



Thursday 21st March 2019

Tunnel dewatering “back to square one”

The level of floodwater in a disused West Yorkshire railway tunnel is back to where it was ten weeks ago after pollution and equipment issues halted an operation to remove it.

Queensbury Tunnel, between Bradford and Halifax, was inundated by an estimated 6.6 million gallons of water after a pumping station at its southern end was shut down last September. This followed a failure on the part of Highways England - which manages the Victorian structure for the Department for Transport - to ensure that the £50 annual rent was paid for land on which the equipment is sited.

Instead of negotiating a new deal with the landowner, Highways England instructed AMCO-Giffen, its contractor, to pump the water 1.4 miles to the north end of the tunnel and discharge it into a nearby watercourse. The operation got underway on 4th January; however, in late February, the main pump unit was replaced twice in two days and a series of pollution incidents were subsequently reported to the Environment Agency. It's understood that, since then, little or no pumping has taken place.

Recent heavy rainfall caused the floodwater to rise and its level has now returned to where it was before pumping started, extending more than 1,200 yards into the tunnel.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “When the pumping station was switched off, AMCO-Giffen told the landowner that they would have all the water out within three weeks. Six months later they're back to square one.

“The real purpose of their presence in the tunnel is to complete a programme of strengthening works to sections of the lining. When they started in October, those works were costed at £560,000, but the new pumping regime and associated engineering requirements pushed that figure to an estimated £1.2-1.4 million. They were intending to finish in March but that's now slipped to the end of May.

“This was always a needless and high-risk strategy; both the taxpayer and the environment have paid the price for it. Costs are increasing but no benefits have been delivered.”

On 2nd March, the Environment Agency launched an investigation after heavily-silted water was filmed discharging into Hole Bottom Beck from a drain connected to the tunnel. During the following week, evidence was gathered of other similar incidents. The Queensbury Tunnel Society, which is campaigning to reopen the tunnel as part of a new cycle network, understands that Environment Agency officials told AMCO-Giffen that they must not pump any water from the tunnel “unless they can guarantee it is clean 100% of the time”.

Water treatment equipment arrived at the tunnel yesterday (20th March) ahead of an expected resumption to the pumping operation. However AMCO-Giffen first has to obtain a permit which could potentially impose conditions such as a limit on the rate at which the floodwater can be discharged.

Professor Barney Lerner, Chair of The Friends of Bradford's Becks, said: “Why did work start without this essential paperwork being in place?



“In January we witnessed heavy, black sediment all the way down Hole Bottom Beck. The pollution reached beyond the confluence with Clayton Beck, a mile downstream. This chokes the bed of the river, suffocating the aquatic invertebrates that fish and birds feed on.

“I am deeply saddened to find that, yet again, one of Bradford’s becks has been thoughtlessly polluted through unauthorised discharges.”

--ENDS--

To link to the video of silt pollution or embed it on your website:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/1UJGXsZcJGE>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/1UJGXsZcJGE?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/

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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 has since risen to an estimated £1.2-1.4 million. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.

On 22nd October, 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 - most of which would be allowed to collapse - and historic local mine workings.