



Thursday 25th March 2021

## Minister blames landowner for tunnel difficulties

A Minister has criticised a landowner for not pumping water out of a flooded Victorian tunnel despite the Department for Transport twice rejecting his offers to do so.

The bizarre intervention came as campaigners await the findings of two Government-funded studies - due at the end of March - into technical options for repairing Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire and the feasibility of developing a Bradford-Halifax Greenway incorporating the 1.4-mile long passageway.

Highways England, who manage the Historical Railways Estate of 3,200 disused railway structures on the DfT's behalf, intends to partially infill the tunnel due to perceived safety concerns. It secured the right to install pumping equipment on land at the Halifax end in March 2015, enabling the removal of groundwater which collects inside the tunnel due to the original drainage system having failed.

Acting for the leaseholder, the Secretary of State for Transport, Highways England was obliged to provide the landowner with annual progress reports on works in the tunnel and pay £50 per year in rent; however it never fulfilled either of those requirements so the lease was forfeited in December 2017.

The landowner - who supports the campaign to reopen the tunnel - turned off the equipment in September 2018 when contractors made clear their intention to begin £545K of preparatory works for the tunnel's abandonment without any formal agreement in place to ensure the continued operation of the pumps. By January 2021, the total sum committed to the works - which are still only 70% complete - had risen to £7.53 million.

In a letter to Shipley MP Philip Davies on 23rd March, Baroness Vere of Norbiton, the Minister for Roads, Buses and Places, claimed that "it is entirely within [the landowner's] gift to completely dewater the tunnel and do so without conditions. This would allow inspections and works to be completed over the full length of the tunnel which would in turn inform the current studies and support the landowner's professed desire to see the tunnel reopened."

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Coordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "Baroness Vere seems to be ignorant of the facts. The landowner has no right to unilaterally activate equipment that he does not own, is not located on his property and is powered by electricity he does not pay for. He would require specific written authorisation from Highways England.

"Furthermore, restarting the pumps would result in the rapid drawdown of water through the tunnel lining, with the potential to impact on its condition. We assume that Highways England - as a responsible asset manager - would wish to have input into the rate at which the water was removed.

"As Baroness Vere makes clear in her letter, 'Highways England would need to be able to undertake...works without the threat of the pump being turned off at any moment', so legal arrangements would have to be agreed before any dewatering begins, to safeguard both parties."



In August 2020, the landowner offered to facilitate the tunnel's dewatering so that strengthening could be installed at a shaft which Highways England insists is close to collapse. No evidence has been provided to support this claim which was first made almost a year ago. The offer was rejected although the landowner was never formally notified.

A further £1.96 million was committed to the shaft strengthening work in January 2021, resulting in the landowner making a new offer to the Secretary of State for Transport on 11th March. Baroness Vere rejected this in her letter.

Landowner David Sunderland said: "Twice now I've offered to restart the pumps but they've supposedly rejected both offers, although they've never bothered to inform me or let me know why. Now this Minister is criticising me for not restarting the pumps which I can't do without permission and won't do without a legal agreement in place.

"The only real condition I've mentioned is that the works must not prejudice the tunnel's reopening - so no infilling and no abandonment works. I've offered talks but they've ignored that. This Minister says she wants to see inspections and repairs. That's fine - they just need to ask, but they never have.

"All I want is a clear written commitment from Highways England and the DfT that they wouldn't use dewatering as a chance to destroy the community's hopes for the tunnel once and for all. It's an outstanding feat of engineering and must be used for public benefit; that's what ten men died building it for.

"They blame everyone but themselves for this shambles. The truth is that if Highways England had paid the £50 rent, the tunnel would still be dewatered and the preparatory works would have been completed two years ago. Their failure has cost us - as taxpayers - £7 million.

"Why doesn't this Minister criticise that?"

--ENDS--

## Photos/video

DavidSunderland: Landowner David Sunderland on his flooded land at the south portal of Queensbury Tunnel. (Four by Three)

Floodwater: The southern half of the tunnel is flooded following Highways England's failure to pay the rent on the pumping station. (Forgotten Relics)

No3Shaft: Highways England first claimed that No.3 Shaft is close to collapse almost a year ago. (Forgotten Relics)

BaronessVereOfNorbiton: Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Minister for Roads, Buses and Places (Chris McAndrew)

Higher resolution versions are available on request.



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)

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>`

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More general information on the campaign is available from:

[www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/](http://www.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 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 Permitted Development 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 £7.53 million had been committed to the project by the end of January 2021. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.