



Monday 14th October 2019

Tunnel works halted by flooding

The contractor leading work to abandon a disused railway tunnel in West Yorkshire has withdrawn from site after a significant inundation of floodwater brought operations to a standstill.

Queensbury Tunnel, which extends for 1.4 miles between Bradford and Halifax, has been the focus of a longstanding battle over its future. Local campaigners, supported by Bradford and Calderdale councils, believe the Victorian structure should be restored for public use as part of a greenway connecting the two districts; meanwhile Highways England, who manage the tunnel on the Department for Transport's behalf, is seeking planning permission to abandon it due to perceived safety concerns.

Last year, a pumping station at the Halifax end of the tunnel was switched off after Highways England twice failed to pay the £50 annual rent for the land on which it is sited, resulting in around 8.2 million gallons of floodwater collecting in the tunnel between September and December 2018. AMCO-Giffen, the abandonment contractor, had removed about 80% of it using a temporary pump before the area was hit by a prolonged period of heavy rain towards the end of last month.

The water level in the tunnel began to rise on 26th September. Hole Bottom Beck, the watercourse into which the floodwater is being discharged, was already running high and overtopping its banks in places. Pumping was suspended in the early hours of 29th September and, three days later, the flooding had returned to its level in January.

Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Co-ordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "It's an inescapable fact that if the rent had been paid on the pumping station, the tunnel would still be clear of water and the original programme of preparatory works for abandonment - costed at £550,000 - would have been completed months ago.

"Instead the taxpayer is footing the bill for an alternative pumping system and significant associated strengthening of the tunnel which look like adding £2.5 million to the bill. Then there's the estimated £400K spent on legal action to facilitate construction of the pumping station; that's also gone to waste.

"Responsibility for the current fiasco and huge escalation in costs lies solely with Highways England. However, over the past few months, they've made a number of unfounded allegations against third parties in an attempt to deflect attention from the serious consequences of their own failings. This suggests deep cultural problems within the organisation."

Work to demobilise the tunnel continued all last week as plant, equipment, pipework and a pump were taken away on lowloaders. Meanwhile it's understood that Highways England's abandonment team held meetings in an effort to find a way forward.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: "After forfeiting the lease by failing to pay the rent, the only sensible course of action was for Highways England to admit their mistake, sit down with the landowner and negotiate a new deal to get the pumping station working again.



“Their unwillingness to do so has resulted in a year-long farce which, in terms of the flooding, has got them absolutely nowhere. Almost 60 silt pollution incidents have been recorded in Hole Bottom Beck, 20 of them being sufficiently serious to warrant investigation by the Environment Agency.

“We hope that, after this latest turn of events, they will choose the only outcome that makes any sense. The landowner has recently proposed a solution which meets the needs of all those with a vested interest in Queensbury Tunnel, including the taxpayer, the Department for Transport, Highways England and future generations. It’s about time they engaged in meaningful dialogue in an effort to stabilise a situation that’s clearly out of effective control.”

--ENDS--

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

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.

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. Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of these works was £550,000, but had risen to £2.45 million in July 2019. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million.