



Friday 20th July 2018

New study considers tunnel risks

A report has been published into the short-term risks from a disused railway tunnel under Queensbury in West Yorkshire, following claims that its condition presents a threat to the local community.

The 1.4-mile long Victorian structure, linking Bradford and Keighley to Halifax, is currently the focus of a campaign to reopen it as part of an ambitious cycle network, but Highways England's Historical Railways Estate (HRE), which looks after the tunnel for the Department for Transport (DfT), intends to abandon it as part of a £3.2 million project starting in September.

Over recent weeks, conflicting views have been expressed as to whether the tunnel - which has suffered two partial collapses - could cause damage to houses built on the surface, more than 350 feet (107 metres) above. In June, Highways England suggested that "action now needs to be taken...in order to protect the community", however it was unable to provide evidence to support this claim when challenged by Queensbury's three local Councillors.

The report, produced by the Queensbury Tunnel Society, considers a number of statements made by HRE in email exchanges with DfT officials, in which it sets out the need to make progress with the abandonment scheme. In one, HRE says: "There is a risk, which grows daily, that one of the two known areas of collapse could unravel the tunnel lining back to one of the shafts causing a risk to properties above those shafts." It has since described this as "the worst scenario".

However the new report makes clear that the condition of the tunnel is "generally stable", the partial collapses have not structurally changed in the four years since the most recent one occurred, there are no recorded defects close to the shafts and no signs of deformation or distress to their support structures. HRE inspection reports identify the shafts as being in Fair condition.

It concludes that HRE "appears to have chosen to abandon Queensbury Tunnel without first seeking to formally establish whether there is any realistic likelihood of that [worst] scenario occurring and, if so, within what timescale."

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, says: "The tone and content of some of HRE's emails suggest an urgency and threat level that are simply not sustainable. The risks do not 'grow daily' in any meaningful sense and the idea of an 'unravelling' is difficult to sustain as each collapse is a discrete event caused by unique local conditions. But most importantly, the shafts are in Fair condition; the tunnel lining beneath them isn't squatting and there are no cracks or compression failures as would be the case if the arch was subject to excessive loads.

"In our opinion, Queensbury Tunnel currently presents little short-term risk to the community, as has been the case for several decades."

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, says: "We're pleased that our engineering team has been able to put some of HRE's claims into context, looking at the defects in the tunnel and how they might develop. Their conclusion that abandonment cannot be justified by any reasonable



approach to risk management is something we've suspected for a while; it's more a function of fear and ignorance.

"HRE shouldn't be making decisions or exaggerated statements without evidence to back them up. There is the potential to cause undue concern to people living above the tunnel and we share the view of local Councillors who regard these statements as irresponsible."

The Society has sent a copy of the report to Chris Grayling, Secretary of State for Transport, asking that he seek "some evidence from HRE to demonstrate a realistic short-term need to put a potentially useful structure permanently beyond use... If it is unable to provide that evidence, we would respectfully ask again that you pause the abandonment process."

Meanwhile on Thursday (19th June), members of the Society joined representatives from Sustrans and Calderdale Council at a meeting with Bradford Council officials to discuss how a positive future for Queensbury Tunnel might be secured.

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To link to the Society's promotional video or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/c4f0M_qfvVY

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/c4f0M_qfvVY?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/

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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 3,500 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.