

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 26 April 2022

Engineers reject bridge infill “emergency”

Two experienced civil engineers have criticised the infilling of a historic railway bridge which its custodian claimed might fail and collapse.

Last year, the structure at Great Musgrave in Cumbria was buried in around 1,600 tonnes of aggregate and concrete despite being needed for a connection between two heritage railways. Inspection reports identified a small number of minor defects within the bridge’s arch which could have been repaired for around £20K. Instead National Highways - who manage the bridge for the Department for Transport - infilled it for £124K, blocking the route.

Planning officers from Eden District Council attempted to halt the work, but an engineer from the state-owned roads company told them that infilling was “required to prevent the failure of the bridge and avert a collapse”. National Highways pressed ahead under powers only applicable in emergency situations presenting a threat of death or injury, but these only last 12 months and the Council has since insisted that retrospective planning permission must be obtained.

The HRE Group - an alliance of heritage campaigners, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - provided copies of National Highways’ inspection and assessment reports to two civil engineers with considerable experience of looking after Victorian structures.

In the Sixties, Tony Freschini acted as resident engineer on the project to redevelop Euston Station and, between 1990 and 1992, supervised the refurbishment of the 24-span Ribbleshead Viaduct on the Settle & Carlisle Railway, helping to save the famous line from closure.

“I can’t imagine why anyone would infill Great Musgrave bridge”, he said. “The inspection reports make clear that there was really nothing wrong with it.

“Some of the minor defects may have occurred when the bridge was built in the 1860s. A few of the stone blocks had become loose over time, but repointing the open joints would have kept them in place. It just needed basic, day-to-day maintenance, costing a fraction of the price of infilling.”

“All the efforts of the Victorians who expended capital and men’s lives on these valiant structures: we can’t just desert them by infilling bridges and forgetting about them. That’s not the right way - these are useful assets. We should look to preserve the best of the old infrastructure and give it a new life.”

Charles Blckett-Ord is the Engineering Director of Blckett-Ord Conservation, the company responsible for extensive repairs to the imposing Lambley Viaduct, a Grade II* listed structure on Northumberland’s former Alston branch.

“What happened with Great Musgrave bridge was a disgrace”, asserts Charles, “and brings shame on the engineering profession. There was absolutely nothing to justify it; quite clearly, there was no emergency here or any prospect of one. All the bridge needed was some pointing underneath the arch barrel which is a common, cheap and easy way of providing additional strength.

“Engineers have a duty not only to look at carbon footprints, but also the social, archaeological and historical aspects of what they do. Desecrating a structure like this is unacceptable and the planning application should certainly be refused.”

Following the controversy caused by the work at Great Musgrave, the Government paused National Highways’ programme of infilling and demolition schemes, but work is expected to resume in the next few weeks.

Comments on the planning application can be submitted online via Eden District Council’s website, searching for case reference 22/0254. The HRE Group understands that more than 300 objections were lodged in the first week after the plans’ publication. A decision on whether to grant permission for the infill’s retention is expected by 27 May.

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveBridgeBefore©TheHREGroup: Great Musgrave bridge was in generally good condition before it was infilled by National Highways. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBridgeAfter©TheHREGroup: More than 1,600 tonnes of aggregate and concrete was used to bury the elegant Victorian structure. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveArch©TheHREGroup: A view of the bridge’s arch soffit. (Credit: The HRE Group)

TonyFreschini©TheHREGroup: Tony Freschini, Resident Engineer, Ribblehead Viaduct refurbishment (Credit: The HRE Group)

CharlesBlackett-Ord©TheHREGroup: Charles Blackett-Ord, Engineering Director, Blackett-Ord Conservation (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

SupportingDocuments (PDF): a planning document stating the weight of materials used for the infilling; National Highways’ costings for the bridge’s repair; an email from National Highways’ engineer claiming that infilling was needed to avert the bridge’s failure/collapse; the powers used to progress the emergency infilling of the bridge, known as Class Q.

The planning application for the retention of the infill at Great Musgrave bridge is available via this link to Eden District Council’s planning portal:

<https://tiny.cc/GreatMusgrave>

To link to a video about the Great Musgrave planning application or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/2O-u8wwRkOM>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/2O-u8wwRkOM" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

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.