

## A gem to bridge the cycling gap

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### Jane Honey

AN exciting project to build a £3.4-million bridge across the River Walkham at Grenofen has cleared its last hurdle, following the granting of planning consent by Dartmoor National Park Authority.

The Gem Bridge will be a vital link in the off-road path from Plymouth to Tavistock.

The route, now known as Drake's Trail, is almost complete, with only one kilometre of its 26-kilometre total length to be achieved. It has been described as one of the most challenging of sections of the National Cycle Network to be developed in Devon.

Graham Cornish, project manager for Devon County Council, said: 'It was a huge relief to get planning consent. It's a complicated project, it's taken years of hard work and this really was the last hurdle.'

Mr Cornish said he hoped work on the bridge would start in September next year — the project is currently being put out to tender.

The bridge will have five arches with wine glass stem-shaped piers made from granite aggregate in concrete, similar to material that has been used at Maggie viaduct.

Mr Cornish said: 'It's been designed to be very light and airy looking, very gracious. It's about 25 metres high, so it will be above the tree-tops.'

'People using the bridge, including those using wheelchairs, will be able to see this amazing view towards the moor as it emerges from the tree-tops, and there will be viewing points at each pier.'

'I think the only comparable thing within the whole of the route would be Meldon viaduct, but I think this bridge will certainly be iconic and a symbol of Drake's Trail — it's very exciting.'

Mr Cornish said the route provided a way to visit and enjoy Dartmoor without using a car in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner. It would link several communities at present only connected by busy and very hilly roads.

He said there had been 121 letters of support for the bridge, which was 'very unusual'.

Some came from as far away as Brittany — the regional council there was one of the partners in the scheme.

Mr Cornish added that there was further good news for the cycle route in the Tavistock area.

Negotiations were now underway with landowners, which would see the tunnel underneath Grenofen re-opened as part of the route.

And after Christmas, a section to the north of Tavistock, near the old Tate and Lyle depot at Peter Tavy, is due to be open.

Mr Cornish said: 'It means Tavistock will be connected to Dartmoor to the north, without having to go across a main road. It uses the old railway bridge so the path goes under the road.'

'The whole route has really started coming together now and Tavistock is getting better connections in both directions, north and south.'

West Devon borough councillor for the Grenofen area Philip Sanders said currently there was a temporary structure across the river that involved a very steep descent from both sides which was accessible only by 'very fit people on mountain bikes'.

'It's no good for the rest of us, especially people in wheelchairs, so it will be really nice to get a new bridge which is sympathetically designed and reflects the original railway bridge.'

'Undoubtedly, more people will now use this cycle trail because of the bridge and it provides some splendid views of the view and the valley below.'

'It's a really nice feature and one more piece in the jigsaw puzzle in continuing the national cycle network.'