

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLIE MAYNARD

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This is an oral history interview with Charlie Maynard MP, recorded on the 27th of February 2026 in Whitney, as part of Whitney District Museum's project exploring the past, present and future of the Whitney Railway. My name is Sonia from Whitney District Museum, today we have Sandra also from the District Museum and lovely Charlie Maynard MP and thank you so much for joining us today.

[CM]

Well thank you for having me on, good to see you both.

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Thank you very much, absolutely appreciate your time. So we're going to start really with personal connection and early awareness. Now Charlie, when did you first become aware of the Whitney Railway and proposals to rebuild a local railway?

[CM]

Well the first time I knew that a railway had existed somewhere sometime and it was kind of very much kind of like on the edge of my consciousness and no real factual information about it and then I walked along a bit of it. So I live between Whitney and Stanton Harcourt and I like running and so I like OS maps and so I used to get out my OS map and go where am I going to run today and you kind of you know run north, south, east, west and some bits are easier some bits are harder and that's where I first saw the old route of the railway and you can track it out on the OS map and so there's a nice bit which is not formally a footpath but every user has a footpath which is coming out of South Lee running kind of west, southwest and so I kind of found that bit and that kind of got me interested and then actually bizarrely at a Lib Dem hustings not my hustings but way back in 20 oh maybe 2017 or something like that there was a hustings and one of the candors mentioned it there and I was like it about was a bring it back you know it's like very easy to say that you know but then I was like oh so so that kind of triggered me kind of really starting to dig at it and then I was kind of working I set up a business and ran it for 24 years and had been very very involved in it very deep into that but knew I didn't want to carry on doing that but I was interested in terms of you know I was like what are the problems that Whitney faces and I was wondering about getting into politics and public life and pros and cons and fears about getting involved in all of that and I was like well the things I think that our area most struggles with is housing and and you know central government kind of saying you're going to take a whole load of housing whether you like it or not and transport you know where it's like you know a40 you know we can be rude about it all day long but you know it's a

problem and it's getting worse and worse and worse and I was like well what practically could not actually solve that but help help help those problems better and and and I thought that the railway was something that was worth digging into and then basically in my spare time I just started digging more into it so so looking at the old route looking at maps looking at what could work whether you kind of go north of Ensham south of Ensham where it was what's changed since it shut down because so it was built in I think 1861 and and then closed to passenger in roughly 65 and to freight in 71 give or take if somebody will correct me but roughly that sort of thing and and then got ripped up and bits of it are now kind of under under tarmac so so a bit by Ensham is under tarmac bits of it across fields bits of it hedgerows you know all sorts and and I kind of and then I stopped my job in 2020 kind of December 2020 and then for about a year and a half I just worked on it full time you know and not obviously not paid but just just just like I'm and it partly it was kind of getting over I was hanging up my boots I've worked like a dog and I and I like work so I was like well I want to keep myself busy and this is really interesting it's really gripped me and I'm just going to go at it and so I did and and that was involved you know walking it from end to end not all the way to Fairford but all the way to Carterton so the old track walking as much of where I thought the new track could be and really just trying to kind of grapple with well you know where could it go where would it go because I don't want it I don't want to cause causing trouble for people I don't want knock down houses or doing stuff like that so trying to find a new route that would still join up Oxford, Ensham, Whitney, Carterton which are very obviously the spots and and and trying to understand what the problems are because of course it's a hard thing to do and beginning to kind of build relationships and and ask questions to county councils district councils the you know the previous MP trying to understand who liked it was interested in it problems money you know risks you name it all that sort of stuff and just kind of building and building and and I got lucky there were lots of people who helped me along the way I mean my my favourite angel is a guy called Roger Blake who built a railway line in East London and has got a blue plaque to prove it and um and he you know I'm not a railway guy so so I've got you know I needed somebody who really understands the railway side of things and he was like right okay do that don't do that you know and and we you know hours and hours and hours spent together talking by phone you know working through things and him introducing me to various people so that was just just really interesting and but you know what what I what I try to do is I of course the railway has huge amounts of nostalgia and everything else but practically speaking we've got a tonne of people living in West Oxfordshire who want to get somewhere and we are one of the few communities in the country which don't have a railway and it's not about we've got to have a railway it's got to be a railway I just want something which is fast and convenient and reliable and green that serves us well without tearing our countryside apart and whatever that answer is still even today if somebody said you know it's pods in the sky and I can demonstrate it so much better I might not believe them but but you know it it's got to be it's got to be evidence driven whatever that answer is let's head towards it and and and and it's not like I've got lots of expertise in transport planning when I don't pretend I do but

what I can help bring is is is you know there was a meeting this morning with a with the the key lead developer of salt course garden village and the district council and they um an ex-developer who's working for free and an ex-partner from the big four accounting firm and the head of planning both the officer and the councillor and we all got in a room and we just talked this over three hours and you know I'm I like finding friends you know with with capabilities and and and learning from them and and working together and and frankly the less it's a political you know hobby horse I don't want it to be a I I just think it's good for the community and it's a good long-term thing for the next 10 20 50 100 years nobody knows where we're going to move around in a hundred years time I can't pretend I do but this looks like the best thing we have with the information we have and so I'm just going to keep running down that path

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as quickly as possible and speed matters absolutely and do you know what everything you have said already um has answered most of the questions which has been absolutely amazing and I can already tell how passionate you are which is so good to come across um one of the things so can you tell us

[CM]

what stage is the project at currently well yes so I'll give give a flavour of a few things so I so I met the rail minister last month uh it's Peter Hendy Lord Peter Hendy whoops um and and he's like look you know well done for what you're doing keep going where I'm where I get higher up his list in terms of um winning for the Whitney project is if we can get lots of funding from private landowners and developers because I don't want the taxpayer to be paying a penny more than they have to and if if landowners or developers do well I want them to pay up now that doesn't mean you know they can't make more money I don't mind if they make more money as long as it's all kind above board and arm's length and legit that's fine because but but if they are then I want some of that money shared to help fund the railway and that's something that really floats Peter Hendy's boat um so so that's one conversation going on another one is there's something called the Oxford Growth Commission because the Labour government is looking at Oxford and Oxfordshire and going well you're one of the few golden geese we have in the country and we really want you to lay a lot of eggs so so so there's a guy called Neil Coleman who's been appointed to kind of try to help fix transport and housing problems and you know I've met him a good number of times and you know he kind of looking out west from Oxford yes you've got you've got the Cotswold line heading out that way and that's obviously how you get in and out of Oxford and we'd have a junction off the Cotswold line um but you know if the quadrant heading from northwest to southwest coming out of Oxford there's no railway line yeah and and yet we've got you know right now 30,000 people in Whitney going to however many you've got 20,000 in Cotting going to however many that's a lot of people and Ensham going from 6,000 to at least 12,000 you know it's like what's the plan Sam

you know we we need we need we need one I think one of the most important things especially

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uh we are doing this for um the Whitney district museum um for our heritage lottery project um and one of the biggest things I think we feel because we have such a past history of Whitney railway you know like we said the original opened in 1861 um would there be a possibility of joining when things get moving a little bit more to maybe preserve some of the old historical side of the railway is that a question I mean first of all it's not when it's

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if so so this is I mean in terms of the whole project you know when I get out of bed in the morning I'm like no we're just going to do what we can every day to try and try and take it further there's no guarantee that we can pull this off you know all we can do and I don't want to kind you know I don't want to be making promises people I mean if people can help great but we're just doing what we can um look I mean I love the heritage of it and the photos and so many people have got so many I mean you know obviously as an MP I go out and knock on lots of doors and people like oh yeah I remember riding on it from here to here and the milk was collected here and the post was here and my my uncle did this and you know so there's a huge amount of just kind of really lovely stories which are not going to be around forever of that so so I mean to me there's not a whole lot physically left you know it's under Sainsbury's car park and things like that so so actually the bit that kind of makes my heart beat fastest is is the one about oral histories and and and and and people's memories of what it meant to them and and and capturing that is something that I think you know you both and and the project is it's a real opportunity and and and trying to trying to trying to hold that and and and because that that opportunity passes and we don't want it to pass um uh so so that I would really value now yes of course there's lots of physical you know timetables and tickets and and photos and and and you know huge fan on all that too um but but but actually the thing I'm probably most kind of at risk is what it means for people emotionally and and and their memories of it because that does go exactly it's very

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important um for us to record and um you know be able to exhibit and talk to people um about the past with the ALA but also it's very important um about the future of it also um I think one of the probably biggest things maybe to finish this interview off with um is about how it's going to be for the future generation of our town and of Oxfordshire I think that would be a

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great thing for you to Charlie for you to sure well your passion feels well I mean so Oxfordshire is wonderful you know and there's so many things that we all love about it and and you know but I'm going to say something which Oxford in some ways is

an incredible blessing not just to us but to the world in terms of what it's brought to the world but you know it also cuts both ways in terms of you know we've got Oxford putting enormous pressure on Oxfordshire and you know Oxfordshire is going to grow like a weed um and we need to be as prepared and organised for that as possible so it makes all our lives better rather than worse and and it's not a given that it's all going to be better so and not hiding under the table and pretending we can live in the 1950s again it's that that doesn't get us anywhere so so kind of being forward-looking but you know what I want is and possibly somebody back in 1850 was thinking this when they were thinking about building railway it's like I want I want it to serve our community first and foremost so that it makes people's lives easier and better they can they can go and see their families they can go to work they can go and play they you know they they they're just more joined up in the life of of the county and the country and and that serves us all well and yes environmentally you know we we you know of course there's some downside if you're building a railway line you're building a railway line so so no but you know actually things like carbon footprints and and not needing to buy you know two cars per family because actually I'm you know bike or walking distance railway station I can and by the way it's miles faster by train than it is by car so so I'm going to get on the train because it just makes sense those are the sorts of positive things I want to have happen and but it's a team effort so if you think you can help come and help and you're helping

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by doing this here absolutely I mean just really for us to sort of say you know when the story that we are putting across here is to focus really on future growth jobs housing for the town to grow and for the town to be able to grow and be busy and bring much more people within Oxfordshire I think really I mean before we finish is there anything else you would like to add that maybe we haven't I feel like we've covered an amazing thank you very much it's past it's present and we've talked massively about the future and for me personally I think this will be an amazing thing to happen in our town and for the future of our town and for the

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people within it well thank you look I mean I think the simplest thing is I really respect what you're doing you know and I think it's it's it's incredibly valuable and it becomes more valuable over time we'll all be gone in 300 years time and and you know some of this may not be and that's great and and and you know that care you know can leave a mark through time and that's that's a

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really wonderful thing so thank you very much no thank you very much and thank you for sharing your reflections as part of the industry museum thank you

[CM]

cool that was fun