'green up' Option 30 based on the lowest cost tunnel - Option 3. A 150 metre version of the tunnel could pass below the Air Balloon car park, & keep the Inn and Cotswold Way in place. It would also retain the Gloucestershire Way as it passes both the Air Balloon Inn and Emma's Grove.

This Highways England A417 Missing Link Public Consultation Response (November 2019) demonstrate that Ramblers still press for an exemplar road scheme that's landscape led within the Cotswolds AONB.