



Thursday 20th October 2016

Tunnel achieves historic status

A disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire, which a campaign group is hoping to reopen as a cycle path, has been designated as a Historical Engineering Work by a panel within the Institution of Civil Engineers.

Queensbury Tunnel was engineered by Leeds-based John Fraser for the Great Northern Railway in the 1870s. When contractors Benton & Woodiwiss finished work on it, the tunnel became the longest on the GNR's network at 2,501 yards (2,287 metres). Construction got underway in May 1874 and was intended to take two years, however progress was significantly slowed by the huge amount of water encountered which resulted in two of its seven shafts having to be abandoned and caused work in one of the pilot tunnels (headings) to be halted. The first freight train eventually passed through in October 1878.

Peter Harris, Tunnels Convenor on the Panel for Historical Engineering Works, said: "Queensbury Tunnel is a regionally significant structure because of its history, scale and construction. It was one of the first railway tunnels to benefit from the use of a rock drilling machine which helped the miners to drive a section of heading at a rate probably four times faster than using hand drills. In the 1930s, one of the shafts had a series of unusual reinforced concrete frames inserted to help support a secondary lining. Then, after closure, the tunnel was used as a seismological station. Cambridge University installed strainmeters in the central part of the tunnel and the scientists monitoring them had to sleep overnight in a hut. Not a pleasant experience."

Sadly, the engineering significance of Queensbury Tunnel holds no sway with the Historical Railways Estate (HRE) which manages the tunnel on behalf of the Department for Transport. HRE is developing plans to abandon the structure - at a likely cost to the taxpayer of around £3 million - despite a recent study, produced by the Queensbury Tunnel Society, suggesting that it could be repaired for a similar sum and then brought back into use as a cycle path.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the group campaigning to save the tunnel, said: "We are delighted to hear that the Panel for Historical Engineering Works recognises the tunnel's importance as a fabulous feat of engineering, even if the Historical Railways Estate is determined to put it beyond reuse. We ought to value this tunnel - and others like it - because of the role it could play in encouraging people to adopt more sustainable forms of transport.

"And we shouldn't forget the sacrifices of the men who lost their lives building it, in the most appalling circumstances. I recognise that economics will always defeat sentimentality as far as public bodies are concerned, but the custodians of this remarkable structure have a moral responsibility to fully explore all avenues before consigning it to the history books. It could have a bright future, one which would repay the taxpayer's investment by delivering social and economic benefits to the region. We should grasp that opportunity with both hands. We hope Bradford Council will stand alongside us in questioning why public money is being used to destroy a valuable asset like Queensbury Tunnel."

ENDS



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. At least eight navvies lost their lives during the work which 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 Holmfield and Queensbury, which included the tunnel, was officially closed on 28th May 1956. Lifting of the tracks 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 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.

The Panel for Historical Engineering Works (PHEW) identifies structures that are worthy of recording, promoting and, in some cases, preserving for posterity. It helps to organise groups of civil engineers in the regions who are interested in the history of their profession, and publishes a quarterly newsletter, regional guides and leaflets on the subject. The Panel also commemorates structures and engineers by putting up plaques to bring these to public attention.