



Thursday 11th October 2018

Uncertainty prevails on tunnel's anniversary

This Sunday (14th October) marks the 140th anniversary of Queensbury Tunnel being opened by the Great Northern Railway in West Yorkshire, an event which saw it become the 11th longest tunnel on the country's rail network.

Its construction presented enormous challenges to engineer John Fraser and contractors Benton & Woodiwiss, taking more than four years to complete - double the period specified in the contract - mostly as a result of water inundating the workings. Around 250,000 tons of rock were excavated and removed by 600 men, assisted by explosives, hand tools, 14 horses, a collection of steam engines and their great strength of character. Six million bricks were manufactured, brought to site and laid to form the tunnel's lining.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "The works attracted a lot of attention through the mid-1870s. At the end of their shifts, local mill workers would gather at the shafts to watch the goings-on. Several months before it was finished, a newspaper reporter walked through the tunnel and announced that 'The pyramids of Egypt sink into insignificance compared with such a work'.

"But its opening went largely unnoticed. The Bradford & Thornton Railway saw its first passenger traffic on the same day - grabbing all the attention - whereas the line through Queensbury Tunnel was initially only used by goods trains. However, when the Thornton to Keighley extension was completed in 1884, the tunnel became part of a strategically useful north-south route, avoiding the congestion around Leeds and Bradford. Then it really started to pay its way."

Like many others, the line between Holmfild and Queensbury - passing through the tunnel - fell victim to the convenience of road transport, closing in May 1956; the tracks were lifted seven years later. The structure, 1.4 miles in length, served as a seismological station throughout the 1970s, visited by scientists from Cambridge University who slept in a hut close to its midpoint. Today, parts of it are in poor condition having seen little substantive maintenance for 62 years.

Highways England, which manages Queensbury Tunnel for the Department for Transport, is now proposing a £3.6 million abandonment scheme, funded by the taxpayer. If planning permission is granted, it will see some sections of the tunnel infilled and its entrances permanently sealed.

An alternative vision, put forward by campaigners, is for the money to be invested in a repair programme, allowing the tunnel to become part of an ambitious cycle network connecting Halifax to Bradford and Keighley, echoing its original role. An engineering study commissioned by Bradford Council will soon be completed, helping stakeholders to understand the financial and practical viability of its rebirth.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "We've moved on since the 1950s. Only this week, scientists have set out the disastrous consequences our actions are having on the



planet. We have to change our ways before it's too late. That means a better diet, more exercise and less reliance on fossil fuels.

“Queensbury Tunnel is an asset with the potential to make a positive social and economic difference for the people who live in this part of Yorkshire. It could inspire, transform and become a beacon for sustainable transport.

“We need to spend money wisely on infrastructure, not flush it down the drain. The ten men who lost their lives during the construction of Queensbury Tunnel will turn in their graves if we allow their endeavours to be destroyed by a public body which seems culturally incapable of seeing value in the magnificent structures they look after.”

The Society intends to erect a cross in memorial to the ten men close to the tunnel's northern entrance.

--ENDS--

To link to a new 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/

Contacts

General press enquiries: media@queensburytunnel.org.uk

Norah McWilliam: campaign@queensburytunnel.org.uk

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) Uitzi 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.