

Tuesday 5th January 2021

Railway heritage at risk from Highways England's "wrecking ball"

Hundreds of potentially useful disused railway structures are threatened with demolition or infilling by Highways England under plans described by one campaigner as "finishing off what Dr Beeching started".

The Government-owned company is responsible for managing the Department for Transport's Historical Railways Estate (HRE) - a collection of around 3,200 bridges, tunnels and viaducts, some of which carry or span routes earmarked for walking and cycling, or for reopened railways and extensions to heritage lines. Blocking or severing the alignments would make reuse more difficult and expensive, possibly preventing the proposals from coming to fruition.

Attracting an annual budget of around £10 million, the HRE is generally inspected annually and repaired on a 'reactive' basis. However, in a strategic report from 2016, Highways England made clear its preference to "significantly reduce the level of liability and risk to the HE and DfT" through a move to proactive interventions such as demolition and infilling. The number of structures within the Estate would be reduced by 10-15% (320-480 structures). To fund this work, the HRE budget is being quadrupled to a typical annual figure of £41 million.

But according to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, cycling campaigners and greenway developers - no assessment is being made as to the strategic value of the affected structures for future transport provision and attempts are being made to infill most of them under permitted development powers to prevent scrutiny through normal planning processes.

Highways England has been undertaking occasional bridge infilling projects since it took over responsibility for the HRE in 2013. One of them, at Chilcompton in Somerset, has blocked a future extension to a line operated by the Somerset & Dorset Railway Heritage Trust, despite Mendip District Council having a policy that protects the former trackbed.

John Baxter, a member of the Trust's board, said: "We only heard about the plans second hand and not long before permission was given to carry out the works. We regarded this as a serious oversight and we would have submitted an objection if we had received earlier notification. It has always been our intention to rebuild as much of the line towards Shepton Mallet as possible.

"Our bridge inspector, who has over 30 years' experience with such bridges in the heritage sector, reported that the structure had a few minor defects - the sort you would expect of a bridge that was 140 years old - but there was absolutely no safety justification for what Highways England was proposing.

“Their internal brief appears to be one where the consultative process is simply not wide enough to encompass all the people that matter and to get rid of every liability they can without any thought whatsoever of the consequences to rail, rambling or cycling organisations that could take over the structures.

“With this huge increase in budget, it seems they’re now intent on finishing off what Dr Beeching started.”

The full programme of demolition and infilling schemes is expected to continue for ten years, with 54 structures earmarked in the ongoing first phase; amongst these is the controversial abandonment of Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire where £5.2M has already been committed to preparatory works. It’s understood that 80 further schemes are already being explored. Of these 134 structures, 102 are located in England, 27 in Scotland and five in Wales.

Jacobs, consulting engineers acting for Highways England, recently informed Mendip District Council of their intention to infill a bridge near Wells, Somerset on a proposed cycle route, but engineers changed their minds four weeks later claiming that the work was no longer necessary as a result of £16K worth of repairs carried out ten months earlier. The Council’s planning team had challenged the lack of detail and illegitimate use of permitted development powers.

In May, the Town Council, Civic Society and a rambling group in Alnwick, Northumberland objected to the infilling of two bridges crossing the route of another proposed greenway. Jacobs recognised that the schemes would conflict with local policies to safeguard disused railway lines and reuse them for leisure purposes.

Nothing happened for four months; then the firm told Northumberland County Council that the infilling schemes would be going ahead under permitted development powers “in order to prevent an emergency arising”. Inspection reports record both bridges to be in generally good condition, with a low risk ranking.

Colin Davidson, a supporter of the greenway scheme, said: “Locals regard the old railway as an important amenity and many use it for exercise. It’s embedded in the town’s history.

“With £2 billion being invested over the next five years on active travel, we thought the time had come for the line to be reborn. A greenway could ultimately connect the town with Edlingham Castle - six miles down the line - drawing people into the fresh air and providing another attraction for tourists. Some of the countryside it cuts through is stunning.

“And then we got the news about the bridges. Without being able to pass beneath them, we’d be faced with building a path out and then back into a rock cutting at one of the bridges, and forcing users to cross a busy, fast road at the other.

“You’d think Government would be more joined-up than this. How can one part of the Department for Transport spend huge amounts of money promoting walking and cycling, whilst another is taking a wrecking ball to the prospects of creating more safe paths?”

It is understood that Highways England has already notified local planning authorities of their intention to progress 124 schemes under permitted development powers which are only applicable when there is a threat of “serious damage to human welfare” involving the potential for death or injury. This approach circumvents the need for planning permission.

The HRE Group has written to Chris Heaton-Harris, the Minister of State for Transport, expressing its concerns over the potential long-term impacts of Highways England’s new approach to managing the Historical Railways Estate.

It has asked for assurances that “no HRE structures will be demolished or infilled without assessments first being undertaken of each scheme’s impact on proposed or potential reuses of the relevant disused railway alignment and that Jacobs/Highways England will fully engage with normal planning processes to ensure that all proposals are subject to effective and appropriate scrutiny in relation to local development plans and policies, and through consultation with local rail and active travel groups”.

More than two thousand people have already signed a petition created by the group, allowing members of the public to make their views known on the issue. Anyone wishing to sign it can do so via www.change.org/theHREgroup.

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Attachments

LittleSmeatonBridge©TheHREGroup: Inspecting one of the bridges threatened with infilling in North Yorkshire.

Heckmondwike©TheHREGroup: Winter walkers pass beneath a series of eye-catching bridges on the former Leeds New Line at Heckmondwike.

AlnwickBridge©TheHREGroup: One of two bridges earmarked for infilling on the proposed route of the Alnwick Greenway.

Somerset&DorsetRailwayHeritageTrust©MrOrganic: A southern extension to the steam railway at Midsomer Norton has been prejudiced by Highways England infilling a bridge over the former line.

(Higher resolution versions of these photographs are available on request)

SupportingDocuments: explanations within the file

Contact details

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Notes for editors

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE) is owned by the Department for Transport (DfT) and managed on its behalf by Highways England (HE). HE is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, culverts and viaducts.

Although transport policy is largely a matter for the devolved administrations, around 19% of the HRE structures are in Scotland and 11% in Wales. These remain under HE's management.

Highways England operates under a Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport which sets out its obligations in relation to the safety, inspection, maintenance, disposal of the structures, the maximisation of rental income and reduction of risk. Its remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30th September 2013.

In 2020, Highways England awarded framework contracts to six companies for works on HRE structures valued at £254M over seven years. It also agreed a professional services contract with Jacobs, worth £31.9M over ten years, and two contracts for inspections/examinations with a value of £18M over ten years. Until 2027, the average annual budget for the HRE is therefore £41.28M.

The 134 structures currently at risk of demolition or infilling are located in East Anglia (12), East Midlands (4), London and the Home Counties (8), Northern England (16), Northern Scotland (8), North-West England (3), South-East England (11), Central/Southern Scotland (19), South-West England (24), Wales (5), West Midlands (16) and Yorkshire & Lincolnshire (8).

A map showing their locations is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1_9GtFIDW-QuYPvp8vBcSUD4gH9cOMdZt&usp=sharing

The HRE Group is an alliance of walking, cycling and heritage campaigners, engineers and greenway developers who regard the Historical Railways Estate's structures to be strategically valuable in the context of future rail and active travel provision.