

PRESS RELEASE



Chiltern Residents Stop HS2 plans in their Tracks

A committed group of local residents joined forces this weekend to celebrate a monumental breakthrough in a 'David versus Goliath' campaign to save an iconic lone veteran Oak, locally known as Ilona, from unnecessary destruction by HS2.

As part of the campaign effort, supporters personally sent over 200 letters to HS2's CEO Mark Thurston, each setting out their own reasons for protecting Ilona and their beloved historical landscape. HS2 have responded to residents to say that they are now 'reviewing their plans'.

Last weekend, an event was held near the tree (just outside the HS2 fencing) to mark the registration of Ilona with The Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory. Supporters included current and former local residents, farmers, Buckinghamshire and local Parish councillors, and representatives of local and national environmental groups. Messages of support were read out, and recollections of Ilona in happier days were exchanged, all showing the importance of the tree in the local landscape and ecosystem.

Ilona the Oak is some 250 years old and supports approximately 2,500 species. She has lived through 10 monarchs, 65 Prime Ministers, 2 World Wars, the Industrial Revolution and the current climate crisis. Her canopy is 18 metres wide, which has provided shade, solace and inspiration to local residents for generations. She is not in the way of the track or the haul road, but HS2 plan to fell her as part of their "landscaping designs" and intend to replace her with "visual screening" - saplings that would do nothing to mitigate the loss of a heritage oak like Ilona. She was shown as standing on maps published at the time the HS2 Bill was passed, so it has come as an unpleasant surprise to residents and local councillors that HS2 now wish to fell her.

This is the first time that a group of AONB residents have challenged HS2 and their contractors by conducting their own ecological surveys and producing reports, which culminated in meetings with HS2 and their subcontractor (EKFB) in order to hold them to account and forced them to review their plans.

Sarah Green MP stands vehemently behind the campaign. Her letter of support states:

"I urge HS2 Ltd to find a way to save Ilona.....I call on HS2 Ltd to live up to the commitments they have made, including adherence to the mitigation hierarchy, and do all that they can to protect the Chilterns from further harm."

Catherine Bunting, Green councillor for Great Missenden Parish Council and representative of the "Prestwood Nature" Environment group, commented:

"As a local green councillor, I'm just so grateful to the local campaign for standing up for these trees, I find it frustrating that locals need to raise the money themselves and take this fight but I'm also so grateful for all those who got involved and to the local bodies who have got behind it."

The Campaign continues to attract support and admiration from local and national campaign groups. In July this year, Carol-Anne O'Callaghan was awarded the prestigious Guardian Angel Award for recognition of her hard work to protect Leather Lane.

The Wildlife Trusts, Friends of The Earth, RSPB, Chiltern Conservation board, Prestwood Nature and The Woodland Trust have been in full support from the outset. The local grassroots group equally stand side by side with the above organisations in full support of The RSPB's Attack on Nature Campaign, a rapidly expanding movement campaigning hard to ensure that legal protection rights of our precious trees and ecosystems - which are currently being challenged - are not lost. It has never been more important to protect our biodiversity from harm in a time of climate change.

Jack Taylor, Lead Campaigner from the Woodland Trust wrote in support of the event:

'When new development is planned near to such trees, the planners and ecologists working on those developments must have these trees at the forefront of their mind. If we are to work towards addressing the UK's current state of nature and climate emergency, then making sure mature trees are retained and protected is fundamental.

That's why we support the Save Leather Lane campaign – HS2 Ltd must listen to the concerns and make the changes necessary to save Leather Lane's fantastic population of mature trees!' -

Bucks Councillor Jane MacBean who has been another key supporter of the campaign adds:

"It is the passion, diligence and tenacity of The Save Leather Lane group that has brought forward alternative design plans, proved the existence of vital bat colonies in the absence of proper HS2 surveys, and galvanised community action to preserve the very fabric of Leather Lane instead of destroying it."