

Restoration of Bridge 2173 at Pope Mill, Sturmer, Essex – Future Direction

Report to Sturmer Parish Council

2nd December 2025

Background

Bridge 2173 is a former British Railways brick-built bridge over a disused railway line, located at Pope Mill, Sturmer, Essex. It is located approximately 100m from the A1017, 50m past the village sign for Sturmer.

The disused railway line was formerly part of the Stour Valley Railway, operated as part of the Great Eastern Railway network. The Stour Valley line ran from Marks Tey, Essex to Shelford, near Cambridge and was opened in 1865. The line ran until 1967 when it was closed in the devastating Beeching cuts.

The bridge spans the former railway line beneath. The track bed is now an amenity walk running from Water Lane, Sturmer, to the site of Bridge 2173, purchased by Sturmer Parish Council in 1978 to provide public outdoor space for enjoyment by residents. The path extends beyond to the nearby town of Haverhill and is owned by West Suffolk District Council.



View over Bridge 2173 towards Pope Mill Farm



Bridge view towards Haverhill, showing condition and existing propping

About Sturmer

Sturmer is a small parish located in the north of the county of Essex, in the District of Braintree. The 2021 census recorded a population of 525. The parish neighbours the district of West Suffolk in the county of Suffolk to the north and east.

The village of Sturmer is linear in its layout, along the busy A1017 Priority One route running from Halstead, Essex to Haverhill, Suffolk. The village lacks significant community amenity space and facilities. A small village hall is managed by the Sturmer Village Hall charity. There are a number of public rights of way across private land.

Although the parish does have a village green/common, it is not located within the village and sits to the north-east of the Parish bordering Haverhill. It is therefore not conducive to nor practical for community use. A land transaction and exchange is currently underway, which will see a minor relocation of this common land to enable the development of a residential care home on the site. The Parish Council will receive a compensatory sum in return for this exchange.

The village also enjoys a public house and a garden centre within the village. Sturmer Hall, a former manor, operates as a hotel and hospitality venue. There is also a church, which dates back to the 11th Century, but is closed to regular worship. Part of the Parish overlaps with the Town of Haverhill and include light industrial and enterprise business. Therefore, there is little in the way of community amenity space.

In 1974, Sturmer Parish Council made initial enquiries into purchasing the disused railway, with the view of creating an amenity walk for residents to enjoy. This would connect from the former Sturmer railway station at Water Lane through to the growing neighbouring town of Haverhill. Prolonged enquiries and searches continued, with completion of the sale in November 1978, some 4 years later. The purchase cost was £850, which was supported by a grant from Braintree District Council of £637.50.

Bridge 2173 was included in the purchase of the land beneath, along with a second bridge 2174 which is a metal girder bridge over the Stour Brook. Land deeds show Sturmer Parish Council as the owner of the Railway Amenity Walk and Bridge 2173, with the Haverhill face of the bridge forming the boundary of ownership.

The land beyond the bridge was purchased by Haverhill Urban District Council (since St Edmundsbury District Council, now West Suffolk District Council).

The Railway Amenity Walk today is a much enjoyed and used pathway, with an abundance of wildlife and thriving ecosystem. It offers Sturmer and Haverhill residents access to safe outdoor space away from the busy A1017 road, linking the village and town with an extended network of other footpaths, cycleways and walks in the area. A small pocket park with a children's playground is maintained by the Parish Council at the Water Lane end of the walk in the village, opposite the former Sturmer station.

Bridge 2173 at Pope Mill is a significant feature of the Railway Amenity Walk and is one of a number of heritage assets and buildings within the parish. It supports residents' sense of identity and place, with the railway a key part of the parish's history. The former station and platform still exist, but is now a private residence.

Although this project relates to the former Stour Valley Line, the parish in fact has two former railway lines crossing through, with the Colne Valley Line running through the west of the parish. The lines converged just north of the village, beyond a notable 3 arch viaduct known locally as the Sturmer Arches, which still forms a local landmark today along the former railway and the scale of the local railway heritage.

Little can be seen of the Colne Valley Line through the parish now, with many of the former bridges demolished and cuttings filled in. Therefore, bridge 2173 is an important landmark for residents in that it is accessible and can be approached from track level and cross from above. The track over the bridge itself forms part of Sturmer Public Right of Way 1 and gives access to the land at Pope Mill Farm to the landowners there. However, it is also important to note that bridge 2173 is not a listed structure.

Maintenance and Restoration

From consulting the Parish Council archives, it is clear that there was some discussion over the ownership and liability of Bridge 2173 during the purchase negotiations between Sturmer Parish Council and British Railways.

Bridges 2173 (brick) and 2174 (girder) were included in the land sale and Sturmer Parish Council assumed all responsibility for their maintenance upon completion of the sale. The land sale runs to the western face of bridge 2173 (Haverhill side). British Railways relinquished any interest or liability for the former railway land or structure thereon. Bridge 2174 does not have any outstanding maintenance repair liabilities at this time. But that's not to say that future budget provision should not be made to support this.

A right of way exists for cart/vehicle access to Pope Mill Farm. The owners of Pope Mill Farm were offered the opportunity to purchase bridge 2173 from Sturmer Parish Council for a nominal sum of £1 at the time of its the purchase from British Railways. However, the file notes are incomplete and there is no evidence this took place.

It is acknowledged in documentation in the parish archives that throughout the land purchase and the years since that ownership of bridge 2173 would be a considerable liability for Sturmer Parish Council. At the point of purchase the bridge required investment due to its condition and acts of vandalism. Consequently, there was an early proposal to demolish the bridge and use the hardcore to re-provide some form of right of way.

Despite the considerable liability for the Parish Council to take on following their purchase, particularly for a such a small parish with modest funding obtained through the Council Tax precept, no budget provision has been identified or available to support the maintenance of the assets. At this point of writing this report, the Parish Council has less than £10,000 in reserves, which whilst typically sufficient to meet unforeseen obligations in day-to-day operations, but not the scale of liability that is associated with a sizeable heritage asset.

Since the bridge came into the Parish Council's ownership the condition has continued to decline and little maintenance undertaken. Structurally the back of the bridge appears to be broken, with the arch visibly flattened. Much of the brickwork is cracked and suffering from intrusive vegetation growth. Some of the brickwork is missing and appears to have fallen. This poses a safety risk for users of the Amenity Walk and vehicular access over the bridge. The immediate live risks associated by this are being managed aside from the considerations of this report.

The Parish Council has not particularly considered nor identified a solution for the ongoing upkeep nor restoration of the bridge. Some minor maintenance and removal of vegetation growth has been carried out. At present, whilst the bridge is insured in relation to public liability considerations, it is not insured for any form of reinstatement or repair.

Essex County Council as Highways Authority have undertaken some inspection regime over the years, although have now stated that they don't have the resources to continue to undertake this and bridges in private ownership are not their responsibility.

However, in 1999 propping was installed under the bridge arch to prevent collapse. This propping is owned by Essex County Council (although there are conflicting references to

this) and they have undertaken inspection of the installation and solution since. In October 2025, the propping was deemed to have reached end of life, a considerable change from the previous regular inspection. Essex County Council is currently advising on the potential replacement and alternative schemes to support the bridge structure until a longer-term solution is identified.

Future Options

The Parish Council is acutely aware that essential maintenance and a long-term resolution is required to arrest the decline in condition of Bridge 2173 and, ideally, restore the asset to its former glory. However, this may not be (a) technically feasible and (b) affordable or provide good value for money for funders or the Parish Council as a public body.

The future options would therefore appear to be as follows:

- (i) Secure funding to restore the brick bridge structure to full serviceable, safe condition.
- (ii) Secure funding to ensure long term safety and stability through alternative options, i.e. permanent propping or infill.
- (iii) Demolish the existing bridge and replace with a form of structure to provide vehicular access over the former railway cutting.
- (iv) Demolish the existing bridge and replace with a pedestrian right of way only – but it is unlikely that this could be achieved without the agreement of the interested parties who rely on the bridge for vehicular access.
- (v) Do nothing – this is always an option, but in the case of this structure, the Parish Council is strongly advised not to consider this as a viable option.

The recommendation is that option (i) is considered to be the most desirable option and that funding is sought to undertake a development phase to obtain a fully costed options appraisal and feasibility into restoration of bridge 2173. This will fully inform the direction of travel and enable the Parish Council to make informed decisions.

Notwithstanding, any immediate maintenance required to ensure the bridge's safety until a conclusion is reached should be undertaken by the Parish Council. A successful application for any development phase grant does not guarantee that further delivery funding is available, nor that restoration is feasible or provides best value.

Funding Options

At this time, the level of funding required to undertake restoration or replacement of the existing bridge is unknown. The feasibility and associated costs need to be understood. A

number of funders have been identified and reviewed, with the project failing to meet criteria for a number of railway specific funders, typically due to the bridge not being part of a heritage railway or infrastructure, or not being part of the British Railways legacy estate under Network Rail's ownership.

The most suitable match to the aims of this project would appear to be the National Lottery Heritage Fund. A Project Enquiry has been submitted to ascertain project suitability, which has been confirmed. However, the level of complexity and detail required for the grant application varies considerably depending on the level of funding sought. For projects with a value of £250,000 become far more complex and involved. It is not known if the aim of stabilising and securing the existing bridge's future can be achieved within this cost envelope.

Therefore, it is recommended that a development phase one application is made to the National Lottery Heritage Fund in line with the outline process in Appendix 1. Appendix 1 outlines the process for larger grants over £250,000. However, much of the detail applies irrespective of the level of funding sought.

According to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, a project of this nature typically takes 2 to 5 years to be delivered.

The value of the application at development stage one is expected to be in the region of £30,000, to include full technical surveys and engineers' appraisals, possibly to RIBA Stage 4, which is the likely requirement to satisfy funders, provide cost assurance and feasibility. The Parish Council is consulting Essex County Council on the cost estimates to inform an initial grant application.

This would provide a full options appraisal and cost estimate to the Parish Council to be able to make informed decisions and, if feasible, seek further funding for phase two delivery.

It will also be necessary to demonstrate that the Parish Council is in a position to ensure ongoing maintenance of the bridge in future years. At this time, the position is challenging given the Parish Council's available funding.

However, as and when the village green/common land transaction is completed, consideration should be given to designating funding specifically for the maintenance of the two bridges along the amenity walk, given they are significant assets within the Parish Council's ownership. This is something that may need to be resolved before funding can be secured for bridge restoration.

A project of this nature also requires dedicated project management resource, which we will also seek to fund through any grant application; again due to the limited time, resources and expertise within the Parish Council. However, some paid officer input is also likely to be required to finalise a development phase application. This will be quantified for Parish Council approval.

The application will also be strengthened by working in partnership. A number of key partners have been identified for discussion about the project.

Recommendations:

- (i) To complete the preparatory work required to submit a development phase funding application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to understand the feasibility and cost implications to restore and stabilise Bridge 2173.**
- (ii) Obtain final sign by Councillors off for application prior to submission.**

Report author:

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Sturmer Parish Council**

Appendix 1

It is recommended that the Parish Council seek National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) support for a two-phase approach to the restoration of bridge 2173 at Pope Mill, Sturmer, on the former Stour Valley railway, now part of the Sturmer Railway Amenity Walk.

The summary below is intended to provide Parish Councillors with an outline of the NLHF. It is anticipated that the bridge restoration will fall into the category for project valued at over £250,000. The National Lottery Heritage Fund offers a two-stage application process for grants of £250,000 or more.

For projects seeking funding of £250,000 or more, the National Lottery Heritage Fund offers a two-stage application process. This approach is designed to support applicants in planning and preparing their proposals thoroughly before seeking funding for the delivery (capital) phase of their project.

Stage One (Development Phase) supports early planning, including feasibility studies, community engagement, and design work. This stage begins with an initial Expression of Interest.

The expression of interest must account for all four NLHF investment principles:

- Saving Heritage
- Protecting the environment
- Inclusion, access and participation
- Organisation sustainability

Applicants must clearly state how the project will respond to each principle. It is felt that the Parish Council can make a strong application against each of these principles, bearing in mind the caveats around the ongoing maintenance liability. Initial feedback from the expression of interest is that the project could feasibly meet the NLHF funding criteria, but a strong case will need to be made, given that the bridge is not a listed heritage asset.

Applicants should then submit a full development grant application within 12 months of being invited. The development phase typically lasts 12–24 months.

Stage Two (Delivery Phase) involves applying for the capital grant to implement the project, backed by detailed plans, costs, and permissions. This should be no longer than 5 years. For grants under £1m, applicants must contribute at least 5% of the project costs.

For grants over £1m, applicants must contribute at least 10% of the project costs.

A full summary of the NLHF application is outlined below.

Stage One: Development Phase

The development phase is intended to help applicants refine proposals, undertake necessary preparatory work, and produce all documentation required for a full capital (delivery) grant application.

The formal Stage One Development Grant application must provide a clear plan for how the development grant will be used.

The purpose of this funding is to support:

- Feasibility studies
- Community consultation and engagement
- Planning and design work (e.g. RIBA Stage 2/3/4 as required)
- Surveys and technical assessments
- Business, activity, and conservation management planning
- Securing necessary statutory permissions (e.g. planning, building control)

The development grant is typically expected to be proportionate to the anticipated size and complexity of the final capital project.

Applicants must also provide an indicative outline of the intended delivery (capital) phase, including proposed costs and timelines.

Development Phase Implementation

If the application is approved, the grant recipient proceeds with implementing the activities described in the development phase plan. This stage generally lasts between 12 and 24 months. At the conclusion of the development phase, applicants are expected to have a fully developed and costed proposal for the capital project.