

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 9 January 2023

Rare Norfolk bridge lost to “destructive forces”

National Highways has “failed to fulfil its statutory obligations”, according to campaigners, after it infilled a historic bridge using permitted development rights that have now expired.

Congham bridge, five miles east of King’s Lynn, is one of 3,100 legacy structures comprising the Historical Railways Estate, managed by the state-owned roads company on the Department for Transport’s behalf. One of only three surviving examples of its kind, the structure spanned the dismantled Midland & Great Northern Joint Railway which has featured in proposals to develop a cycle network across Norfolk.

On 14 October 2019, consultants acting for National Highways told the Borough Council of King’s Lynn & West Norfolk that Congham bridge represented “an ongoing and increasing risk to public safety” and was proposed for infilling under permitted development rights that apply only to temporary works in emergency situations. Costing £127K, the five-week project got underway on 22 March 2021, 17 months after the notification letter was sent.

The line passing beneath the bridge opened in 1879, but the original structure was completely replaced in 1926 - one of six similar projects to benefit from an innovative system of reinforced concrete components and blockwork, developed by pioneering railway engineer William Marriott.

Bridge specialist Alan Hayward - co-founder of Cass Hayward, a firm of consulting engineers - said: “Marriott was the engineer, locomotive superintendent and eventually general manager of the Midland & Great Northern Joint Railway. There was probably no other engineer to combine such multiple roles, except for the renowned Robert Stephenson.

“His achievements included the design of locomotives, station architecture and bridges, as well as the early development of precast reinforced concrete. A concrete works was established within the company’s workshops at Melton Constable, predating the facilities of railways such as the Southern and Great Western.

“The Congham bridge used precast jack arches, precast casings to the main beams, precast wall units, copings, bedstones and bricks. It was impressive and more elaborate than the other five he rebuilt, featuring elegant curved wing walls. The infilling leaves only two of its type to survive, both under National Highways’ custodianship.”

A narrow and little-used country lane crosses the structure. According to Jacobs, National Highways’ consultants, the girders supporting its parapets and verges had a reduced capacity of 7.5 tonnes, but a 2003 assessment by Norfolk County Council found that the five girders beneath the carriageway could carry 40 tonnes. Cracks and other minor defects were

recorded - typical of structures of this age - some of which were possibly caused by a failure to tackle vegetation growth.

For the past two years, The HRE Group has been campaigning against National Highways' programme of infilling legacy railway structures which has seen the loss of 51 bridges since 2013, at a cost to the taxpayer of £8.01M.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the group, said: "It's self-evident from the passage of 17 months between the notification letter being sent and work starting that there was no emergency at Congham bridge. It presented a collection of routine asset management challenges.

"National Highways exploited rights that effectively expired after 12 months to complete a scheme intended to be permanent. As such, the company has failed to fulfil its statutory obligations under those rights: the infill should have been removed almost a year ago in the absence of written consent for its retention from the local planning authority.

"Destructive forces were at work here. A legacy bridge with historical significance and perhaps a future cycling role was put beyond use for liability reduction purposes, with democratic scrutiny circumvented. That's not how a public body should behave."

In 2018, Norfolk County Council published a report entitled 'Recycling Norfolk's Disused Railways' as part of its strategy to quadruple the number of commuting journeys completed on foot or bike in the county's market towns by 2025. Last year, its Local Transport Plan committed to the continued development of a programme "for greenways and active travel on disused rail corridors".

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Attachments

ConghamBridgeBefore©NorfolksDisusedRailways: A view of the bridge prior to National Highways carrying out its infill scheme. (Credit: Norfolk's Disused Railways)

ConghamBridgeAfter©TheHREGroup: The structure was infilled with hundreds of tonnes of aggregate and concrete between 22 March 2021 and 30 April 2021. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamRoad©TheHREGroup: The bridge carries a narrow and little-used country lane. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamAerial©TheHREGroup: An aerial view showing the bridge and route of the old railway to its north-east. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamBridgeArchive©M&GNTrust: An archive photograph showing the bridge shortly after its construction. (Credit: M&GN Trust)

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

Supporting Documents (PDF): Jacobs' letter to Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk on 6 October 2020; Class Q emergency development powers.

The 2003 assessment of Congham bridge's capacity is available via this link.

https://hre.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/pmy2_76_Congham+Road_7.5+tonnes.pdf

A map showing the 51 structures infilled by National Highways is available via this link. The cost of each scheme and the planning requirements can be found by clicking on the icons.

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxIwWc>

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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 NH'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.

Since assuming responsibility for the HRE, NH has infilled 51 bridges at a cost of £8.01M. The programme was paused by the government in July 2021. A map showing the infilled structures, together with the cost of each scheme, is available via this link...

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxIwWc>

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 were at risk of demolition or infilling. These were 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 the threat of infill or demolition has been lifted from all these structures and any future major works will be the subject of review and consultation with its Stakeholder Advisory Forum, established in October 2021.

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 bridge 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.