

PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 22 December 2021

Infill threat lifted from historic bridge

Campaigners have welcomed National Highways' commitment to relieve a historic railway bridge in East Sussex following robust opposition from the community and local council.

Church Road bridge in Barcombe was one of 68 Victorian structures 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. All works were paused by the Government in July following the controversial infilling of a masonry arch at Great Musgrave, Cumbria, which was needed for a link between two heritage railways.

Carrying a minor road, Barcombe's bridge was built in the early 1880s as part of a line connecting Lewes and East Grinstead. Its 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 had intended to bury the structure within an estimated 1,800 tonnes of aggregate and concrete. This would have resulted in the loss of an asset within the village's conservation area and blocked a wildlife corridor.

In October, 176 residents sent a letter to National Highways expressing their opposition to infilling, whilst Lewes District Council wrote to Transport Secretary Grant Shapps demanding the "full and unequivocal cessation" of the infill policy.

The Council met officials from National Highways and East Sussex County Council on 18 November to discuss the bridge's condition, traffic usage and ecological issues. Yesterday (21 December), in an unexpected move, the company told stakeholders "We do not intend to infill this structure", informing them that "All three organisations are working in partnership to update our knowledge of the use of [the] structure which will inform future options for ensuring the safety of the bridge for the public".

Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser, said: "We're obviously delighted to hear that National Highways has listened to the views of residents and councillors, heard the strength of feeling locally and lifted the infill threat. From the outset, this was an ill-conceived scheme reflecting a lack of understanding as to the environmental and ecological damage it would have inflicted on a sensitive habitat and its wildlife.

"We now need to ensure that the bridge is repaired sympathetically - reflecting its position within our conservation area as a valued heritage asset - and prevent any reduction in the 20-tonne weight limit currently imposed on vehicles using it. The needs of our farming community must be recognised and we remind council officers that National Highways has an obligation to deliver a capacity of 24 tonnes from this structure. That obligation must be enforced to avert any adverse impact."

In a social media post, Councillor Zoe Nicholson, leader of Lewes District Council, said: "I think we have made some progress which is that at least infill is now off the table. There is still a way off from being able to determine what the best solution is for the wildlife corridor, the community and bridge users, including local farmers. I was able to be clear that infill is not an option that we at the Council would support."

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - cautiously welcomed the apparent change of approach at Barcombe.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the Group, said: "Over the past few months, National Highways has established its Stakeholder Advisory Forum and developed a draft procedure for determining the most appropriate maintenance option for each structure. Meanwhile, Sustrans has evaluated the active travel potential of the structures currently at risk from infill or demolition. Alongside the reprieve for Barcombe, these represent substantive steps in a better direction and we look forward to many other bridges being granted a stay of execution as a result.

"Unfortunately the cultural vandalism at Great Musgrave will continue to hang like a millstone around National Highways' neck until it does the right thing and removes the infill there. We urge the company to do so soon. There are however early signs that 2022 could see NH adopt a more positive and collaborative approach to the Historical Railways Estate. These are national assets and we need to derive the greatest possible benefit from them."

--ENDS--

Attachments

BarcombeProtestors©TheHREGroup: Members of the community gather on Barcombe bridge to protest about National Highways' infilling scheme. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeSigns©HazelFellRayner: Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser, with two of the many signs that have appeared recently around Barcombe. (Credit: Hazel Fell Rayner)

BarcombeBridge©TheHREGroup: The bridge carrying Church Road at Barcombe was built in the 1880s as part of a railway connecting Lewes and East Grinstead. (Credit: The HRE Group)

BarcombeLimit©TheHREGroup: Church Road bridge is used by farm traffic so campaigners say they will oppose any reduction in the current 20-tonne weight limit. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): the letter sent by National Highways to stakeholders including the local campaign group; Councillor Zoe Nicholson's Facebook post.

To link to Forgotten Relics' video report about Barcombe bridge 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>`

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.