



Monday 20th March 2017

Study reveals navvies' tunnel sacrifice

As the Historical Railway Estate (HRE) prepares to spend around £3 million of public money abandoning Queensbury Tunnel, the Society campaigning to save it has published a study of the ten men known to have lost their lives during its construction 140 years ago.

At 2,501 yards (2,287 metres) in length, Queensbury Tunnel was one of the most challenging projects ever undertaken by the Great Northern Railway. Engineered by John Fraser in the 1870s, it formed part of a strategically important north-south route, bypassing the congested lines around Leeds and Bradford. It was anticipated that work would take two years, however contractors Benton & Woodiwiss had to cope with huge volumes of water entering the workings. Consequently two of the seven construction shafts had to be abandoned. Work was eventually completed in July 1878 and, when it opened three months later, the tunnel became the 11th longest on Britain's railway network.

Around 600 navvies played a part in building Queensbury Tunnel, whilst a further 100 laboured in the cuttings at either end. From a health and safety perspective, they endured conditions unimaginable in the 21st century. Of the ten men confirmed to have been killed, three died as a result of explosions, two were crushed, one fell down a shaft, one was struck by a falling skip, one drowned, one was hit on the head by a collapsing roof support and one was run over. The death rate therefore was about one worker in 70, although many others sustained injuries that could easily have proved fatal.

At 44, the oldest to die was John Swire, a profoundly deaf man who had only returned to work on the morning of his death after being hurt in another accident. His right leg was severed below the knee when wagons ran over it. The youngest casualty was 25-year-old Frederick Goulding who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time - standing between a wagon and a roof support when a large rock smashed into the wagon, causing Goulding to get crushed.

But perhaps the most tragic misadventure befell a farm labourer called Captain Pickles. On 15th May 1877, he married Edna Oddy at Bradford Parish Church. Days later, in a probable attempt to give his wife a better life, the 30-year-old secured work as a platelayer on the new railway, a job that attracted a higher rate of pay. However on 17th June, barely a month after the happiest day of his life, he was hit on the head by a half-ton timber in Queensbury Tunnel which had been dislodged by a trolley striking it. His injuries were so severe that death was instantaneous.

Norah McWilliam, who leads the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "It's easy just to see Queensbury Tunnel as a black hole in the ground but, beyond its physical form, it has a compelling story to tell and many men made appalling sacrifices to drive it through the hill. As well as those killed, others suffered injuries that would change their lives forever.

"Of course none of this is a reason to save the tunnel at any price; but, in our view, it does impose a moral obligation to robustly examine all possible options before deciding to destroy it. We owe those men a huge debt because they gave their lives in pursuit of the great social revolution brought by the



railways in the 19th century. We shouldn't allow our engineering heritage to be swept aside simply because that's the easy option, particularly when the tunnel still has the potential to serve a useful purpose for generations to come."

The Queensbury Tunnel Society is campaigning for the structure to be repaired so that it can serve as the centrepiece of a future cycle path network connecting Bradford, Halifax and Keighley. However designers working for the Historical Railways Estate are already making progress with an abandonment scheme ahead of physical works starting in 2018. According to HRE, the cost of repair would be £35.4 million, but a specialist engineering team acting for the Society last year put forward a "proportionate and pragmatic" remediation programme costing at £2.8 million.

The Society would like anyone who shares its vision for the tunnel - and the associated development of a local cycle path network - to sign its ePetition on *change.org* ([tiny.cc/QueensburyTunnel](https://www.change.org/p/queensbury-tunnel)). The report on the ten fatal accident victims can be downloaded from the Reports section of the Society's website (www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/reports/).

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

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

To link to our latest campaign video or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/fax5oWFAz_s

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/fax5oWFAz_s" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

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.

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 Holmfild and Queensbury, which included the tunnel, was officially closed on 28th May 1956. Lifting of the tracks took place in 1963.

The report into the 10 fatal accident victims was the product of several months' research, principally by Stephen Prior and Graeme Bickerdike.

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 associated liability from around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, cuttings and viaducts. HRE's remit was formerly fulfilled by British Railways Board (Residuary) until its abolition 30th September 2013.