



Friday 22nd June 2018

Tunnel abandonment in 'chaos'

£3.2 million plans to abandon a disused railway tunnel under Queensbury in West Yorkshire have been thrown into disarray by the non-payment of £150 in rent.

Equipment to pump water from the 1.4-mile long tunnel was installed in 2016; without it, the southern entrance floods to a depth of several metres, preventing access to around half of the tunnel. The discharge pipes and control equipment are located on land covered by a ten-year lease held by the Department for Transport (DfT). However Highways England's Historical Railways Estate (HRE), which manages the tunnel, has not paid the annual rent of £50 since the lease was agreed in 2014.

Lawyers acting on behalf of the landowner notified the DfT last December that the money was outstanding. Six months elapsed without reply, resulting in a notice being issued this week to HRE informing them that the lease had ended. As things stand, there is no longer any agreement allowing the pumping equipment to remain in situ which creates uncertainty over preparatory works for the abandonment scheme, intended to start in September.

In 2011, British Railways Board (Residuary), HRE's predecessor, sought £5.2 million in damages against the landowner, money that would have been used to fund abandonment. However the action failed and the subsequent process to put the lease in place is estimated to have pushed the final legal bill to around £400,000.

For the past five years, the Queensbury Tunnel Society has been campaigning for the tunnel to be reopened as part of a cycle network connecting Bradford and Keighley to Halifax. It believes abandonment offers no value for the public's money, whereas the cycle network would deliver an estimated £37.6 million in social and economic benefits over 30 years, according to a Sustrans study.

In principle, Bradford Council is supportive of the cycle path scheme and has been arranging a programme of structural investigations to establish the precise condition of Queensbury Tunnel and a likely repair cost, prior to making a decision on the viability of taking on its ownership. It was feared that this process could be overtaken by the start of abandonment works, but the ending of the lease has thrown timescales into doubt.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Society, said: "It's chaos. The Department for Transport professes its support for cycling - as it should - and is investing huge amounts of money to inspire more people to get on their bikes, with all the health and environmental benefits that would bring. Meanwhile another part of the Department is conspiring to destroy a public asset that could be transformational for local communities. And now this has happened."

"It's time the DfT and HRE did the right thing: put abandonment on hold while Bradford Council and other stakeholders carry out a full assessment of issues surrounding the proposed cycle network, based on robust evidence. We've now had two years of misleading advice, fiction and ridiculous costings from HRE. We've tried to engage positively with them, but they're hell-bent on abandonment and the appalling waste of taxpayers' money that goes with it."



Last month, consultants acting for the Historical Railways Estate asked Bradford Council for a Screening Opinion as to whether the forthcoming planning application for abandonment needed to be accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment.

Plans were outlined to install concrete plugs under six shafts and infill about 120 metres of the tunnel at both ends; the rest of it would be allowed to collapse over time. However this was less than half the minimum distance needed to reduce the risk of ground settlement “to an acceptable level”, according to a Ground Investigation Report produced by the consultants last year. Proposals were also set out for managing long-term flood risk which relied on the existing pumping arrangements - and the lease - remaining in place.

“There are 64 pages of analysis, looking at issues such as air quality, noise, ecology, landscape and heritage,” reflects Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society. “But there is literally not one mention of ‘ground settlement’ and its possible impact, despite the presence of 70 properties on the surface within a few metres of the tunnel’s centreline. Neither is any evidence presented about historic mine workings, of which there are several close to the tunnel.”

“If HRE’s plan is to let most of the tunnel collapse, those who live above it have a right to feel confident that the risks have been properly assessed and appropriate mitigation measures put in place. We suspect that the infilled lengths simply represent what HRE can afford within its tight budget - about £3 million - but we know that another consultant has put the cost of ‘safe abandonment’ at almost three times that figure.”

“What grounds do the people of Queensbury have for confidence in HRE when it forgets to pay a £50 lease - obtained at huge expense - which is critical to implementing their plans? That’s the kind of failing you might expect of The Chuckle Brothers, but not a competent public body about to embark on the most costly and challenging project it’s ever undertaken.”

A decision on the Screening Opinion has been put back to allow the consultants more time to submit additional evidence. Meanwhile, over 9,000 people have now signed an online petition (www.tiny.cc/QueensburyTunnel) supporting the tunnel’s conversion to host a cycle path.

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

(Link) 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



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. 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.