

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 17 January 2022

Anger as bridge fencing blocks wildlife corridor

Residents of an Oxfordshire village are up in arms after “ugly” steel fencing was erected around a historic railway bridge, blocking a wildlife corridor and forcing deer onto a busy road.

The structure over Cuddesdon Road in Horspath was occupied by members of the community last February after contractors, appointed by National Highways, arrived unexpectedly and started to remove its parapets ahead of an expected full demolition. Villagers were angry about a lack of consultation over the future of the valued heritage asset which acts as a traffic calming measure and is used by animals to reach a nearby nature reserve.

The bridge has since been the focus of a repair scheme; however, as part of the works, the local Parish Council asked National Highways to fence-off a substantial area around the structure - and beneath another bridge nearby - following a handful of reports about drug-taking. The company offered to grant a licence so members of the community could legitimately access and use the structure - an approach that often deters anti-social behaviour - but then agreed to install the fencing. One resident described it as “like Colditz”.

Locals have since reported deer running into the road below the bridge and panicking when they cannot find a way back onto the old railway which they use as a migration, dispersal and foraging route. Several collisions have narrowly been averted.

A petition has been set up to “save Horspath’s wildlife corridor”, describing how animals are “dangerously crossing the road, exposing themselves, residents, pedestrians and drivers to a high risk of accidents.” By Monday morning, it had been signed by 614 people.

Daniel Kidd, one of the petition’s supporters, said: “There has been an increase of wild animals being seen in places they usually wouldn’t venture. If the wildlife corridor is not accessible this will cause needless death to many animals and potentially accident and injury for the people who encounter them.”

Angela Julian said: “I am concerned that insufficient thought was given to the role of [the] bridge as an important wildlife corridor linking Shotover with the fields beyond... The very industrial looking high security fence that was erected is not in keeping with the character of this rural village.”

Catherine Porter said: “Lovely restoration work on our beautiful bridge. Horrible that animals are now trapped behind the ugly new fence. Save our wildlife sanctuary!”

Others described the fencing as “misguided”, “thoughtless” and “grossly unfair”.

Last week The HRE Group, which is campaigning against National Highways' programme of infilling and demolishing legacy rail structures, wrote to Baroness Vere, the Minister responsible, pointing out that "Dismantled railways are often sensitive in terms of habitat and many have become important wildlife transit routes. Academic studies have demonstrated the negative impacts associated with blocking these corridors..."

Hazel Fell Rayner, who has launched a petition seeking independent ecological studies of the routes affected by National Highways' works, said: "What's happened at Horspath is brutal - evicting wildlife in this way shows a complete lack of understanding or regard for sensitive ecosystems.

"Even if this work was requested by the Parish Council, as a state-owned company acting as custodians of 3,000+ structures on dismantled railways, National Highways should know better than anyone the importance of maintaining the continuity of these corridors for wildlife and should have therefore refused to erect the fences. It was outside its normal remit to do so.

"This suggests a need for re-education about ecology and enhanced scrutiny of the company's activities. Their social responsibilities extend beyond engineering, but they persistently demonstrate ignorance or a refusal to acknowledge them. This culture must change."

--ENDS--

Petitions about wildlife corridors on dismantled railways

Horspath: <https://www.change.org/p/horspath-residents-save-horspath-s-wildlife-corridor>

National: <https://www.change.org/protect-railway-wildlife-corridors>

Attachments

HorspathProtest©SimonLogan: Members of the community occupied the structure last February, protesting about the threat of demolition. (Credit: Simon Logan)

HorspathFencing(1)©TheHREGroup: A substantial area to the east of Cuddesdon Road bridge has been fenced off, blocking access to the wildlife corridor. (Credit: The HRE Group)

HorspathFencing(2)©TheHREGroup: Villagers have branded the fencing as "like Colditz" and out of character for Horspath. (Credit: The HRE Group)

HorspathFencing(3)©TheHREGroup: The fenced-off embankment at the west side of the bridge. (Credit: The HRE Group)

HorspathMuntjac: A muntjac tries to breach the fence to access the wildlife corridor.

HorspathBridge: Steel fencing has also been installed below another bridge in the village.

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The HRE Group's letter to Baroness Vere.

To link to Forgotten Relics' video report about National Highways' infilling and demolition programme 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>`

Contact details

Media enquiries: 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

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.