



Tuesday 8th December 2020

## Plans revealed for navy memorial

Campaigners hoping to reopen a disused West Yorkshire railway tunnel as part of a new cycle route have unveiled plans for a memorial to the ten men known to have died during its construction.

Work on Queensbury Tunnel, between Bradford and Halifax, began in May 1874 when navvies started to sink a shaft close to its north end. Around 600 men were employed on the project which involved the excavation of 180,000 cubic yards of rock as well as the manufacture and placement of over seven million bricks to form the arch.

Progress was significantly delayed by the volume of groundwater entering the workings. Pumps at five of the seven construction shafts removed 63,000 gallons of water every hour. The 1.4-mile long engineering feat was eventually completed in July 1878, more than two years after the date specified in the contract.

The greatest cost was borne by the workforce; dozens of appalling injuries were overshadowed by ten deaths. The youngest casualty, 25-year-old Frederick Goulding, was crushed between a wagon and a large timber; the oldest was John Swire, 44, who was run over by wagons in the tunnel's southern approach cutting. Newlywed Captain Pickles was the last to lose his life in June 1877 when he was struck on the head by a half-ton roof support. Others succumbed to explosions, drownings and falls at the shafts.

To commemorate the navvies, the Queensbury Tunnel Society plans to erect a memorial comprising two rows of railway sleepers - one for each of the ten men - which will stand either side of the path connecting the Great Northern Railway Trail to the tunnel entrance. The Society has received an offer of help from the Keighley & Worth Valley Railway and is also exploring the practicality of salvaging a collection of sleepers from a tunnel on the former Bradford to Thornton line.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Society, said: "The experiences of these men are beyond the comprehension of anyone in the 21st Century. Although they were paid comparatively well, the risks they faced were overwhelming. Every shift could realistically be their last.

"Of the navvies involved in construction, one in every 60 lost their lives; even more would have suffered life-changing injuries. And every accident brought with it the threat of destitution for the family as there was no financial support from the companies involved.

"Although there were basic safeguards, health and safety simply didn't exist as we now know it. Almost every construction activity was perilous - the use of explosives, excavating rock overhead; it was very difficult to control the risks associated with tunnelling in the Victorian era.

"What we fail to appreciate when we're sitting in comfort on today's modern trains is that the infrastructure we're travelling on, through or over was mostly built 140+ years ago. We owe these men a huge debt for their determination in gifting us our railway network against the odds. The very least we can do is pause to reflect on the sacrifices they made.



“Hopefully our memorial will serve as a focus for those reflections.”

Queensbury Tunnel has been surrounded by controversy since Highways England - who manage it on the Department for Transport's behalf - announced plans for a partial infilling scheme prompted by perceived safety concerns. The cost is likely to exceed £7 million; more than £5 million has already been committed to preparatory works. A planning application, which has not yet been determined, has attracted more than 7,250 objections.

According to a recent study, a Bradford-Halifax Greenway - passing through the tunnel - would cost around £16 million to construct and return £5.60 in social and economic benefits for every £1 invested, representing high value for money.

“It would be a travesty if a hard-won piece of infrastructure - with a viable and positive future role to play - was lost on the whim of distant officials who seem to know the cost of everything but the value of nothing”, said Dr McWilliam. “It's not Westminster's to destroy. We can't let them do it.”

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**To link to a video on plans to abandon the tunnel 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>`

**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/)

## 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 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 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 £5.23 million by the end of September 2020. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.