

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 1 February 2022

Bridge infill threat to ambitious greenway vision

Prospects for an active travel route connecting the former Yorkshire coalfields with the east coast will diminish if National Highways infills two legacy rail bridges along its route, campaigners have warned.

Fledgling plans to reopen the former Hull & Barnsley Railway to benefit the region's post-mining regeneration emerged late last year. The line was constructed in the 1880s to take coal from the pits of West and South Yorkshire to a new dock in Hull, which was built as part of the same scheme. Much of the route closed in 1959.

The Coal to Coast Greenway is the vision of Keith Taylor who recognised the benefits of walking and cycling during his time living in Devon, where the network is already extensive and delivers a considerable boost to the local economy.

"These routes are good for people's mental and physical wellbeing; they're good for the environment and they're good for tourism", says Keith. "A lot of Yorkshire's traditional industries have died out and have to be replaced with something. Why not tourism? It would create opportunities for former mining communities, with bed and breakfasts, camp sites, cafes and restaurants along the line."

But the greenway proposal - which already faces several significant obstacles - is further threatened by National Highways' plans to bury two old railway bridges at Little Smeaton, near Selby, in thousands of tonnes of aggregate and concrete.

"It's insane; it's short-sighted", says Keith. "They haven't really moved on from the days of Dr Beeching. They don't realise what they've got and don't seem to have any vision for what this could be.

"As a nation, we seem to have lost our confidence and ambition. The bridges will cost more money to infill than repair so we'll do all we can to stop it from happening."

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate of more than 3,100 bridges, viaducts and tunnels on the Department for Transport's behalf. Last year much of its major works programme was put on hold by Government following the infilling of a masonry arched bridge at Great Musgrave in Cumbria, which was needed for a link between two heritage railways. Engineers and politicians condemned the act as cultural vandalism.

Many of the old colliery sites served by the Hull & Barnsley Railway have been transformed into country parks and nature reserves. These could be linked by the proposed active travel route to form a 'green trail'.

According to a desktop study by The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - the structures at Little Smeaton span a viable wildlife corridor and are located within a section of dismantled railway designated on the Priority Habitat Inventory. But last autumn, National Highways removed vegetation and felled trees around one of the bridges, clearing the footprint of its proposed infill scheme.

Hazel Fell Rayner, who has launched a petition seeking independent ecological studies of the corridors affected by the infilling and demolition programme, said: "As intrinsically connected routes that have been reclaimed by nature, Britain's dismantled railways now provide crucial opportunities for biodiversity recovery: we have a duty to recognise their importance for wildlife migration, dispersal and foraging, and preserve these special places.

"Infilling the larger bridge at Little Smeaton would involve around 3,000 tonnes of quarried material being transported to site and compacted around the structure, blocking the corridor and forcing animals onto the road. A further 2,000 tonnes could be needed at the other bridge.

"From every environmental perspective, these are brutal asset management solutions and suggest a culture rooted in the last century. Sympathetic repair is much more sustainable, less costly and would preserve these structures as assets for the future."

The petition for ecology studies can be signed at change.org/protect-railway-wildlife-corridors

National Highways has developed a new procedure which, if given Ministerial approval, will be used to review future works at 69 legacy structures currently threatened with infilling or demolition, including the pair at Little Smeaton.

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Attachments

LittleSmeatonCorridor©TheHREGroup: Ambitious plans for an active travel route along the former Hull & Barnsley Railway emerged late last year. (Credit: The HRE Group)

LittleSmeatonHabitat©TheHREGroup: National Highways has cleared habitat and mature trees from the footprint of its proposed infill scheme. (Credit: The HRE Group)

LittleSmeatonSecondBridge©TheHREGroup: A second bridge near Little Smeaton is also earmarked for infilling by National Highways. (Credit: The HRE Group)

LittleSmeatonKeithTaylor©TheHREGroup: The proposed Coal to Coast Greenway was conceived by Keith Taylor who lives close to the old railway. (Credit: The HRE Group)

LittleSmeatonEngineer©TheHREGroup: The bridge at Little Smeaton forms part of the Department for Transport's Historical Railways Estate, managed by National Highways. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

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>`

The petition seeking ecological studies of the corridors spanned by under-threat bridges is available here:

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

Contact details

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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.