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Concerns grow over tunnel being 'left to collapse'

Disquiet is emerging in a West Yorkshire village as plans to allow a disused railway tunnel to collapse beneath it become clearer.

The 1.4-mile long Queensbury Tunnel is the focus of an ongoing campaign to reopen it as part of a cycle network linking Bradford and Keighley to Halifax, but Highways England's Historical Railway Estate (HRE), which manages the tunnel for the Department for Transport, intends to permanently close it at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £3.6 million.

A recent report into coal mining risks by Jacobs, HRE's consulting engineers, shows that only short sections of the tunnel would be infilled as part of the proposed abandonment scheme, amounting to about 15% of its total length. The remainder - mostly passing beneath the populated part of Queensbury - would be left to collapse, including a 300-metre long section where the lining is already failing.

For much of its length, Queensbury Tunnel is at a depth of around 110 metres and a mining convention adopted by Jacobs suggests that, in the event of a collapse, the void would migrate upwards by no more than 64 metres. However investigations into a 2016 subsidence event on Tyneside - which affected 35 properties, 18 of which had to be demolished - found that this "rule of thumb" was exceeded as a result of unrecorded mine workings and a fractured layer of sandstone.

Queensbury Tunnel's 'zone of influence' includes around 440 dwellings in a strip of land between Thornton Road to the north and Roper Lane to the south.

Following a review of Jacobs' report, the Coal Authority stressed that there is a potentially complex relationship between the tunnel and Queensbury's extensive mining legacy which merited "much more detailed investigation and analysis". As a result, Bradford Council decided last month that any planning application for the tunnel's abandonment must be accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment to address concerns that the scheme is "likely to have significant effects on the environment".

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "If reopening the tunnel as a cycle path proves not to be viable, there are two reasonable options for its future management. HRE could undertake a basic repair programme to stabilise the higher-risk areas and then continue with a regime of inspection and maintenance. This has not even been considered. Alternatively, the section under the village could be infilled. Instead HRE intends to progress a third option - abandonment on the cheap: seal both ends, walk away, cross their fingers. Lengthy sections will be left unfilled, with no access available to see what's happening in them."

Councillor Andrew Senior, who represents Queensbury ward, said: "Several times this year, HRE has told us that the tunnel presents a threat to the community and action now needs to be taken. But it's becoming increasingly clear that the only real threat to the community comes from HRE."



“In this day and age, it is not appropriate for a government-owned company to wash its hands of the tunnel in a way that leaves uncertainty for those who live above it. We know from past experience that cutting corners to save money can come at a high price.

“This is not just a technical exercise whereby experts decide whether thresholds have been met; there is also the question of public confidence. Why should we believe HRE when they’ve already proved themselves unable to effectively assess the risks presented by Queensbury Tunnel?”

It’s understood that provisional abandonment plans, sent to Bradford Council in May, were subsequently costed at £7 million by HRE’s contractor, more than double the original estimate. Since then, engineers have been working to develop a lower-cost scheme which is expected to be submitted for planning permission in the coming weeks.

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To link to a video on the tunnel campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Yij7v7lM2H4>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Yij7v7lM2H4?rel=0" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

A collection of high-resolution photos for Media use is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/media/imagery.shtml

More general information on the campaign is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/

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Notes for editors

Queensbury Tunnel was built by the Great Northern Railway between 1874 and 1878 as part of the Halifax, Thornton & Keighley Railway. Work was initially expected to take two years but was delayed significantly by two of the seven construction shafts having to be abandoned due to water ingress. At least ten navvies lost their lives during the work.



The tunnel, which is 2,501 yards (2,287 metres) long, opened to freight traffic in October 1878 and passenger trains in December 1879. The line between Holmfield and Queensbury, which included the tunnel, was officially closed on 28th May 1956. Track lifting took place in 1963.

Queensbury Tunnel would be the longest in the UK to host a shared path if the proposal to reopen it for such a purpose is successful. Currently Combe Down Tunnel in Bath holds that position at 1,829 yards (1,672 metres). The longest in Europe is the 2,931-yard (2,680 metres) Uitzu Tunnel on the Plazaola Greenway in northern Spain. However plans are being developed to restore Rhondda Tunnel in South Wales for cycle path use; this has a length of 3,443 yards (3,148 metres).

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE), part of Highways England, is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, cuttings, culverts and viaducts. HRE's remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30th September 2013.

HRE's proposed abandonment scheme has been split into two phases, the first of which is for 'temporary works' and got underway on 1st October. It has an estimated cost of £550,000. The second phase would require planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million. On 22nd October, Bradford Council informed Highways England that it would need to produce an Environmental Impact Assessment to accompany any planning application due to the complex relationship between the tunnel - most of which would be allowed to collapse - and historic local mine workings.