



Monday 7th October 2019

## Explorers reveal extensive tunnel works

Striking photographs have emerged showing the ongoing works to strengthen a disused railway tunnel under Queensbury, West Yorkshire, which campaigners hope to reopen as part of an active travel route.

The Bradford-Halifax Greenway would link communities either side of a ridge which the 1.4-mile long tunnel passes through. However Highways England, responsible for managing the Victorian structure, is seeking planning permission to partly infill and abandon it due to perceived safety concerns. The cost of the work is now expected to exceed £6 million; repairs to host a greenway were priced last year at £6.9 million by engineers working for Bradford Council. According to a Sustrans study, the route would deliver £37.6 million in social, economic and tourism benefits over 30 years.

The photos were taken by a pair of urban explorers who entered the tunnel during a two-week period when it was left unlocked and unattended for between half-an-hour and 90 minutes most evenings. They show a section south of the tunnel's midpoint which was previously designated as an exclusion zone due to its poor condition.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "Brickwork defects have developed through this area and two partial collapses occurred in 2013/14. At these locations, the debris has been cleared away and colliery arches erected to provide safe access beneath the voids, one of which has not yet fully stabilised.

"Elsewhere, the contractor has fixed steel mesh panels to strengthen the lining and prevent loose material from falling. These panels extend for about 300 metres and could be encapsulated in sprayed concrete to create a permanent repair.

"The work carried out so far is not detrimental to the greenway proposal and would reduce the time, effort, risk and cost of a refurbishment scheme for that purpose."

A decision on Highways England's planning application has twice been delayed due to failures on the part of Jacobs, their agent, to provide satisfactory responses to queries raised by consultees.

Bradford Council has identified several conflicts between the abandonment scheme and policies within the Local Development Plan covering cycling/walking, tourism, the economy, built heritage, health, air pollution and carbon use. According to a submission from Calderdale Council, the scheme "represents the kind of short-term thinking that is at odds with the excellent work that is being carried out by both Councils to facilitate sustainable travel between settlements". It urges Bradford Council to reject the application.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "The costs of abandonment and repair are converging on an almost-daily basis due to significant project management shortcomings around the preparatory works. They were meant to take three months, but their first anniversary passed last week.



“Not only does abandonment deliver no public benefit, it compromises the ability of future generations to meet their own needs - the overarching objective of national planning policies.

“We’re grateful for the insight provided by the urban explorers who have shown the extent of the works already completed to improve the tunnel’s condition. It would be a travesty if the £3 million spent so far was wasted by frittering away another £3 million - probably more - putting Queensbury Tunnel permanently beyond use.”

To date, Highways England’s planning application has attracted more than 4,100 objections whilst 12,000 people have signed an online petition supporting its reuse.

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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](http://www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/media/imagery.shtml)

**More general information on the campaign is available from:**

[www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/](http://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) Uitz 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 £550,000, but had risen to £2.45 million in July 2019. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.