

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 16 May 2022

Minister asked to intervene as report exposes bridge infill failings

National Highways should be forced to remove infill from a historic Cumbrian bridge after a detailed engineering study found the structure to be in fair condition and required no repairs, according to campaigners.

Great Musgrave bridge was needed for a connection between two heritage railways, but the state-owned roads company - which looks after 3,100 legacy structures on the Department for Transport's behalf - spent £124K of taxpayers' money burying it in more than 1,600 tonnes of aggregate and concrete. It claimed the bridge was being overloaded and might collapse, and used emergency development powers to force through the scheme when challenged by planning officers from Eden District Council.

Now Bill Harvey Associates, an internationally-respected firm specialising in masonry arches, has completed an evaluation of the bridge's condition and associated risks using evidence sourced from National Highways. The 45-page document reveals no concerns about the 160-year old engineering feat, stating that it had only minor longstanding defects and could carry 44-tonne vehicles; it presented no threat to public safety and "no credible risk" of collapse.

National Highways says that infilling is "fully reversible", but the report suggests that the bridge's stonework and mortar is likely to suffer accelerated degradation because water can no longer escape. As time passes, this will bring greater safety and financial risk when it comes to removing the infill.

"We finally have the truth", says Mike Thompson, Project Manager with the Stainmore Railway Company. "National Highways has wasted a huge amount of taxpayers' money on a structure that needed nothing doing to it. It's difficult to comprehend how supposedly competent engineers could get this so wrong. Failings of this magnitude must be properly investigated.

"The vandalism inflicted on the bridge has jeopardised our plans to connect with the Eden Valley Railway and boost the local economy. It's unacceptable and they cannot be allowed to get away with it. The infill must come out - sooner rather than later - and the bridge returned to its previous state as an important heritage asset within the landscape."

Eden District Council has insisted that National Highways seek retrospective planning permission for its infill scheme. The application was submitted in April and more than 830 people have already lodged objections.

But The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - has written to Baroness Vere, the Minister responsible for the Historical Railways Estate, asking her to instruct National Highways to remove the infill now because of the

company's actions, which it describes as "clumsy, disreputable and suggest questionable competence".

The Group goes on to say that "Through careful, deep and objective analysis of the available evidence, the BHA report forensically dismantles the case for infilling Great Musgrave bridge. £124K of taxpayers' money was absolutely wasted. That National Highways could so comprehensively misrepresent the threat posed by the structure should be a matter of concern to everyone."

According to the Group, National Highways also lied when it told media outlets that it had discussed the bridge's proposed infilling with the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways, a claim both organisations have vigorously denied.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group, said: "The insight provided by Bill Harvey Associates is clear and unequivocal. It supports what many experienced civil engineers have been saying for the past 12 months: this historic bridge was in fair condition and National Highways' claims of a risk to public safety have brought embarrassment to the profession.

"The company's stewardship of the Historical Railways Estate will continue to be defined by the shabby events at Great Musgrave until this monument to its failings is removed. Sadly it shows no sign of doing so voluntarily; it's therefore down to the Minister to take action.

"National Highways has recently been making positive moves in a better direction with respect to its legacy railway structures, but the distorted narrative it contrived here - and continues to perpetuate - demonstrates a need for more radical reform and we call on the Government to transfer the Historical Railways Estate to Great British Railways."

National Highways' planning application to retain the infill at Great Musgrave is expected to go before Eden District Council's planning committee in June. The Council's Conservation Officer has already made clear that infilling has caused "substantial harm to the significance of the non-designated heritage asset" and "the works are not considered to be supported by conservation policies".

--ENDS--

Attachments

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

GreatMusgraveBridgeInfill©TheHREGroup: Work to infill the 160-year-old bridge took place in May and June last year. (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)

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

BaronessVere-130522(red)(PDF): the letter sent by The HRE Group to Transport Minister Baroness Vere on 13 May 2022.

BHA-GreatMusgraveBridge-May22 (PDF): the report on the condition and risks associated with Great Musgrave Bridge.

22-0254-Conservation Officer response (PDF): the report produced by Eden District Council's Conservation Officer on the infill scheme.

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.