

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 14th June 2021

“Cultural vandalism” as Highways England targets Brunel bridge

A bridge engineered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel is earmarked for infilling as part of a Highways England scheme that threatens the future of dozens of disused railway structures.

Voted the second greatest Briton after Winston Churchill, the engineer designed the structure in the 1850s for the Cornwall Railway, linking Plymouth to Truro and Falmouth. Elegantly constructed in masonry, it is located three miles west of Brunel’s famous Royal Albert bridge over the River Tamar, on a section of line near Saltash that was bypassed by an inland diversion in 1908. This resulted in its redundancy.

Last September, Highways England - who manage the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused railway structures for the Department for Transport - told Cornwall Council that the bridge is damp and has “calcite deposits throughout the arch barrel. There is standing water beneath the structure.”

The state-owned roads company went on to claim that the bridge - which is 220 metres from the nearest right of way - is “an ongoing and increasing risk to public safety” and is therefore going to be infilled under Permitted Development powers “to prevent an emergency arising”. This approach circumvents the need for planning permission.

According to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - the bridge is one of 115 disused railway structures programmed for infilling by Highways England, with 15 others due for demolition. But a study has found that 23 of the structures are proposed for reuse on active travel routes, reopened railways and heritage line extensions, whilst a further 18 could play similar roles in the medium term.

John Ball, Secretary of the Cornwall Railway Society, said: “The bridge is an attractive stone structure sitting harmlessly in the Cornish countryside. When the route of the railway between Saltash and St Germans was changed and moved north to its present alignment, this bridge was ‘stranded’ and has been left in peace ever since.

“Being 162 years old, it would benefit from a few minor repairs, but it cannot seriously be regarded as presenting any risk to the public. It is in Fair condition and is crossed by a remote farm track that connects two fields. It simply has no transport role as far as the public is concerned. Its destruction is completely unnecessary and a waste of public money to the tune of about £145,000, according to my information.

“Nevertheless, it merits preservation as an historic piece of the nation’s infrastructure, built arguably by our greatest civil engineer. To destroy it in the absence of any danger to the

public - who do not even have any access to it - amounts to cultural vandalism on the part of Highways England."

Cornwall Council did not respond to Highways England's Permitted Development notification. Of the 18 other local authorities who received the same template letter about bridges in their area, only two consented to Highways England's plans. Most made clear that the powers cited by the company only apply to temporary works - not permanent infilling schemes - in emergency situations where there is a serious threat of death or injury.

Highways England is continuing work this week to infill a bridge at Great Musgrave in Cumbria which is needed for a planned connection between two heritage railways. Neither organisation was consulted about the project which campaigners have condemned as "disproportionate and unnecessary".

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Attachments

BrunelBridgeEast©TheHREGroup: The bridge is an elegant masonry structure spanning the former Saltash-St Germans railway.

BrunelBridgeSpandrel©TheHREGroup: Stonework on the east side of the bridge.

BrunelBridgeWest©TheHREGroup: The former railway now supports local wildlife.

BrunelBridgeTrack©TheHREGroup: The bridge carries a narrow track connecting two fields.

IsambardKingdomBrunel©TheMetropolitanMuseumOfArt: Isambard Kingdom Brunel is considered to be one of the most innovative, influential and prolific engineers.

(Higher resolution versions of the above photographs are available on request)

CornwallCouncilLetter(PDF): The Permitted Development notification letter written by Jacobs, agents to Highways England, about the planned infilling of the bridge.

To link to a video report about the campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/i_JUNXUPkFQ

(Embed) <iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/i_JUNXUPkFQ" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>

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.

The following local authorities have told Highways England that planning permission is required for their infilling schemes: Aberdeenshire, Angus, Cheshire West & Chester, Essex, Glasgow, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, North Ayrshire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland, Perth & Kinross, Powys, Shropshire and Stratford-upon-Avon. Others have raised objections or imposed specific constraints.