



Friday 25th October 2019

## Campaigners hit back at tunnel “vandalism”

The Society seeking to reopen a disused West Yorkshire railway tunnel as a cycle path has condemned Highways England for “unlawfully abusing emergency powers” to infill a ventilation shaft, blocking the passageway beneath it.

Queensbury Tunnel, extending for 1.4 miles between Bradford and Halifax, has been at the centre of a long-running dispute over its future. Highways England, who manage the Victorian structure on the Department for Transport’s behalf, has applied for planning permission to abandon it due to perceived safety concerns. However the application, which has so far attracted almost 4,200 objections, has not yet been determined.

Earlier this month, preparatory works had to be suspended after the tunnel was inundated with floodwater during a prolonged period of heavy rain. According to a Highways England spokesman, “water began to enter the tunnel at an unprecedented volume and speed” and “endangered the safety of our workforce” who “had to abandon equipment and move to a safe area”. However a report by the Queensbury Tunnel Society indicates that the water level in the tunnel only rose by an average of 4.6cm - less than 2 inches - per hour.

On Monday (21st October), Highways England started to infill a 99-metre deep ventilation shaft due to “fears it could collapse”. In 2012, a defect was recorded in the tunnel’s sidewall close to the shaft, but a planned repair to resist any further movement was never carried out. The supporting section of lining directly below the shaft was laser-scanned in August 2018 and found to have changed very little since construction in the 1870s. No evidence has been produced to suggest any deterioration over the past 14 months.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “For rising water to keep up with someone walking in the tunnel, the ingress rate would have to reach about 46,000 litres per second. The actual rate was 72 litres per second. Whilst that’s considerable, it’s certainly not unprecedented; something similar happened in January 2016. But the suggestion that either staff or equipment were in any way at risk is just another example of Highways England’s ridiculous hyperbole.

“Both the shaft and the supporting tunnel lining are in generally Fair condition. Even if the defective area did fail, there’s no plausible mechanism whereby any effect could be felt at ground level. Load paths from the shaft would redistribute through unaffected parts of the tunnel lining and, more importantly, the shaft lining itself was built in two separate sections, with the upper portion independently supported on a rock ledge 39 metres below ground level.”

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “This is nothing short of ruthless vandalism on Highways England’s part.

“For the past six years, we’ve worked tirelessly to secure this fabulous historic asset as an active travel route, but our efforts have been persistently blighted by Highways England’s failings. Once again, their



car-crash abandonment scheme has almost been sunk by flooding, so they've now resorted to unlawfully abusing emergency powers to keep it afloat. There is no emergency situation at this shaft; in fact there's no real situation of any kind there.

“If these civil servants think they can get the better of us by attempting to circumvent statutory planning processes, they can think again. This is not over. In fact we've been advised that the material being tipped down the shaft could be removed and used as the foundations for the cycle track.”

Councillor John Pennington, Conservative Group Leader on Bradford Council and champion of the successful campaign to save the city's Odeon cinema, said: “”

A spokesperson for Bradford Council said: “The Council is pressing DfT and Highways England for the necessary authorisation or other legal basis for their works and taking external advice on its options.”

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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>`

**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)

**More general information on the campaign is available from:**

[www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/](http://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) Uitzi 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 £550,000, but had risen to £3.46 million by the end of September 2019. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.