



For some, Queensbury Tunnel will never be anything more than a filthy great hole in the ground; others can see no further than its entry on a balance sheet. But as far as the Society is concerned, the tunnel is an extraordinary feat of human endeavour that deserves a more useful future than the one earmarked for it by the Historical Railways Estate (HRE), that of abandonment. There are many reasons why we take that view, not least because of the appalling sacrifice made by at least ten men during its construction.

The tunnel and its approach cuttings were excavated by around 700 navvies, labouring in conditions that are beyond our comprehension in the 21st century. At best, they had to tolerate incessant water ingress and the purest possible darkness, broken only by a few candles; at worst, there was toxic air, rock falls, flooding, confined spaces and unprotected excavations. One in 70 men - thereabouts - didn't live to see the tunnel completed whilst many more sustained injuries that would change their lives forever. There is then a moral obligation on us to robustly examine all possible options for the tunnel before triggering its self-destruction.

So who were those ten navvies? The Society has just published a study into the circumstances of their deaths and what we know about them. In some cases, that's not very much. The men responsible for building our railways in the 19th century were largely transient - moving from place to place in pursuit of work - so unearthing their life stories is challenging, particularly as three of the casualties had the name Jones! Welsh roots presumably.

As you can imagine, they were caught up in horrific accidents. Richard Sutcliffe, 30, was struck on the head by a skip which fell down a shaft. John Swire, 44, was run over in the southern approach cutting, losing the lower part of his right leg. Henry Jones, 39, and John Gough, 40, were withdrawing a failed charge when it exploded in their faces. Richard Jones, 33, was crushed by a piece of rock as he worked it with a pick.


But probably the most tragic victim was Captain Pickles, a 30-year-old farm labourer. On 15th May 1877, he married Edna Oddy at Bradford Parish Church. In a probable attempt to give his wife a better life, he soon got a job on the new railway at a higher rate of pay.

On 17th June, barely a month after the happiest day of his life, Pickles found himself in Queensbury Tunnel, helping three others to push a trolley loaded with sleepers to a point where track panels were to be laid. As they passed a group doing lining works, the trolley collided with a half-ton timber holding up the roof. The timber fell and stuck Pickles on the back of the head, killing him instantly.

Yes, Queensbury Tunnel is very much more than a filthy great hole in the ground. It stands as a monument to those who gave their lives building it, helping to push the railway's social revolution to previously untouched parts of the West Riding. Of course, this isn't a reason to save the tunnel at all costs, but it should inspire all of us to look hard for a viable new use for it.

The Society believes it has already identified one, as the centrepiece of a local cycle path network. The tunnel can be repaired at a price comparable with abandonment, notwithstanding the over-inflated £35.4 million figure put forward by HRE.

The real issue is whether there is sufficient vision and ambition amongst the various stakeholders to seize the opportunity.

You can help us secure this asset for future generations by signing our ePetition , asking the Department for Transport to pause HRE's abandonment work whilst a full assessment of the tunnel's potential is carried out.

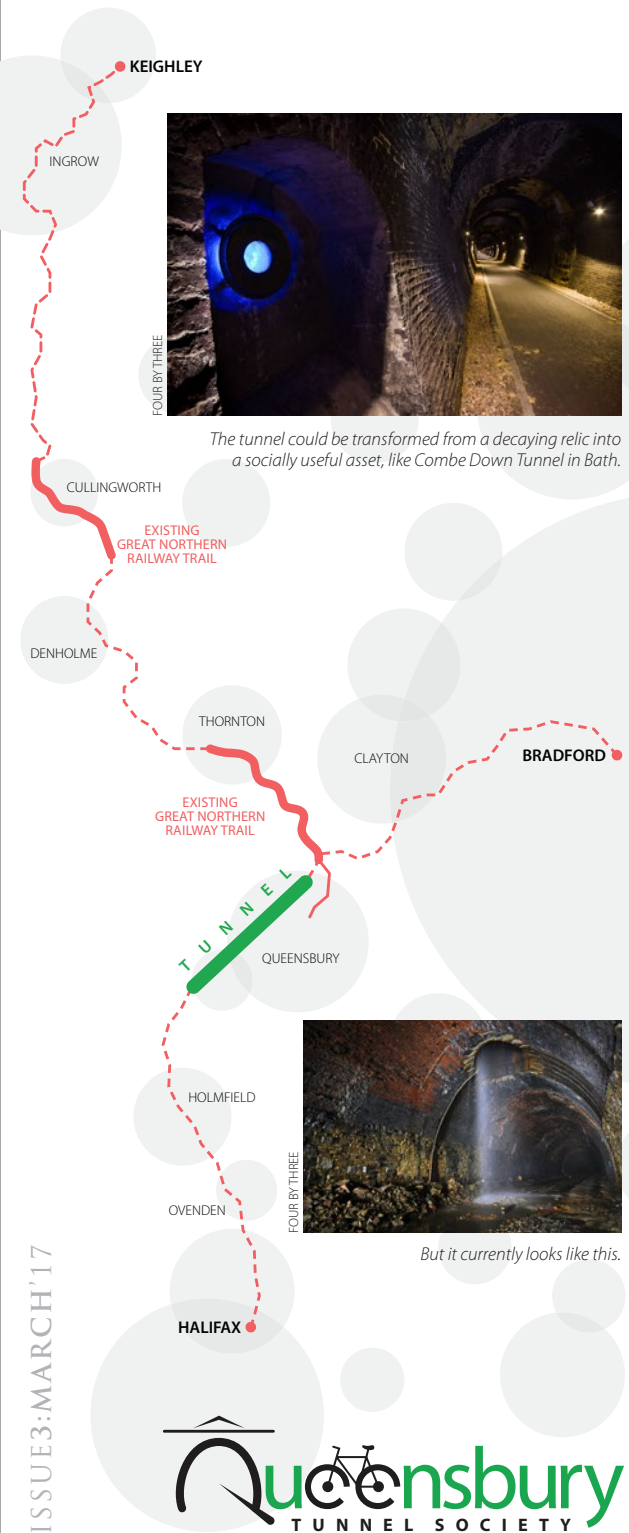
For more insight, including a copy of our study into the ten fatal accident victims, please visit our website or join us on social media:

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The tunnel could be transformed from a decaying relic into a socially useful asset, like Combe Down Tunnel in Bath.



But it currently looks like this.

