



Thursday 6th June 2019

Battle starts against tunnel plans

Campaigners hoping to reopen a disused West Yorkshire railway tunnel as a sustainable transport corridor have asked supporters to join them in fighting a planning application to abandon the 1.4-mile long Victorian structure.

Queensbury Tunnel, which closed in 1956, could form part of a new route for walkers and cyclists connecting Bradford and Keighley to Halifax, but Highways England's Historical Railways Estate (HRE), which manages the tunnel on the Department for Transport's behalf, wants to permanently close it due to perceived safety concerns. Plans for the scheme have now been submitted for Bradford Council's approval.

For the past five years, the Queensbury Tunnel Society has been working with transport, heritage and environmental groups, MPs and local Councillors to promote the idea of an ambitious cycle network to the west of Bradford. More than 10,800 people have signed an ePetition backing the proposal whilst Bradford and Calderdale councils announced their support for the scheme in February. According to a Sustrans study, it could bring £37.6 million in social, economic and tourism benefits over 30 years.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Society, said: "Queensbury Tunnel is a remarkable public asset which establishes a strategic connection between Calderdale and Bradford District, overcoming the ridge that separates them. If there is ever to be a cycle link between the two areas, it will have to go through the tunnel. So what's needed here is long-term vision.

"We will have failed future generations if the opportunities presented by the tunnel are allowed to slip through our fingers. It could help us to meet our emerging health and environmental obligations, improve connectivity for commuters, draw visitors to explore our built heritage and natural landscapes, and serve as a leisure facility for communities along its route. It also offers high value for money, with £2.31 returned for every £1 invested. In contrast, abandonment is likely to cost around £5 million and offer absolutely no benefit."

HRE's plans reveal that less than 15% of the tunnel will be filled in, focussed around the two entrances and six shafts. The remainder - mostly passing beneath the populated part of Queensbury - will be left to flood and collapse over time. Around 440 residential properties lie within the tunnel's 'zone of influence', as defined in a report from HRE's consulting engineers.

As the tunnel is typically 360 feet (110 metres) below ground, HRE believes there is very little risk of ground settlement in the event of a collapse, but the Coal Authority has previously expressed the view that the complex interaction between the tunnel and Queensbury's extensive mining legacy has not been properly assessed, stating that it "merits much more detailed investigation and analysis".

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "HRE wants to walk away from the tunnel and let nature take its course - an approach driven largely by budgetary constraints. In doing so - no matter how low the risks might be - they are inflicting permanent uncertainty on the community. Is that appropriate for a government-owned company?"



“The people of Queensbury should ask themselves whether they would prefer to live above a tunnel that’s been sealed up and left to collapse and flood, or one that’s subject to an ongoing regime of inspection and maintenance; perhaps even fully repaired so it’s safe enough to cycle through. If they don’t like the sound of the first option, they need to make their voices heard by objecting to HRE’s planning application.”

Comments and objections can be lodged via the planning portal on Bradford Council’s website, at tiny.cc/TunnelPlans.

To coincide with the planning application’s submission, the Queensbury Tunnel Society has launched a new video in which campaigners, stakeholders and politicians consider the significance of the tunnel and the benefits it would bring if reopened. The Society will also be delivering a leaflet to homes above the tunnel which addresses key issues relating to HRE’s abandonment scheme.

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To link to the new video on the tunnel’s abandonment or embed it on your webpage:

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

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/azIBmmzECgs?rel=0" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

To view the abandonment plans, or object/comment on them:

<http://tiny.cc/TunnelPlans>

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 it's understood that the figure has since risen to more than £1.75 million. The scheme's main phase - which requires planning permission - is costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.

On 22nd October 2018, 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 and historic local mine workings.