

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 29th June 2021

Highways England slammed over bridge “preservation” claim

Campaigners have expressed their disbelief after Highways England claimed to have “preserved” a Victorian railway bridge by burying it within hundreds of tonnes of aggregate and concrete.

The state-owned roads company is custodian of the Historical Railways Estate of 3,100 disused structures on behalf of the Department for Transport. Dozens of its bridges and tunnels are earmarked for infilling or demolition over the next five years as part of an asset management programme, despite many of them being needed for proposed cycle routes, reopened railways or heritage line extensions.

Great Musgrave bridge in Cumbria spanned a five-mile section of trackbed which the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways intend to restore, uniting their operations to create an 11-mile tourist line between Appleby and Kirkby Stephen. But their plans have been thrown into doubt after Highways England compacted aggregate around the structure and filled the arch with concrete. Only its parapets are now visible.

In a statement, a Highways England director claimed that “Through our work we have preserved the structure”.

A report published by The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - found that there was no engineering, public safety or financial justification for the infilling scheme. Highways England’s own inspection reports recorded the bridge as being in fair condition, presenting no significant public safety risk, a low likelihood of any problems occurring, and no action was required.

Although a technical assessment in 1998 had rated the structure as strong enough only to carry 17 tonnes, £5K of repointing work would have increased its capacity to 40 tonnes. Infilling cost £124K. The narrow road crossing the bridge is very lightly used and traffic is constrained by a nearby 18-tonne weight restriction, two low railway bridges, three humped crossings of the River Eden and several sharp bends.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: “The evidence demonstrates that the bridge was in good order, showing no signs of overloading. It had a few minor defects like any other 160-year-old structure, but nothing that warranted any more than modest repair.

“What happened at Great Musgrave was opportunistic work to get rid of what Highways England saw as a liability, empowered by Eden District Council telling them that they didn’t require planning permission. But the company didn’t recognise - and probably didn’t care - that the bridge was viewed as an asset by the two railways.

“As we meet our obligation to develop more sustainable transport routes, the value of the UK’s disused railway network increases in value. But Highways England continues to view the Historical Railways Estate as a millstone around its neck. That culture must be challenged and changed.”

Mike Thompson, Project Manager for the Stainmore Railway Company, said: “It’s been a kick in the teeth for us. We knew nothing about the infilling until after the work had started. Highways England consulted their partners in Sustrans and the Railway Heritage Trust - who have no interest in the route and therefore expressed no objections - but they made no contact with the two organisations who had known and longstanding intentions to reuse the bridge.

“They’ve told the media - but not us - that they will remove the infill free-of-charge if our reconnection plan moves forward. That would burden the taxpayer with another huge bill. And how would we enforce this pledge when the managers who’ve made it have moved on to other things?

“This work was unwarranted and destructive. Why didn’t they carry out the repairs recommended by their inspector? And to suggest that they have ‘preserved’ the bridge just adds insult to injury. They are completely out of touch. Anyone involved in the care of historic buildings and structures would only recognise this as an act of vandalism.”

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Attachments

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

GreatMusgraveSouth©TheHREGroup: Foamed concrete oozes from the arch on the south side of the structure.

GreatMusgraveDelivery©TheHREGroup: Contractor AmcoGiffen takes delivery of another load of aggregate.

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

GreatMusgraveMap©TheHREGroup: A map showing the bridge in the context of constraints on the local road network.

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

GreatMusgraveBridge(June2021)(PDF): The HRE Group’s report on the infilling of the bridge.

HighwaysEnglandStatement(PDF): The statement issued by Highways England describing their work as ‘preservation’.

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>`

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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 3,100 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

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.