



Wednesday 26th February 2020

Tunnel camera prompts claim of waste

Campaigners have condemned Highways England for spending almost five thousand pounds of taxpayers' money every week on a CCTV camera in a disused railway tunnel.

The Victorian structure, which extends for 1.4 miles beneath Queensbury in West Yorkshire, has been at the centre of a longstanding battle over its future. Campaigners believe it should be restored for public use as part of a greenway connecting Bradford and Halifax, a view supported by the councils at both ends. However Highways England, who manage the tunnel for the Department for Transport, is seeking planning permission to fill parts of it in due to perceived safety concerns. The project is likely to cost around £7 million.

Contractor AMCO-Giffen spent much of last year undertaking preparatory works inside the tunnel but withdrew most of its equipment in early October after six days of persistent heavy rain caused floodwater to reach the tunnel's midpoint. Since then, works have been suspended. But Highways England is continuing to fund the operation of a generator, lighting and CCTV camera system to record anyone attempting to enter the tunnel. Locals have reported clouds of blue smoke coming from the generator's exhaust and the smell of burning fuel in the air.

The entrance is protected by 3-metre high steel gates, anti-vandal grease and razor wire. Despite this, two urban explorers were able to get into the tunnel during a two-week period last September when it was left unlocked and unattended for between half-an-hour and 90 minutes most evenings.

According to figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the weekly cost of the CCTV operation is £4,704, meaning that the bill since the site was stood down is approaching £100,000.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said "It's become very clear that Highways England couldn't care less about how much public money it wastes.

"Last year, about £1.2 million was squandered on pumping floodwater out of the tunnel, but today its level is exactly the same as when they started. Now they're frittering away tens of thousands of pounds monitoring people supposedly trying to get into a tunnel which has better security than many prisons. If they kept the gates locked, that would be sufficient.

"At what point will Highways England be called to account for this misuse of taxpayers' money and the unnecessary air pollution they're causing?"

Meanwhile the planning application for the tunnel's partial infilling has had to be re-advertised after changes were made to the proposed scheme following controversial works at one of its ventilation shafts last October, carried out under emergency powers. So far, more than 6,300 people have lodged objections to the plans.

It's now likely that Bradford Council won't determine the application until May, by which time a decision is expected on a £23 million funding bid for the Bradford-Halifax Greenway - incorporating



Queensbury Tunnel - which the West Yorkshire Combined Authority submitted to the government's Transforming Cities Fund in November.

--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 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 emergency planning powers later that month.

Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of the preparatory works was £550,000, but had risen to £3.44 million by the end of November 2019. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million. However, before any further works can take place, the tunnel will have to be dewatered at an estimated cost of £350,000.