



Tuesday 23rd October 2018

Tunnel safety concerns reported to HSE

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) has been asked to investigate plans for work in a disused railway tunnel which would involve the appointed contractor undertaking activities in an area designated as too hazardous to enter.

Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire is currently the focus of a campaign to reopen it as part of a cycle network linking Bradford and Keighley to Halifax, but Highways England, which looks after the Victorian structure on the Department for Transport's behalf, intends to partly infill and permanently close it at a cost to the taxpayer of £3.6 million.

The southern end of the tunnel is currently flooded to a depth of 13 feet (4 metres) following the switching-off of a pumping station which had been installed by Highways England in 2016. The lease for land on which most of the equipment is sited was forfeited last December due to the £50 annual rent not being paid for two years.

Following discussions between Highways England and its contractor AMCO-Giffen, plans have been developed for a new dewatering system which would involve the floodwater being pumped 1.4 miles to the north end of the tunnel. However, to implement it, heavy machinery would have to be used to create an access route through a section of the tunnel which is blocked in two places by tonnes of fallen rock and buckled scaffold platforms.

Partial collapses occurred in 2013 and 2014, resulting in an exclusion zone being established which inspectors and contractors are not allowed to enter. Its length was subsequently extended to cover 300 metres of the tunnel based on concerns that adjacent sections of its lining might also fail. The exclusion zone is identified in AMCO-Giffen's works contract.

The HSE was notified because Highways England has not yet entered into meaningful negotiations with the landowner for a new agreement allowing its original pumping station to be turned back on.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "Basic health and safety principles set out a hierarchy of controls. The preferred approach is for the risks to be eliminated - in other words, instead of undertaking the work, could something else be done? Clearly, until the option of restarting the existing pumps has been absolutely ruled out, there is no justification for any physical works to be undertaken.

"The situation is entirely of Highways England's own making so it's incumbent upon those responsible for it to overcome their embarrassment, engage with the landowner and find a way forward that does not involve exposing the contractor's workforce to wholly unnecessary risks. We have alerted the HSE to what's being discussed and suggested that proactive action is needed."

The HSE has also been asked to consider whether the flooding should have been resolved before preparatory works got underway in the tunnel on 1st October, resulting in personnel currently having only one viable means of escape. If a collapse occurred between their site of work and the exit - a possibility recognised in the contractor's construction plan - their only options would be to swim 400



metres through the floodwater or, if the route was not completely blocked, take the risk of passing through the failed section of tunnel.

--ENDS--

To link to a new video on the tunnel campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Yij7v7lM2H4>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Yij7v7lM2H4?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.