



PRESS RELEASE: Monday 13 December 2021

## **“Underhand” bridge works progressed despite Government’s infill pause**

National Highways awarded 14 contracts in five weeks as preparatory works gather pace to infill or demolish dozens of Victorian bridges, despite Ministers pausing the schemes in July.

The state-owned roads company manages more than 3,100 disused railway structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. A controversial plan to put 134 bridges and tunnels beyond future use was revealed in January, but the Government called a halt after a structure in Cumbria was infilled, jeopardising the reconnection of two heritage railways. The programme is expected to resume in the next few weeks, with 68 structures under immediate threat.

According to The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - tree felling, drainage, access and ecology works have been authorised at 14 sites from Dorset to East Lothian. The contracts were awarded between 21 September and 25 October, with a total value of £192K.

One of the affected structures is needed for an extension of the Watercress Way, a 27-mile walking route to the north and east of Winchester. The preparatory works for infilling - valued at £5,246 - involve clearing vegetation within the footprint of the proposed scheme.

£55,371 has been committed to drainage works at two bridges between Fairford and Lechlade-on-Thames in Gloucestershire, ahead of proposed infill projects. The old railway spanned by the structures is the focus of a longstanding aspiration to reopen it as a cycle route.

Cracks were filled to prevent bats roosting in a structure located within a conservation area at Barcombe, East Sussex, at a cost of £14,096. A vigorous community campaign has been launched to resist an infill scheme which would block an established wildlife corridor. Contracts worth £246K have also been awarded for the main works.

Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser, said: “Passers-by who saw contractors on site were told they were conducting a bat survey - only to find bat exclusion measures had been installed on the bridge immediately after. It seems underhand, dishonourable and to take communities for fools, giving false reassurance that the scheme is paused whilst charging ahead with the removal of wildlife and habitat from sites.”

In Yorkshire, trees have been felled as part of a £9,463 works package to make way for the infilling of a large bridge over the former Hull & Barnsley Railway at Little Smeaton. A 10-metre wide corridor adjacent to the structure has been stripped of vegetation. It is estimated that around 3,000 tonnes of aggregate and concrete would be needed to complete the scheme.

Drainage work costing £17,123 has taken place at an ornate cast iron bridge near Wakefield - also earmarked for infilling - which has “turned the old line into a canal”, according to one local.

Utility investigations and tree felling have been completed on the site of a bridge demolition project in Dorset. Loss of the structure would effectively scupper plans to construct a narrow gauge railway along the former Maiden Newton-Bridport branch line. The works were priced at £36,758. On 11 August, three weeks after Government halted National Highways' works programme, the company's engineer told a Dorset Council official that "We are proceeding with all of the background works as if [the demolition] were continuing".

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: "The engineer's comment reflects a determination within National Highways to push ahead with its damaging schemes. The awarding of these contracts demonstrates a clear direction of travel and undermines the Ministers' intervention.

"The company is not sensitive to its broader social obligations around heritage, ecology and the environment. Instead it spends taxpayers' money cutting a swathe through nature's reclamation of disused railways, destroying habitats for schemes that have supposedly not been confirmed. So why not wait until they are? The so-called pause is just a smoke and mirrors."

National Highways recently established a Stakeholder Advisory Forum to review its major projects and support the development of strategy around its management of the Historical Railways Estate. But The HRE Group points out that five of its nine members are from National Highways and its client, the Department for Transport, whilst two others receive funding or technical support from NH. There is currently no heritage rail, environmental or ecological representation.

"We have low expectations of the Stakeholder Advisory Forum", asserts Graeme Bickerdike. "The real test will come when a scheme like Barcombe is put forward. Infilling is a poor engineering solution which will damage a sensitive landscape. Locals value the structure as a community asset, but National Highways shows no signs of engaging with these issues."

Minutes from the Forum's first and only meeting indicate that just two of the 14 structures affected by the preparatory work contracts have so far been reviewed and no conclusions were drawn.

On 29 November, in response to a Parliamentary question from Baroness Randerson, Roads Minister Baroness Vere said: "No decision has yet been taken as to when the pause to infilling work on the Historical Railways Estate might end."

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## **Attachments**

LittleSmeaton©TheHREGroup: Trees have been felled and vegetation cleared at a bridge infilling site at Little Smeaton, North Yorkshire. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ItchenStoke©TheHREGroup: The route of a proposed extension to the Watercress Way near Winchester will be blocked by an infill scheme. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Barcombe©TheHREGroup: A community campaign is seeking to prevent the infilling of a bridge over an established wildlife corridor in East Sussex. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Wakefield©TheHREGroup: The old railway spanned by an ornate cast iron bridge now resembles a canal after National Highways carried out drainage works. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Dorset©RichardSims: Trees were cut down at a bridge demolition site in Dorset without landowners being notified or granting consent. The arisings were washed into road drains, causing flooding. (Credit: Richard Sims)

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): the email exchanged between a National Highways engineer and a Dorset Council official; National Highways current HRE Major Works programme, identifying structures earmarked for infill or demolition; contractual documents exchanged between National Highways and its contractors.

To link to Forgotten Relics' video report about National Highways' infilling and demolition programme or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Y7kltVY7l8Y>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Y7kltVY7l8Y" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

### Contact details

Media enquiries: [campaign@thehregroup.org](mailto:campaign@thehregroup.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 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](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.

14 structures are affected by the contracted preparatory works. These are:

WTD/1 (near Glasgow)	£7,366	AGB/3 & AGB/5 (East Lothian)	£7,313
BYS/477 (near Lowestoft)	£9,627	AIW/78 (near Winchester)	£5,246
AKC/35 (Northumberland)	£13,348	BRP/8 (Dorset)	£36,758
HBR3/124 (Little Smeaton)	£9,463	SNO/4 (near Wakefield)	£17,123
END/709 (Kent)	£9,472	FFD/26 & FFD/28 (Gloucs)	£55,371
HGG2/1 (Barcombe)	£14,096	WMC/1329 (Norfolk)	£6,654

Baroness Vere's full Parliamentary response is available via this link...

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-11-24/hl4388>