



Thursday 17th January 2019

Tunnel dewatering under investigation

The Environment Agency is investigating an operation to pump millions of gallons of floodwater out of a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire following concerns over potential pollution to a nearby stream.

The 1.4-mile long Queensbury Tunnel 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 Railways Estate, which manages the tunnel for the Department for Transport, wants to permanently close it because of a perceived threat to public safety.

Since September, the southern half of the tunnel has been inundated by an estimated 6.6 million gallons of water after a pumping station was switched off. The equipment had been installed in 2016 to keep the Victorian structure dewatered, but Highways England failed to pay the £50 annual rent for the land on which it is sited.

On 4th January, contractor AMCO-Giffen started to pump the water out at the Bradford end of the tunnel, discharging it via an old construction drain into Hole Bottom Beck which feeds a fish pond downstream.

An Environment Agency source has confirmed to the Queensbury Tunnel Society that no permit is in place to cover this operation and it appears to be non-compliant with the requirements of the Agency's Regulatory Position Statement; this is due to the expected duration of the works - more than three months - and the potentially-contaminated nature of the floodwater. Investigators are discussing the matter with AMCO-Giffen.

Graeme Bickerdike, the Society's Engineering Co-ordinator, said: "When the tunnel was last dewatered in 2015, the Environment Agency intervened to stop Highways England's contractor pumping solids and heavily-silted water into Strines Beck at the Halifax end. Equipment had to be installed to filter it before entering the watercourse.

"The floodwater in the tunnel today is still contaminated and contains a considerable amount of rubbish - cans, tyres, plastics, polystyrene, old pallets... We've taken samples both upstream and downstream of the discharge point; at the moment, the discolouration appears relatively minor but that could change when AMCO-Giffen starts to undertake different work activities.

"It's surprising that a permit was not obtained before this operation got underway - if one was required - but we're reassured that the Environment Agency is investigating the circumstances to ensure all relevant regulations are being complied with and appropriate safeguards put in place.

"As a responsible contractor, we're sure AMCO-Giffen would not wish to be responsible for polluting a stream or affecting local wildlife."

--ENDS--



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/

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) 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 preparatory works and got underway on 1st October. Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of these works was £560,000, but has since risen to £993,000. The scheme's main phase requires 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.