



Sunday 2nd August 2020

Tunnel group condemns disjointed government

Campaigners have expressed their exasperation after contractors started to infill part of a disused railway tunnel which the Government and local councils want to see reborn as part of an active travel route.

The 1.4-mile long Queensbury Tunnel, between Bradford and Halifax, has been at the centre of a longstanding battle to prevent its custodian, Highways England, abandoning the Victorian structure due to perceived safety concerns.

Last month, the Department for Transport committed £1 million to developing a business case for a Bradford-Halifax Greenway, passing through the tunnel. Announcing the funding on 14 July, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said the money would “enable us to see just how the Queensbury Tunnel - an iconic element of the region’s landscape - could be redeveloped as a green transport link.” He went on to state that the greenway would help “to improve connectivity in an environmentally friendly way while being a source of pleasure for generations of cyclists and walkers to come.”

But it has now emerged that, the day before Shapps’ announcement, Highways England began work to create a concrete plug below a ventilation shaft - blocking the tunnel - despite still not having planning permission for its abandonment scheme. Almost 7,000 people have so far submitted objections.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Coordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, says: “This shaft is in the best condition of the seven sunk during the tunnel’s construction in the 1870s. It benefits from reinforced concrete frames which - although partly degraded - transfer much of the load from the shaft’s lining into the surrounding rock.

“The brickwork is in good condition and there’s no sign of the tunnel lining below the shaft showing any meaningful signs of distress. So there’s no evidence to suggest any need for short-term support or strengthening.

“This is just the latest example of Highways England attempting to circumvent planning regulations to make progress with an abandonment scheme it cannot justify but is determined to impose.”

Highways England has received half of the £1 million business case funding to look at the engineering requirements and costs of making the tunnel safe for any future reuse. It’s understood that the latest works are costing more than the £575,000 spent on strengthening at three other shafts earlier in the year. More than £4 million has already been spent on preparatory works for abandonment.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “The situation is beyond ridiculous. Highways England has been given a huge amount of money to undertake a study into the tunnel’s repurposing for active travel and, at the same time, is unnecessarily spending an even greater sum filling part of it in, making the job of reopening more difficult and costly.

“It’s an embarrassing example of disjointed government. At a political level, the DfT is showing increasing commitment to walking and cycling, and the Secretary of State clearly recognises the value



of a greenway connecting two large population centres via the tunnel. And yet a tiny number of officials within the Department and a body acting on its behalf are hell-bent on thwarting a positive outcome for Queensbury Tunnel which would see it deliver social, economic and tourism benefits for generations to come.

“No prejudicial work should be carried out until the business case has been completed and evaluated, and planning permission granted. Prematurely infilling the tunnel below the shaft is another irresponsible act of vandalism on Highway England’s part.”

The Society has urged Bradford Council to take immediate enforcement action to halt the current project. When one of the tunnel’s other shafts was infilled under emergency powers last October, the Council’s legal team subsequently told Highways England that, in its view, the work required planning permission.

In July, the Government announced its ‘bold vision for cycling and walking’ - a £2 billion investment to pay for thousands of miles of protected bike lanes and transform the role active travel can play in our transport system.

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To link to a video on the Bradford-Halifax Greenway or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/LzfdJna0Tno>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/LzfdJna0Tno?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 3,200 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 2018. However the contractor, AMCO-Giffen, pulled most of its staff and equipment out of the tunnel in October 2019 after a significant inundation of floodwater. No.2 Shaft was infilled under emergency planning powers later that month.

Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of the preparatory works was £545,000, but had risen to £4.06 million by the end of June 2020. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.