



For Thursday 1st October 2020

## Problems push tunnel closure cost over £5 million

Exactly two years after contractors began work on the abandonment of a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire, preparatory works have not yet been completed and costs have almost tripled.

Queensbury Tunnel, between Bradford and Halifax, has been surrounded by controversy since its custodian, Highways England, confirmed plans to partially infill it in 2016 when the outlay was estimated at £2.7 million. Meanwhile campaigners - backed by cycling, environmental and heritage groups, and the neighbouring local authorities - want to see the 1.4-mile long Victorian structure repaired to form part of a greenway connecting two of Yorkshire's biggest population centres.

An initial phase of strengthening works, costed at £545K, was due to start at the southern end of the tunnel in September 2018, but had to be replanned after a pumping station there - which kept the structure dewatered - was switched off due to Highways England failing to pay the £50 annual rent.

Temporary pumping equipment was deployed at the north end and, by September 2019, contractor AMCO-Giffen had strengthened the tunnel below three shafts and through a 300-metre long section which had previously been regarded as too dangerous to enter. However the workforce was then forced to withdraw after six days of torrential rain caused the floodwater to return to its original level.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "The tunnel has suffered from high levels of water ingress since the time of its construction, so the loss of the pumping station proved calamitous from a planning and logistical perspective. Highways England has effectively lost control of this project, as evidenced by the lack of progress and increasing sums being spent. According to the contract, abandonment was due to be completed by 31st October 2019 and yet they're still struggling to finish the preparatory works.

"Whilst it was not a party to the lease on the pumping station, Highways England was obliged to pay the £50 rent every year under the terms of a Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport, which sets out its duties in relation to Queensbury Tunnel and 3,200 other disused structures. It's told a lot of half-truths in an effort to conceal that reality.

"The past two years have shown just how crucial the pumping station is for the effective management of the tunnel, yet Highways England has still not entered into dialogue with the landowner about recommissioning it. The taxpayer has paid a considerable price for that."

Today, more than £5 million has been committed to the preparatory works, with a further £2.7 million allocated for expenditure on the tunnel over the remainder of this financial year. Highways England's engineering consultant, Jacobs, has also been paid £236K for technical studies and the development of a planning application for the abandonment scheme which has so far attracted more than 7,150 objections.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "It's been an extraordinary couple of years during which the climate around the tunnel has changed noticeably. Even the Department for



Transport, which owns it, is beginning to recognise the structure's value as an asset for future transport provision.

"If the Government is seriously committed to getting more of us walking and cycling in a post-Covid world, segregated infrastructure will have to be constructed. We cannot continue to kill 100 cyclists on our roads every year; bikes and motor vehicles do not mix.

"There is a way forward for the tunnel which benefits everyone. Instead of pursuing a wasteful and unnecessary abandonment scheme - which is exposing the contractor's workforce to increasingly high levels of risk - why doesn't Highways England become a positive partner in the effort to build a case for its rehabilitation? Doing so would make more likely the prospect of the company being discharged of all responsibility for it.

"Queensbury Tunnel doesn't have to be a burden around the taxpayer's neck; it could pay a return on our investment through social, economic and tourism benefits."

In July, the Government announced a £1 million funding package to develop a business case for a greenway connecting Bradford District to Calderdale, half of which has been given to Highways England to consider the engineering requirements and costs associated with making Queensbury Tunnel safe for any future repurposing.

"That's a huge amount of money", said Dr McWilliam. "We're obviously keen that it's spent wisely so the greatest possible value and insight are derived from it."

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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

General press enquiries: [media@queensburytunnel.org.uk](mailto:media@queensburytunnel.org.uk)



Norah McWilliam: [campaign@queensburytunnel.org.uk](mailto: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 £545,000, but had risen to £5.00 million by the end of June 2020. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.