



Tuesday 29th January 2019

Tunnel visit inspires cycling vision

Stakeholders, cycling groups and heritage campaigners gathered at a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire yesterday (28th January) as the battle to save it from permanent closure enters a crucial phase.

Built in the 1870s, Queensbury Tunnel was the engineering centrepiece of a railway linking Halifax to Bradford and Keighley, but it closed in 1956 and parts of it are now in poor condition. Highways England is currently carrying out £1 million worth of improvement works to the structure, after which it intends to spend £3 million sealing and partially infilling it, subject to planning approval.

Campaigners believe the money would be better invested on repairing the tunnel to form part of a cycle network connecting the communities formerly served by the railway. Although this would be more expensive, a Sustrans study found that the network would deliver £37.6 million in social, economic and tourism benefits over 30 years.

As part of the ongoing works, contractor AMCO-Giffen has installed lighting and a temporary roadway for about 120 metres at the tunnel's northern end, offering a glimpse of how it might look if the cycle path proposal went ahead. On Monday, more than 100 cyclists from across the District took part in a 'solidarity ride' to the tunnel to take a look inside, joining about 50 supporters of the campaign and Councillors from Bradford and Calderdale.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "It was an inspiring event. For so many to turn out on a biting weekday afternoon was really humbling. Great commitment and so many smiling faces!

"More and more people are buying into our vision - seeing the tunnel as a transformative asset, not a liability that must be destroyed. Providing safe, high-quality infrastructure is vital if we are to deliver the much-needed culture shift away from our reliance on cars to more sustainable forms of transport, particularly for local journeys."

Councillor Dot Foster, who leads on cycling issues for Calderdale Council, said: "One of the biggest barriers to cycling is having to mix with traffic on the roads; the tunnel would be traffic-free - which is perfect - and it avoids having to climb over Queensbury hill.

"Crucially, it also opens up opportunities for communities along the route in terms of education, employment and leisure. This project works on so many levels which is why there's a huge amount of enthusiasm for it."

However Queensbury Tunnel cannot be reopened as a cycle path unless another statutory body takes on its ownership. Members of Bradford Council's Executive Committee will consider the future of the Victorian structure at a meeting on 5th February, with a recommendation that they "fully recognise and support the benefits in saving the tunnel for the enjoyment of future generations and its potential conversion to a leisure cycling facility connecting Bradford city centre and Halifax town centre."



Councillor Alex Ross-Shaw, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Planning & Transport said: “A Bradford to Halifax cycleway with Queensbury Tunnel at its heart has such huge potential. It would be a transformational project, not just for the area but for Yorkshire and the North of England.

“You could see from the huge turnout yesterday how many people are passionate about restoring the tunnel and we’ll continue to make the case to government to support us with feasibility funding and more time to assess how this great asset could be restored for future generations.”

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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

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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 3,200 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.