



PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 16 March 2022

Report reveals active travel potential of at-risk historic bridges

Campaigners have welcomed a report which identifies the potential walking and cycling value of 50 Victorian bridges earmarked for “destruction” by National Highways.

The state-owned roads company manages the Historical Railways Estate (HRE) of 3,200 structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. Last summer, the Government halted a major works programme which would have seen dozens of them infilled or demolished. The invention followed the controversial burial of a bridge at Great Musgrave, Cumbria, in a thousand tonnes of aggregate and concrete, despite it being needed for a link between two heritage railways.

In September, the DfT asked Sustrans - custodians of the National Cycle Network - to investigate the likely potential of 75 at-risk structures for future active travel schemes. It found that 26 have identifiable value for existing or planned routes, whilst 24 could prove useful for local networks as part of medium-term plans. The remainder are unlikely to find any walking or cycling function within the next ten years.

Amongst the structures recommended for retention is Stoke Road bridge on the edge of the South Downs National Park, intended for reuse within the Watercress Way. Hackney Bottom bridge in West Berkshire could be needed for a link between Newbury and Didcot, whilst Fenton bridge in East Lothian has value as part of a campaign to develop a path from Drem to Gullane.

Further investigations are recommended into the future of Gloucestershire’s Crows Castle bridge - spanning a proposed cycle route from Cheltenham to Bourton-on-the-Water - and Little Smeaton bridge in North Yorkshire which crosses the route of the recently conceived Coal-to-Coast Greenway, connecting Hull and Barnsley.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group which is campaigning against National Highways’ programme of infilling and demolishing legacy rail structures, said: “We thank the Sustrans team for their considerable efforts in compiling the report. It demonstrates that two-thirds of the under-threat Historical Railways Estate structures have potential significance as we increasingly recognise the importance of developing an extensive network of local and national active travel routes as an alternative to carbon-emitting forms of transport.

“It’s worth noting that the one-third of structures considered *unlikely* to have future value only reflects a ten-year time horizon. As the report states, ‘An argument could be made for all the structures that, one day, they may be useful so this assessment needs to be seen in that light.’

“What’s needed more broadly is a change of culture within National Highways and the Department for Transport whereby the Estate is, by default, managed as an asset, not a liability. In this context, the NH/DfT Protocol Agreement needs to be reframed.”

The findings of the Sustrans report will help to inform decision-making around maintenance work on National Highways’ railway bridges which, in future, will be subject to a new review process developed by the company, including input from its Stakeholder Advisory Forum. All infilling and demolition schemes will require Ministerial approval.

“Sustrans’ report is an essential and positive step”, says Graeme Bickerdike. “But when will these 75 structures also be evaluated for their heritage and ecological significance? At least one is in a conservation area; another spans a Site of Special Scientific Interest; most form crucial parts of established wildlife corridors. And what about possible railway reopenings and heritage line extensions?”

“We need a holistic understanding of the role historic bridges and tunnels can and do play in the 21st century before any decisions are made about their destruction.”

The bridge at Great Musgrave is soon expected to be the subject of a retrospective planning application. Its infilling was carried out under powers that only permit temporary works in emergency situations; however the bridge was in good condition, with only a handful of minor defects. Eden District Council, the Local Planning Authority, has told National Highways that it needs to obtain planning permission if the infill is to be retained beyond 23 May.

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Attachments

CyclingRoute©TheHREGroup: Cyclists approach an old railway bridge on a route through the New Forest. (Credit: The HRE Group)

StokeRoadBridge©TheHREGroup: Stoke Road bridge on the edge of the South Downs National Park is needed for a future phase of the Watercross Way. (Credit: The HRE Group)

HackneyBottomBridge©TheHREGroup: Hackney Bottom bridge in West Berkshire could play a role in a greenway connecting Newbury and Didcot. (Credit: The HRE Group)

FentonBridge©Simon Douglas: Fenton bridge has potential value for a cycle path campaign in East Lothian. (Credit: Simon Douglas)

CrowsCastleBridge©TheHREGroup: Crows Castle bridge spans a Site of Special Scientific Interest through which a cycle path is proposed between Cheltenham and Bourton-on-the-Water. (Credit: The HRE Group)

LittleSmeatonBridge©TheHREGroup: Two at-risk bridges at Little Smeaton, North Yorkshire, span the route of the fledgling Coal-to-Coast Greenway. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBridge©TheHREGroup: The infilling of Great Musgrave bridge in Cumbria prompted the Government to pause National Highways' infilling and demolition programme. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

Supporting Documents (PDF): Sustrans' report into the active travel value of 75 at-risk HRE structures; the NH/DfT Protocol Agreement

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>`

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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.