



Monday 15th March 2021

Tunnel abandonment budget now exceeds repair cost

More public money has been committed to the partial infilling of a West Yorkshire railway tunnel than it would cost to repair it as part of a proposed cycle path, according to campaigners.

Queensbury Tunnel extends for 1.4 miles under a ridge between Bradford and Halifax. In September 2018, when Highways England began a project to abandon the structure, preparatory works were costed at £545K and programmed to take four months. But the Government-owned roads company had twice failed to pay the £50 annual rent on a pumping station that had been installed to keep the tunnel dewatered, resulting in the landowner turning it off.

As a result, two-and-a-half years later, the preparatory works are still only 70% complete and £7.53 million has so far been committed to them through contract variations. The main abandonment scheme could add a further £3 million to the bill.

Highways England's destructive plan for the tunnel has been the focus of considerable opposition, with more than 7,300 objectors to the planning application. These people want the structure saved for reuse as part of an ambitious active travel route, the Bradford-Halifax Greenway, proposed by a local campaign group and supported by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, together with Bradford and Calderdale councils. Ministers have also expressed enthusiasm for the idea as it aligns with the Government's 'levelling up' and 'building back better' agendas.

Engineering consultants costed the tunnel's repair at £6.9 million in 2018, whilst a Sustrans study found that a greenway passing through the historic passageway would return £37.6 million in social, economic and tourism benefits over 30 years.

No substantive works have taken place in the tunnel since mid-September, but documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that Highways England then approved the payment of £263,857 to its contractor, AMCO-Giffen, to cover 'running costs' and a round-the-clock security presence in the weeks through to Christmas, equating to more than £3K per day. Lone workers were stationed in a van at the tunnel entrance which is protected by 10-foot high steel gates, anti-vandal paint and razor wire.

Then, in January, Highways England issued a contract variation valued at almost £2 million for the installation of a concrete plug below a ventilation shaft located 500 metres into the floodwater which currently reaches the tunnel's midpoint. The company claims the plug is urgently needed to prevent the shaft collapsing, but has provided no evidence to suggest there is any risk of such an event. Engineers commissioned by Bradford Council voiced no concerns about the shaft's support structure when they carried out a comprehensive study into the tunnel's condition two years ago.

"There's been a scandalous waste of public money here," says Graeme Bickerdike, Engineering Coordinator for the Queensbury Tunnel Society. "We've now reached a point where the tunnel's abandonment could cost £10 million as a result of Highways England's failure to pay the rent on the pumping station. Nobody has been held accountable for the huge burden placed on the taxpayer.



“The money could have paid for the tunnel’s repair, transforming this outstanding feat of Victorian engineering into an asset that could be a source of delight and adventure, delivering benefits for generations to come. Instead they’ve turned it into a money pit.”

Highways England correctly states that it was not a party to any legal arrangement with the landowner over the pumping station. However, under Clause 5.4 of its Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport covering management of the Historical Railways Estate - of which Queensbury Tunnel is a part - the company is responsible for “meeting from existing funding all costs associated with the property”, including the £50 annual rent which was specified in a lease held by the Secretary of State for Transport.

Last year, the landowner agreed to the pumping station being restarted so that strengthening work could be undertaken at the shaft, but this was rejected by Highways England because of his insistence on safeguards to ensure no abandonment works took place whilst the tunnel was dewatered. He has now written to the Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, renewing the offer.

“Both Highways England and the DfT profess their commitment to walking and cycling,” says Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society. “But that requires greater provision of safe infrastructure.

“The tunnel offers a unique opportunity to create both a strategic commuter link between two of West Yorkshire’s biggest population centres and a leisure route joining the fabulous countryside west of Bradford to attractions in Calderdale. It would draw tourists to the region, boosting our local economy and connecting people with green space. We’ve seen during lockdown just how valuable that is for our wellbeing.”

Studies into the feasibility of delivering the Bradford-Halifax Greenway and technical options for the tunnel’s repair are due to be completed by the end of this month.

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Photos/video

SouthernEngineers: Engineers enter Queensbury Tunnel’s southern entrance in June 2016 when the pumping station was still operational. (Four by Three)

SouthernFlood: The southern end of the tunnel in March 2019, following Highways England’s failure to pay the rent on the pumping station. (Four by Three)

SecurityVan: A lone worker sits in a van at the northern entrance to the tunnel which is protected by 10 feet high steel gates. (Queensbury Tunnel Society)

ExpectantCyclists: Two young cyclists peer into the 1.4-mile long tunnel. (Queensbury Tunnel Society)

Higher resolution versions are available on request.



A collection of high-resolution photos for Media use is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/media/imagery.shtml

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>`

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More general information on the campaign is available from:

www.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 Permitted Development 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 £7.53 million had been committed to the project by the end of January 2021. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by contractor AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million.