



Engineering study offers hope for tunnel path

It would cost £2.81 million to repair a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire for use as a cycle path, according to a study published today by a campaign group. However Queensbury Tunnel, between Bradford and Halifax, is currently being prepared for abandonment at a cost of about £3 million by the Historical Railways Estate (HRE) which manages the structure on behalf of the Department for Transport. HRE is pursuing this option after its own report, which was presented to former Transport Minister Robert Goodwill earlier this year, put the cost of repair at £35 million. Mr Goodwill decided that this was unaffordable.

The new study, produced on behalf of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, found that most of the tunnel is in a fair condition and can be repaired, where necessary, using standard techniques adopted in operational railway tunnels. However, for about 300 metres, the tunnel cuts through a coal seam and is suffering from severe defects due to the arch being overloaded as the coal is crushed by the rock above it. Partial collapses have occurred at two locations. This section would have to be remediated using either in-situ or sprayed concrete.

Graeme Bickerdike, who co-ordinated the engineering study on behalf of the Society, said: “The campaign group was very fortunate in securing the help of an experienced civil engineer specialising in tunnel reconstruction and the contractor responsible for successfully repairing a collapsed disused tunnel under Liverpool in 2012. They went into Queensbury Tunnel to record the defects and then developed a remediation plan, programme of works and a costing.

“To the untrained eye, the collapses and the areas around them do look quite dramatic but, to people with a mining background, there are established ways of dealing with them that don’t involve huge costs. I spoke to a number of tunnelling and mining engineers about HRE’s £35 million figure - which was the product of a desk study - and they all regarded it as being off the scale. There has to be a proportionate and pragmatic approach to developing a repair solution here.”

In 2015, HRE commissioned an Options Report from Jacobs, its engineering consultants, to inform decision-making about the future management of Queensbury Tunnel which has the highest risk profile of any in HRE’s portfolio of 3,200 disused railway structures. The options ranged from a minimalist form of abandonment (plugging the entrances with concrete and allowing the tunnel to collapse), through partial or complete infilling, to repair for use as a cycle path.

However the report contains a number of errors resulting from Jacobs’ mistaken assertion that more than 900 yards of Queensbury Tunnel was driven using a “tunnel boring machine”. In reality, the advancement of around 300 yards of pilot tunnel (heading) was assisted by a “rock drilling machine” which drilled holes in the working face for blasting purposes. More critically, as the report is high level, it remains largely silent on the materials, quantities and construction methodologies associated with the various options. Without these, there can be little confidence that the costings are robust.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel campaign group, said: “I’m quite angry about it. HRE paid a lot of money for a report which ought to have been rejected. But instead, they took it to Robert Goodwill and effectively asked him to decide the future of the tunnel based on it. They are now



proceeding towards abandonment - which involves pouring £3 million into a black hole - when there is a better option with a similar price tag that would convert the tunnel from a liability into an asset. By putting a cycle path through the tunnel, we believe that the £3 million investment would be repaid through social and economic benefits.

“Whether or not you care about Queensbury Tunnel, I think most people would object to a government body spending £3 million in a way that offers no value for money. We will be asking the Minister to halt the process of abandonment until a proper review has been conducted - based on proper costings - to decide the right way forward for the tunnel, one which offers the best possible outcome for taxpayers.”

To better inform such a review, Sustrans has begun work on a benefits study which will attempt to quantify the economic uplift a reopened Queensbury Tunnel might bring to Yorkshire’s economy. The findings are expected next spring.

Meanwhile HRE has made clear its intention to begin the physical process of abandoning the tunnel in the summer of 2018.

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From 00:01 on 10/10/16, the campaign group’s full report can be downloaded from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/reports/

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. At least eight navvies lost their lives during the work which 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.

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. Lifting of the tracks 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). 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 longest in Europe is the 2,931-yard (2,680 metres) Uitzu Tunnel on the Plazaola Greenway in northern Spain, whilst the 3,963-yard Snoqualmie Tunnel in America holds the world record.

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE), part of Highways England, is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the associated liability from around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, cuttings and viaducts. HRE's role was formerly fulfilled by British Railways Board (Residuary) until its abolition 30th September 2013.