



PRESS RELEASE: Monday 21st June 2021

## **“Deceit” exposed as Highways England scales back bridge works**

Campaigners have accused Highways England of “industrial-scale dishonesty” after it reprieved 47 Victorian bridges it was planning to infill over supposed safety concerns.

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. It was revealed in January that 116 bridges and tunnels were to be infilled, and up to 18 demolished, as part of an asset management programme.

A study by The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - found that more than 40 of the threatened structures are already proposed for reuse as part of active travel routes, reopened railways or heritage line extensions, or have identified potential to play such roles in the future.

In April, Transport Minister Baroness Vere told the House of Commons Transport Committee that Highways England had selected the structures for infilling on the basis of a “risk assessment carried out by its expert engineers”. In subsequent media statements, the company insisted that “Infill or demolition is only considered on structures that are unsafe”.

But, following controversy over the programme, Highways England now states that the number of bridges proposed for infilling has been cut to 69, prompting campaigners to question how the condition of 47 allegedly “unsafe” structures had suddenly improved without intervention.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: “We’ve made clear from the outset that Highways England’s actions are unjustified, disproportionate and prejudicial to the many community groups and stakeholders who have use for these assets as part of sustainable transport projects.

“Whilst welcome on the face of it, this apparent 40% reduction in the number of at-risk structures exposes the deceit Highways England has been peddling for the past five months in persistently claiming that these bridges are a threat to public safety and have to be infilled. That clearly wasn’t true, so how can we trust their judgement about the remaining 69?

“They continue to abuse Permitted Development orders to force through schemes that are totally unwarranted, impose a significant burden on the taxpayer, undermine democratic scrutiny and place immovable obstacles in the way of a better future.”

The company has informed 19 local councils that 34 bridges are “an ongoing and increasing risk to public safety” and infilling will be carried out under Permitted Development powers “to prevent an emergency arising”. This circumvents the need for planning permission.

Amongst this collection is an isolated bridge engineered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel near Saltash, Cornwall, which carries a narrow grassed track between two fields, and another at Wells, Somerset, which was claimed to be in a "deteriorating condition" until Highways England's engineer admitted that a programme of repairs had been completed ten months earlier. The future of these two structures remains uncertain.

Many councils have challenged the use of Permitted Development orders as they only facilitate temporary works in situations presenting a serious threat of death or injury. Infilling is intended to be permanent and no evidence of any emergencies has been provided.

"This all serves to demonstrate industrial-scale dishonesty", asserts Matt Skidmore, also a member of The HRE Group. "Infilling is not the response to an impending collapse - these projects take months of planning - but Highways England has invented a distorted reality to justify them in the face of criticism.

"The firm recently infilled a bridge in Cumbria that was needed for a connection between two heritage lines. When the council challenged them about it, they claimed they were acting to prevent an emergency. The structure was fine, carried a minor road with very little traffic, had a capacity of 17 tonnes and £5,000 of repointing would have increased that to 40 tonnes. And all that had been known for 23 years! But they put the structure beyond use for £124,000.

"Highways England has proven itself to be a wholly disreputable custodian of the nation's great railway heritage and its responsibilities should be transferred to an organisation that engages properly with local communities. These structures are national assets and need to be managed accordingly."

Highways England has refused to release a list of the 69 structures still threatened with infilling. Campaigners point out that stakeholders are now unable to make representations about bridges and tunnels they have an interest in.

The HRE Group remains sceptical about the new figure and believes the 47 reprieved structures have simply been transferred to a "hidden hit-list" which will be progressed when the remaining bridges have been infilled. "We already know of three structures on it", says Bickerdike.

The Group has written to Baroness Vere asking for an independent review of Highways England's infilling and demolition programme.

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## **Attachments**

Great MusgraveInfilled©TheHREGroup: Highways England recently infilled a bridge in Cumbria which was needed for a connection between two heritage railways.

Great Musgrave©TheHREGroup: The attractive masonry structure before it was infilled.

BrunelEast©TheHREGroup: Highways England claimed that this bridge near Saltash was going to be infilled “to prevent an emergency arising”.

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

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

OriginalHighwaysEnglandList(11Dec2020): Highways England’s original spreadsheet of 134 structures earmarked for infilling or demolition.

BaronessVere(17June2021): The HRE Group’s letter to Baroness Vere of 17 June 2021.

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

(Link) [https://youtu.be/i\\_JUNXUPkFQ](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**

Media enquiries: [thehregroup@forgottenrelics.org](mailto:thehregroup@forgottenrelics.org)

Twitter: @theHREgroup

Facebook: @theHREgroup

### **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 3,100 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.

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](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1_9GtFIDW-QuYPvp8vBcSUD4gH9cOMdZt)

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.