

To: Tunbridge Wells Joint Transportation Board
By: KCC Highways and Transportation
Date: 3rd July 2023.
Subject: Red Brick Footways – Tunbridge Wells
Classification: Information Only

Summary: This report updates Members on the Kent County Council approach for the preservation of the red brick footways in Tunbridge Wells

1. Introduction / Background.

Tunbridge Wells has a history of footways which were constructed with clay bricks. This originated from when the Pantiles were originally paved in c1700 with 9½” square clay pantiles. The laying of brick footways elsewhere in the town probably developed thereafter, culminating with the High Broom Brick Company manufacturing and supplying paving bricks, from excavated clay within the Tunbridge Wells area from 1885 until 1968.

The legacy of this is that there are now a number of characteristic red brick footways within Tunbridge Wells, some of which are of full brick construction and some part brick, part tarmacadam.

In the case of Tunbridge Wells the red brick footways have become a perennial issue when they are to be repaired, and the maintenance and the replacement of the brick footways has generally caused issues over the years with members of the public becoming concerned and campaigning for the bricks to be renewed rather than replaced with tarmacadam.

2. Current position

The repair and maintenance of the red brick footways continues to be a high-profile issue, highlighted further during the Covid pandemic.

The red brick footways themselves are unfortunately particularly susceptible to damage caused by vehicles parked on footways, as generally the brick footways are old and the sub-base structure was not designed to support such loads. The increased usage of heavier electric vehicles also has a further detrimental impact on these footways.

An increasing number of the red brick footways also suffer from the ground heave, resulting in potential trip hazards for pedestrians, which is caused by tree roots. This damage is occurring both from existing highway trees and also from private trees and vegetation adjacent to the public highway, and it is not possible in many situations to cut the roots to prevent this damage or to re-lay bricks.

The effect of both of these issues is to create trip hazards, consequently increasing the risk of Highway insurance claims and creating an additional maintenance burden, and as such in many locations, repairs have been made using tarmacadam.

When carrying out maintenance works, it has not always been practical or possible to replace the bricks when damage had occurred, and as with all highway maintenance, cost effective and sustainable maintenance solutions in line with current and future available funding need to be identified, especially given that reconstruction works on the red brick footways are substantially more expensive than tarmacadam footways.

In addition to these common maintenance issues, local residents and Cllr's have also highlighted concerns regarding the loss of sections of existing red brick footway following construction of new vehicle crossovers and existing crossover widening works.

3. Future Improvement Works.

Despite the funding issues across the country with regards to highway maintenance, in response to the damage being undertaken to these red brick footways in Tunbridge Wells, Kent County Council, (KCC), for the 2023/24 financial year have allocated a sum of £100.000 for reconstruction works that is ringfenced for the improving the red brick footways in Tunbridge Wells.

For 2023/24 and as identified in the Highway Works Programme report for July 2023, design work has commenced on the footway on the western side of St Johns Road, Tunbridge Wells, between Leighton Close, (leisure centre), and the Tunbridge Wells Boys Grammar School. This section of footway has seen the red brick footway severely impacted by tree roots, and KCC receives regular complaints about this section of footway, which is heavily used.

Whilst the allocated funding will not allow this whole section to be completed in this financial year, the design will focus on the completing the section in most need. This construction will use new bricks with the old bricks being saved for future maintenance works.

In order to continue these improvement works; Kent County Council propose that this ringfenced funding will be sustained for red brick improvement works in future financial years, within the available budgets.

It is acknowledged that the demand for red brick reconstruction works is very large, as such at this stage, areas will be prioritised using the following criteria:

- Areas of high pedestrian usage.
- Areas with significant damage
- Key distributor roads into the town.
- Areas where tarmac has previously replaced red bricks.
- Using data from the insurance information and feedback from the highway operations team and inspections team, (who undertake the statutory annual inspections of the footway) to identify priority footways in need of regular repair.

In addition to the ringfenced funding for red brick footways, maintenance works on the footways in Tunbridge Wells will continue to be undertaken to improve the footways within the Borough. The details of this year's schemes can be found in the Highway Works Programme.

Whilst Kent County Council are committed to preserving and enhancing the red brick footway, it should be noted that the damage will continue to the red brick footways, and some tarmacadam works will continue in areas where there is a hazard in the footway and the red bricks cannot be re-laid, however these areas will be included for consideration for future improvement work, but in the short term the priority will be to ensure that the footway is safe.

4. Vehicle Crossovers.

In response to residents and local political concerns regarding the loss of sections of red brick footway following the construction of new vehicle crossovers, Kent County Council is currently in the process of amending the vehicle crossover application process to address this issue.

These amendments will include that for future applications for a new vehicle crossover / dropped kerb, which are on an area of existing red brick footway in Tunbridge Wells, that the applicant will be required to have a red brick crossover.

The new crossover will be constructed will be required to be constructed with new red bricks, (with the old bricks being returned to KCC for future maintenance works).

It is expected that this change will take place from 1st January 2024.

5. Conclusion

This report reiterates Kent County Council's commitment to the preservation and enhancement of the red brick footways in Tunbridge Wells

This report is for Members' information.

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