

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 25 October 2021

Locals furious as bridge scheme prompts unauthorised tree-felling

National Highways “came in like a tornado”, according to a landowner, when its contractor entered their property and cut down trees without permission to make way for a bridge demolition.

The state-owned roads company manages 3,100 disused railway structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. An ongoing programme of major works will see 68 of them put beyond use, but campaigners believe hundreds more are under longer-term threat. The Government paused the schemes following the controversial infilling of a bridge in Cumbria over the summer, but works are expected to resume within weeks.

At Toller Porcorum in Dorset, the disused railway bridge over Barrowland Lane is needed for the development of a narrow-gauge railway and cycle route connecting Maiden Newton with Bridport. Building a new structure to modern standards would not be viable. However the brickwork is in poor condition following years of neglect and National Highways now intends to demolish the bridge.

On 8 October, the company told its newly-formed Stakeholder Advisory Forum that it wants to lift the nationwide pause and remove the structure - at a cost of around £175K - although it is thought that Ministerial approval would be needed. Demolition would allow Dorset Council to progress an alternative ‘trailway’ proposal along the old line, but the link to Barrowland Lane does not have planning permission or meet cycling infrastructure design standards.

Last week, National Highways’ contractor, AmcoGiffen, arrived on site and entered the property of three landowners, creating an access route up to the former trackbed, felling trees and disposing of the timber. The landowners had not been notified of the work or given their consent for it.

“It’s outrageous - they came in like a tornado, removing everything in their path”, said one of the landowners who does not wish to be identified. “It was wild and unspoiled - full of lovely things - but they’ve cleared all the vegetation and trees from around the bridge. The chippings were spread over the embankment, but they’ve now washed into the road drains which have blocked, so there’s a massive flood there at the moment.

“The contractor let slip that they were asked to do this because there is a bat survey about to happen for the demolition and they couldn’t take the risk that there were bats roosting in the trees. That would stop the job.

“People come from all over to see the bridge and it would make sense for the cycle path to go across it. Dropping down a slope onto the road would be dangerous for walkers and cyclists

because of the sharp bend. But that's the council's idea - they've not consulted anyone locally about it."

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - accuses National Highways of "habitually acting like a bully".

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the Group, said: "They seem to hold landowners in contempt; we've heard similar stories from elsewhere. The company benefits from reserved access rights at its legacy structures, but doesn't understand the concept of 'courtesy' - notifying people about intended work and the nature of it. They don't seek permission.

"With its infilling and demolition programme currently paused, National Highways has adopted a scorched-earth policy of destroying habitats to ensure there are no ecological barriers to projects resuming quickly when government gives the green light. These are disreputable acts by a company determined to pursue its destructive agenda come what may.

"National Highways' recent PR efforts to turn around its reputation in managing these structures are persistently undermined by its own actions. Broader social responsibilities are disregarded. Ministers should reflect on whether it is in their political interests to sanction work that prevents good people doing positive things for their community."

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Attachments

TollerBridge©MichaelHancock: The bridge at Toller Porcorum is earmarked for demolition as part of National Highways' controversial infilling and demolition programme. (Credit: Michael Hancock)

TollerTrackbed©NigelEwens: Trees have been felled on the former railway trackbed without permission from the landowners. (Credit: Nigel Ewens)

TollerTrees©RichardSims: National Highways' contractor cut down trees and created an access route up the former railway embankment. (Credit: Richard Sims)

TollerFlood©RichardSims: A van gets stuck in floodwater after a deluge washed the scattered tree debris into the road drain. (Credit: Richard Sims)

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

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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More information on the Bridport Renewal Area is available via www.bridportrenewal.org.uk

Notes for editors

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE) is owned by the Department for Transport (DfT) and managed on its behalf by National Highways (NH). NH 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.

National Highways 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 30 September 2013.

In 2020, National Highways 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 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 the broader threat to HRE structures - including those that have failed assessments - is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1LVvKXUS_a66LGzG8mPNLZaRpz2hw3ioe

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 National Highways 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.