



Thursday 16th April 2020

Tunnel works resume despite lockdown

Whilst many construction sites have closed to comply with social distancing rules, Highways England has just begun a new programme of works in a disused West Yorkshire railway tunnel which has been at the centre of longstanding controversy over its future.

In May last year, the company submitted a planning application to infill parts of Queensbury Tunnel due to perceived safety concerns. Meanwhile its owner, the Department for Transport, is cooperating with Bradford Council on plans to reopening the structure as the centrepiece of a greenway connecting the city with Halifax. As a result, the Council has not yet determined the planning application which, so far, has attracted more than 6,400 objections.

Preparatory works for the infilling scheme started in October 2018 but the contractor, AMCO-Giffen, demobilised the site last October after a period of persistent heavy rain caused serious flooding in the tunnel. By that stage, the £550K cost had risen to more than £3.4 million. Work has been suspended for the past six months, but on Tuesday (14th April) the contractor returned and has since had staff working in the tunnel around the clock.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "According to Highways England's own engineer, the tunnel's shafts are 'safe' and several hundred metres of its most vulnerable sections were strengthened with steel reinforcement mesh last year. So there is nothing about the tunnel's current condition to justify any intervention at this time.

"The precise nature of the planned works has not yet been confirmed, but there's really nothing left to do that's not part of the main abandonment scheme. In the absence of a clear statement to the contrary from Highways England, we therefore have to presume they are intending to undertake works for which they have sought - but not yet received - planning permission."

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "It's irresponsible of Highways England to begin a phase of non-essential works during the coronavirus lockdown, requiring its contractor to manage the additional requirements of social distancing within the confined space of the tunnel, the site cabins and in vans travelling to and from site.

"These works are unwelcome, unnecessary, premature and no doubt place another significant cost burden on the taxpayer's shoulders. Highways England recently assured us that they would not undertake any works which might be prejudicial to the tunnel's reopening until a decision over its future had been reached. This week's events suggest bad faith; all activity in the tunnel should be halted immediately."

The Society has written to Highways England, asking for details about the planned works, their cost and why they are deemed so urgent that they could not be deferred until discussions over the tunnel's future are concluded and the coronavirus lockdown eased.



Last month, Grant Shapps MP, the Secretary of State for Transport, told Bradford's Telegraph & Argus newspaper that he had "specifically prevented" the tunnel being infilled and instead instructed DfT officials to find a way of bringing it back into use, working with local leaders.

--ENDS--

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

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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 £550,000, 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 AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million. However, before any further works can take place in the southern half of the tunnel, it will have to be dewatered at an estimated cost of £350,000.