



Tuesday 24th November 2020

Tunnels works delayed as costs soar

The cost of a project to shore up a shaft in a disused railway tunnel has risen by 25% to more than £1 million despite the “essential” works not having started, weeks after they were meant to finish.

Highways England manages the 1.4-mile long Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire on behalf of the Department for Transport. Their plans to abandon the Victorian structure - prompted by perceived safety concerns - are opposed by cycling and environmental campaigners, heritage groups and the local authorities at either end who hope to incorporate it into a new greenway connecting Bradford and Halifax.

Earlier this year, contractors installed strengthening at three shafts in the tunnel, but were unable to do so at a fourth due to floodwater which inundated the structure after Highways England failed to pay the £50 annual rent on a pumping station, resulting in the facility being shut down. According to a spokesperson for the Government-owned company, the work is “now essential”.

In July, it revealed plans for divers to fit bags below the shaft and fill them with grout pumped from the dry part of the tunnel, 500 metres away. Preparations started in August, with the main phase due to finish in September. However work has not yet started due to a ‘concept redesign’ and logistical constraints. The estimated cost has risen by £100K to £863K, whilst additional investigations and minor works at the shaft have taken the overall bill to £1,013,177.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “Back in August, the landowner offered to restart the pumping station for a partial dewatering of the tunnel, allowing Highways England to install the same type of strengthening used at the other shafts, cutting the cost of the scheme to about £200K.

“Although they haven’t informed him formally, the landowner’s offer has apparently been rejected because of conditions which were intended to prevent Highways England carrying out unauthorised abandonment works - as they did at another shaft last year - under emergency powers that are not applicable at Queensbury because of the Environmental Impact Assessment covering the scheme.

“The landowner offered to discuss the conditions with Highways England, but they’ve just ignored him. Since then his agent has written to the Department for Transport to make clear their willingness to find a way forward. That letter’s been ignored too.”

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Coordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “The support structure at the bottom of this shaft is in Fair condition and showing no meaningful signs of distress, so we don’t currently accept any need for these works.

“However, if Highways England genuinely believes that strengthening is ‘now essential’, the delays must be compromising public safety. Had they accepted the landowner’s offer - which they could and should have done - the work would have been finished weeks ago at a fraction of the cost.



“Instead they’re pushing ahead with a difficult scheme - now expected to take three months - which will expose the contractor’s workforce to significantly heightened risk, working within and above 4.6 metres of floodwater in a confined space with poor ventilation. They wouldn’t need to spend £42,328 to have a safety boat and rescue team on standby in the tunnel if they’d done the sensible thing and accepted the proposal to partially dewater it.

“It’s a shambolic situation. Highways England and the DfT keep insisting that safety is their main priority, but their actions suggest otherwise. Unfortunately the officials making these decisions are not sufficiently scrutinised and accountable.”

The shaft project has driven the cost of abandonment preparatory works to more than £5.2 million, almost ten times the original figure. The main phase - which is contracted to cost £3 million - requires planning permission but, so far, more than 7,200 people have submitted objections. In 2018, consultants commissioned by Bradford Council estimated the tunnel’s repair cost at £6.9 million.

The Government has committed £1 million to technical and feasibility studies looking at the works needed to safely reopen Queensbury Tunnel and the development of a sustainable transport corridor connecting Bradford, Halifax and Keighley. Their precise scope was recently agreed by officials from Bradford and Calderdale councils, the Department for Transport, Highways England and West Yorkshire Combined Authority, with completion expected by March next year.

--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

General press enquiries: media@queensburytunnel.org.uk

Norah McWilliam: campaign@queensburytunnel.org.uk



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 3,200 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.