



PRESS RELEASE: Monday 24 January 2022

Campaigners condemn “crass” bridge request

When National Highways buried an elegant stone arch bridge in a thousand tonnes of aggregate and concrete, it tore up longstanding plans to establish a link between two heritage railways in Cumbria’s Eden Valley.

The work, carried out last May and June at Great Musgrave, was widely condemned as cultural vandalism and the subsequent outcry prompted Government to put on hold dozens of similar projects. It was pushed through under powers that only last 12 months by default and apply in emergency situations presenting a threat of death or injury.

If the state-owned roads company wishes to retain the infill permanently, the local authority has insisted that planning permission must be obtained. Now, in a move described by campaigners as demonstrating “a bizarre lack of judgement”, the engineer responsible for the scheme has asked the two railways to assist with the planning application by providing detailed information on the status of their plans to relay the line between them.

“We put our heart and soul into the railway”, says Mike Thompson, Project Manager for the Stainmore Railway Company, “and, as we expand, it will increasingly deliver economic benefits to the area. We’ve been planning a link from Warcop to Kirkby Stephen for 25 years. Great Musgrave bridge is a critical piece of infrastructure for us and infilling was a kick in the teeth. It came out of the blue and has made the task of reconnection much more difficult, increasing the costs involved unsustainably.

“We’ve been gearing up to oppose the planning application; then a letter arrived from National Highways, asking for details about our future plans - replacement structures, construction phases, land acquisition, fundraising, liability transfers and Parliamentary powers. I couldn’t believe what I was reading: they’ve taken a wrecking ball to our aspirations and they’re now seeking our help to justify their destructive actions.

“We’ve written a polite letter back, but we’re not appointing National Highways to represent our views to the local authority or providing them with ammunition to use against us. If the planning team needs to understand how we intend to reopen the line, we’re perfectly capable of telling them ourselves. But this application is specifically about the bridge and its infill, not the railway. They’re trying to muddy the waters by conflating two separate issues.”

Great Musgrave bridge was in good condition, with an estimated £20K of repairs needed to a handful of minor defects. The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - accuse National Highways of “contriving an alternative reality” to make the case for infilling, misrepresenting the safety implications.

According to the company, bringing the structure back into use for rail could now cost as much as £431K, on top of the £124K spent on infilling. In the face of overwhelming criticism, the company made a public commitment to remove the material when it is the last obstruction to the railways' reconnection, but this is neither legally binding nor enforceable.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: "In these circumstances, seeking information from the two railways was crass and inexplicable. It shows a bizarre lack of judgement. Has National Highways learned nothing from a year of reputational damage through its questionable management of the Historical Railways Estate?"

"Quite clearly, the time for dialogue with the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways was in the months *before* infilling, to understand the damage it would inflict on their long-term plans. The company should be removing the infill voluntarily as a sign of positive intent, otherwise it will hang around their neck like a millstone - a monument to their failings."

The planning application has to be submitted by 23 May and consultants began work on it in August. "We will object in the strongest terms", says Mike Thompson, "and we hope all those who value our great railway heritage will join us. They cannot be allowed to get away with such an appalling act."

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Attachments

Great Musgrave©TheHREGroup: Great Musgrave bridge sat comfortably in the Cumbrian landscape between Warcop and Kirkby Stephen. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Great MusgraveInfilled©TheHREGroup: The structure's infilling caused many engineers to express shame and embarrassment at National Highways' actions. (Credit: The HRE Group)

KirkbyStephenEast©TheHREGroup: The Stainmore Railway Company has established its base at Kirkby Stephen East station. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Warcop©TheHREGroup: The longstanding aim of the Stainmore Railway Company is to establish a connection with the Eden Valley Railway at Warcop. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

SupportingDocuments(PDF): National Highways' letter to the Stainmore Railway Company; NH's costing for the rehabilitation of Great Musgrave bridge.

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>

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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.