



Thursday 18th July 2019

Cost-cutting claim over tunnel plans

Highways England has been accused of “hypocrisy” after it scaled back plans for the abandonment of a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire which it insists is a threat to community safety.

Queensbury Tunnel, between Bradford and Halifax, closed to rail traffic in 1956 and is now managed by Highways England’s Historical Railways Estate team on the Department for Transport’s behalf. However campaigners, supported by Bradford and Calderdale councils, want the Victorian structure to be reopened as part of a new greenway connecting the two districts.

Around 20% of the tunnel is currently in poor condition and Highways England claimed in a recent press statement that it “needs to be closed to reduce the risk to the community around Queensbury Tunnel.” The abandonment scheme - which requires planning permission from Bradford Council - has now attracted more than 3,500 objections.

Previously unpublished plans obtained by the Queensbury Tunnel Society show that, in May 2018, it was Highways England’s intention to infill the tunnel with concrete beneath six ventilation shafts which it had identified as the cause of greatest concern. These ‘plugs’ would have extended for 17 metres between blockwork bulkheads. However plans submitted last month for the Council’s consideration instead show the use of a lightweight aggregate fill retained by steel baskets for just 3 metres either side of each shaft. It’s understood that this system is previously untested for applications of this type.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “Because of its strength and longevity, concrete is the material conventionally chosen for tunnel infilling projects where significant loads are anticipated. Like abandonment, concrete shaft support plugs would have effectively lasted forever.

“On the other hand, these steel mesh baskets have a reduced load-bearing capacity and will eventually corrode. Highways England no longer intends to keep the tunnel dewatered after abandonment so the baskets will either be standing in water or subject to high relative humidity. HE needs to explain how long these support structures will remain serviceable and what will happen thereafter, as they cannot be maintained or replaced once the tunnel is sealed.”

Under the revised abandonment plans, the total length of tunnel to be infilled has been reduced by 12%, from 319 metres to 280 metres. The remaining 2,007 metres - mostly below the populated part of Queensbury - will be left to collapse over time. Highways England believes that the tunnel is so deep below the village that there is no risk of future ground settlement, but last year it was criticised by the Coal Authority for not properly considering how the tunnel - in a state of collapse - might interact with the extensive local mining legacy.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “This is pure hypocrisy. For the past three years Highways England has been justifying its abandonment scheme on the basis of the tunnel being a short-term threat to the community, despite having no evidence to demonstrate this.



“Now it’s seeking Council approval for compromise proposals involving cheaper materials which increase the long-term risks to properties close to the shafts. Cutting corners to save money often comes at a high price. How can anyone have confidence in an abandonment strategy driven by budgetary considerations rather than robust engineering judgements?”

Contractor AMCO-Giffen has had to develop an alternative approach to ongoing preparatory works in the tunnel after Highways England failed to pay the £50 annual rent on a pumping station at its southern end, driving up costs from £560,000 in August 2018 to £1.97 million in May 2019. It’s likely that the contracted cost of the main abandonment scheme - which is set at £3 million - will also increase after logistical constraints prompted an extension of the programme from 34 to 47 weeks.

The deadline for determination of the planning application is 3rd September.

Meanwhile, the Environment Agency is continuing to investigate after nine pollution events were reported to it during June, resulting from floodwater being pumped out of the tunnel into a watercourse at its northern end. In the worst incident, Hole Bottom Beck turned black for about six hours.

The operation to remove 8.2 million gallons of water from the tunnel began in January and is now thought to be half complete.

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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>`

To view Highways England’s 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 Holmfild 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 3,100 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/strengthening 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 that figure has since risen to £1.97 million. The scheme's main phase - for which a planning application has been submitted - is costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.