

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 23 November 2021

Engineers reject National Highways' bridge infilling claims

Experienced civil engineers have dismissed National Highways' assertion that a historic railway bridge in East Sussex needs to be infilled because its condition is now "dangerous".

The Victorian structure on Church Road in Barcombe stands within a conservation area and spans an established wildlife corridor. It is one of 68 legacy bridges earmarked for infilling or demolition by the state-owned roads company as part of its management of the Department for Transport's Historical Railways Estate.

The Barcombe infilling is being pushed through under Permitted Development powers that only apply in emergency situations presenting a serious threat of death or injury. In an email to Lewes District Council on 23 September, National Highways claimed that "the bridge is now in a dangerous condition, with fractures opening - simply ignoring the matter as Lewes has been doing is not safe." The company went on to suggest that "we will likely need to close the road if deterioration carries on as it is".

A £176K contract for the structure's infilling was awarded to AmcoGiffen on 12 August, together with a second contract for £70K of associated repairs, despite National Highways' works programme being put on hold by Government following the controversial infilling of a bridge at Great Musgrave, Cumbria, which critics condemned as "cultural vandalism".

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - provided a respected bridge engineer with a substantial archive of inspection, assessment and feasibility reports about Church Road bridge - sourced from National Highways - and asked for an evaluation of the structure's condition, the threat it poses and required works. The fractures are known to date back at least 27 years.

Alan Hayward is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering and has more than 50 years' experience in the design, construction and assessment of bridges. He co-founded Cass Hayward Consulting Engineers in 1983 and the company has since earned a reputation as railway bridge specialists.

"I am appalled that an 'emergency' has been declared by National Highways", says Alan. "I would have expected to learn of reasoned engineering considerations - backed up by technical calculations - to demonstrate that the bridge could collapse. But the inspection reports appear to concentrate on cracking of the brick wing walls to the exclusion of vital aspects such as structural stability affecting safety of the bridge and the public.

"Yes, remedial works are required in the form of brickwork repairs and addition of kerbs to contain vehicles from using the grass verges, but the bridge is not in a critical state in my

view. Remedial works would still be needed if the bridge was to be infilled. My initial view is that appropriate repairs could be effected within the £70K cost allocated to minor works.”

A second team of civil engineers, whose opinion was requested by local campaigners, agreed with Mr Hayward’s view. Mark Whitby of Whitby Wood Ltd said: “At some point in time, the North West, North East and South East wing walls have detached from the abutments when vertical cracks formed in the structures, relieving the force on the abutments.

“Movement in bridge structures induced by the settlement of inadequately founded wing walls is not uncommon.

“We are confident that we could demonstrate that infilling the bridge will not improve its condition and moreover that there is no immediate risk that the structure may collapse.”

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: “At Great Musgrave, National Highways claimed that a masonry arch ‘was being overloaded and that works were required to prevent the failure of the bridge and avert a collapse’. In reality, it had a handful of minor defects requiring modest repairs, with no evidence of overloading. Now they’re intending to repeat the same disproportionate act at Barcombe.

“The risks associated with these structures are being grossly overstated by National Highways, driven either by a determination to force through its destructive policy of liability reduction by frightening planners into accepting unwarranted infill schemes, or by a lack of insight and experience of Victorian structures.

“This situation cannot continue and Government must prevent any further loss of our outstanding railway heritage by transferring responsibility for the Historical Railways Estate to a body willing to manage it in an appropriate manner.”

--ENDS--

Attachments

BarcombeCommunity©TheHREGroup: Members of the local community gather at the bridge to protest against National Highways’ infilling proposal. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeBridge©TheHREGroup: The bridge at Barcombe, which has a weight limit of 20 tonnes, carries a minor road over the former Lewes-East Grinstead railway. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeWingWalls©TheHREGroup: Cracks developed in three of the bridge’s wing walls at some time prior to 1994. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeParapets©TheHREGroup: The bridge’s parapets are cracked at all four corners of the span. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Great Musgrave©TheHREGroup: A masonry arch bridge with a handful of minor defects was infilled by National Highways in May/June. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

Supporting Documents (PDF): Mr Hayward's appraisal of the bridge's condition; Mr Whitby's team's appraisal of the bridge's condition; National Highways' email to Lewes District Council; the contracts awarded by National Highways for works on Barcombe bridge; permitted development letters sent from National Highways to Lewes District Council's planning team.

To link to Forgotten Relics' video report about Barcombe bridge or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Y7kltVY7I8Y>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Y7kltVY7I8Y" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

To link to Paul and Rebecca Whitewick's video about Barcombe bridge or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/1uSw9ZzZkpE>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/1uSw9ZzZkpE" 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 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 with a headline value of £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.

In January 2021, it was revealed that 134 structures are at risk of demolition or infilling. These 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).

National Highways now claims that only 68 structures will be infilled or demolished in the short term, but hundreds remain at risk in the longer term.

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.

Designed by civil engineer Frederick Banister, the bridge on Church Road, Barcombe was built in the early 1880s as part of a line connecting Lewes and East Grinstead. The structure carries a narrow, minor road and is assessed as having a capacity of 24 tonnes. A weight restriction prohibits vehicles over 20 tonnes from using it, helping to keep unsuitable traffic out of the village. The brick parapets and wingwalls have been subject to movement for many years, with cracks recorded as long ago as 1994.

But instead of carrying out appropriate repairs, National Highways intends to bury the Victorian feat within an estimated 1,800 tonnes of aggregate and concrete. The design has already been completed and a contract for the work has been awarded to AmcoGiffen. There is anger that the scheme is being progressed under Permitted Development powers which leaves objectors without a voice and circumvents any democratic scrutiny of the historical, ecological and environmental impacts.