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Tunnel works bill hits £4 million

The cost of preparatory works for the abandonment of a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire has passed the £4 million mark, more than seven times the original estimate.

In May 2019, Highways England submitted a planning application to infill 12% of Queensbury Tunnel - which extends for 1.4 miles between Bradford and Halifax - due to perceived safety concerns. A year later, the application has not yet been determined as Bradford Council is still waiting for the submission of information requested by consultees. To date, more than 6,470 people have lodged objections via the Council's planning portal.

Last year, Highway England spent £3.44 million on an initial phase of preparatory works involving the installation of steel reinforcement panels at a number of locations through the tunnel. The programme was originally costed at £545,000, but this figure rose significantly after the company failed to pay the £50 annual rent on a pumping station at the Halifax end of the tunnel, resulting in the need for a temporary dewatering operation which cost around £1.2 million.

Under its agreement with the Department for Transport to cover the management of around 3,200 disused railway structures, including Queensbury Tunnel, Highways England is responsible for meeting "all costs associated with the property". It claimed that the rent demands for the pumping station never reached its team for payment due to what it described as "a simple but unfortunate administrative error". However, under the terms of the associated lease, the rent should have been paid "whether formally demanded or not".

In March, contractor AMCO-Giffen returned to the tunnel to spray 45 metres of the steel reinforcement panels with concrete. According to a letter written by Highways England's Operations Executive Director to Shipley MP Philip Davies, these new works will cost "an estimated £585,000", taking the total bill so far to £4.02 million.

Meanwhile Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, who owns the tunnel, said in March that he had "specifically prevented" it from being infilled and instead wanted to work with local leaders to come up with "a better solution". Bradford and Calderdale councils, together with a number of other bodies including the Queensbury Tunnel Society, want the Victorian structure repurposed as the centrepiece of a greenway linking the two districts. A study has found that the route would return £2.31 for every £1 invested, offering "high value for money".

The contracted cost for abandonment was set at £3.56 million in 2018 but, if planning permission is granted, could now exceed £7 million. Consultants commissioned by Bradford Council have costed the tunnel's repair to accommodate the greenway at £6.9 million.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "These are eye-watering sums of public money which Highways England continues to fritter away on abandonment despite Grant Shapps clearly stating that he has rejected the official advice to fill it in.



“One thing we’ve learned from the coronavirus crisis is the public’s underlying appetite to embrace active travel and enjoy the environmental benefits offered by leaving our cars at home. Clean air and green space are valuable commodities if we’re to successfully tackle the health challenges facing us.

“People have taken to foot and bike in huge numbers over the past few weeks, but the opportunity to secure permanent change depends on the provision of safe off-road routes. Queensbury Tunnel is a unique strategic connector providing a green alternative to a heavily congested, steep main road connecting two districts. We cannot afford to lose it.”

It’s expected that an updated version of the government’s Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy will be launched this summer, with further measures to encourage the use of active travel by establishing a long-term budget for investment and setting higher infrastructure standards. A national Cycling and Walking Commissioner will also be appointed.

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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/

Contacts

General press enquiries: media@queensburytunnel.org.uk

Norah McWilliam: campaign@queensburytunnel.org.uk

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 £3.44 million by the end of November 2019. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.