



Thursday 14th January 2021

Confidence lacking over tunnel study findings

Campaigners have expressed their astonishment that a £500,000 study into the viability of repairing an old railway tunnel for use as a cycle path is being undertaken without engineers carrying out any inspections.

Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire has been at the centre of a longstanding battle between Highways England, who manage the Victorian structure on the Department for Transport's behalf, and a group hoping to repurpose it as part of a new foot and cycle path. The alternative is abandonment - expected to cost £8 million - which would involve around 12% of the tunnel being infilled and the rest left to collapse.

In July, the Government committed £1 million to two studies: the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, working with Bradford and Calderdale councils, is developing the business case for an active travel route connecting Bradford and Halifax via the tunnel, whilst Highways England is conducting a technical study into repair options for the structure and their associated costs.

Floodwater has accumulated through the southern half of the 1.4-mile long tunnel since Highways England twice failed to pay the £50 annual rent on a pumping station it built at the Halifax end, resulting in the equipment being switched off. Since then the company has consistently suggested that the water will be causing the masonry lining to deteriorate, jeopardising prospects for reopening.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Coordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "The technical study offers the best opportunity to get current insight into the tunnel's condition - based on evidence, rather than speculation. The landowner has made it clear that he would enter into positive dialogue so the pumps could be restarted and the tunnel dewatered. Unfortunately his offer was ignored.

"So we're now faced with the farcical situation of consultants carrying out a desktop study from old reports, rather than entering the tunnel to conduct proper investigations. There's a need to record the location and extent of any defects in order to design and price a suitable programme of remediation works, and there's money in the budget to do that.

"The Government promised a study that would offer a definitive view of what's required, helping to 'build a consensus around the findings'. But how can anyone have confidence in the results of expensive guesswork and conjecture?"

The new study is being conducted by Jacobs, the company acting as agent for Highways England's abandonment scheme, with input from AMCO-Giffen, the works contractor. Jacobs estimated repair at £35.4 million in 2016 as part of a report into the tunnel's future management, but the Department for Transport's own review found that this figure was "simply too high to be credible" and had been contrived to make the case for abandonment.

A 2018 study by AECOM, commissioned by Bradford Council, costed repair at £6.9 million.



Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “Not unreasonably, we assumed the new study would be conducted by independent engineers with tunnelling expertise, such as AECOM, which is what’s needed given the unique circumstances and prevailing conflict.

“To appoint the company driving the abandonment scheme - with its track record of exaggeration and inflation - immediately calls into question the trustworthiness of the study. £500,000 is a huge sum and we must derive maximum value from it.

“Jacobs’ 2016 costing was eventually discredited thanks in part to the DfT, but it put the reopening campaign back two years and shattered stakeholder confidence. We’ve worked hard to rebuild it and there is now solid support for the tunnel’s reuse as part of a Bradford-Halifax Greenway.

“One clear message from lockdown is the public’s enthusiasm for walking and cycling if safe, high-quality infrastructure is available. We have the opportunity to build a better future after the pandemic.”

The findings of the two studies are expected by the end of March, after which the Department for Transport will consider the case for funding the greenway scheme from its active travel budgets.

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To link to a video on plans to abandon the tunnel or embed it on your webpage:

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

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/azIBmmzECgs?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) 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 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 £5.23 million by the end of September 2020. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.