



Monday 16th July 2018

## No evidence to support tunnel claims

Highways England has failed to present any formal evidence to back up a recent claim about the need to “protect the community” from a disused railway tunnel under Queensbury, West Yorkshire, parts of which are in poor condition.

The 1.4-mile long Victorian structure is the focus of a 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, is proposing to permanently close it at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £3.2 million.

In June, a press statement issued by Highways England insisted that “Unless major work is carried out on Queensbury Tunnel, the level of safety risk to the community increases. Due to the deteriorating poor condition of the tunnel, action now needs to be taken... We have been clear on our decision, backed by the Department of Transport, to close the tunnel in order to protect the community and of our intention to start the safety work in September 2018...”

Despite repeated requests from Queensbury’s three Councillors, HRE has been unable to support its claim with a risk assessment or written analysis of annual condition reports. In an exchange of letters with the Councillors, an official at HRE accepted that “there are potential differences in interpretation, even by similarly qualified professionals, around the level of risk and the scale and timing of consequences”. However they went on to say, “Highways England needs to manage the situation based upon the worst scenario as we carry all liabilities.”

That “worst scenario” would involve the collapse of more than 160 yards of tunnel lining, the destabilisation of a ventilation shaft that is currently in Fair condition, its subsequent failure and the undermining of properties 360 feet above on the surface.

“Risks need to be properly evaluated before £3.2 million of public money is spent mitigating them,” says Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society. “The burden on the taxpayer becomes unbearable otherwise.”

“This ‘worst scenario’ is theoretically plausible in the long term, but there is nothing about the tunnel’s condition now to suggest any impending risk of this nature. The critical factors are the shaft and the supporting section of tunnel lining beneath it: neither is showing signs of distress. And the situation elsewhere in the tunnel is generally stable.”

According to the Society, only around 20% of the structure is currently in ‘Poor’ condition and there has been no meaningful deterioration to the part under Queensbury for more than four years, since the second of two partial collapses occurred in Spring 2014.

The Society has now submitted a formal complaint to Highways England, suggesting that the press statement was “clumsy, painted an inaccurate picture of the tunnel’s condition and adopted a tone which created an unsustainable sense of urgency. This had the potential to cause undue concern to those living above the tunnel which we regard as unacceptable.”



Queensbury Councillor Andrew Senior says: “This seems to be a local version of ‘Project Fear’ - a smokescreen to justify abandoning the tunnel. HRE keeps telling us there is a risk to the community, but it’s unable to provide anything that shows the risk is real, likely or imminent.

“HRE is an accountable public body and should be able to demonstrate clear safety grounds for abandonment. If it can’t, the Council and other stakeholders must be given the time they need to fully review the opportunities and difficulties of bringing the tunnel back into use as a cycle path. That’s the only option that benefits the public. Abandonment should be the last resort, not the first choice.”

It is expected that consultants working for Bradford Council will soon begin a programme of investigations to gain a deeper understanding of Queensbury Tunnel’s condition and the likely cost of repairing it. The findings will be used to inform decision-making about the viability of transferring its ownership to the Council, without which the reopening proposal cannot go ahead.

However there is continued uncertainty about the ability to gain access to the tunnel at the south end after HRE forfeited a lease by failing to pay rent for three years, a total sum of £150. The lease was secured following four years of legal action at an estimated cost of £400,000 and allowed pumping equipment to be installed which stops the tunnel from flooding.

--ENDS--

### To link to the Society’s promotional video or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) [https://youtu.be/c4f0M\\_qfvVY](https://youtu.be/c4f0M_qfvVY)

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/c4f0M_qfvVY?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](http://www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/media/imagery.shtml)

### More general information on the campaign is available from:

[www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/](http://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 3,500 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.