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“Missed opportunity” as National Highways rejects request for stone from infilled bridge

A heritage railway whose extension plans were dented by National Highways’ infilling of a historic bridge has expressed disappointment after the company refused its request to make use of some of the infill material when it’s removed later this year to comply with a planning enforcement notice.

Since the 1990s, the Stainmore and Eden Valley railways have been intending to reconnect their operations by laying five miles of track between Kirkby Stephen and Warcop in Cumbria. But the ambitious proposal suffered a setback in 2021 when National Highways buried a bridge over the line at Great Musgrave in more than 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete.

The state-owned roads company was widely condemned for what engineers, politicians and campaigners described as “cultural vandalism”. NH was forced to apply for retrospective planning permission after pursuing the infill scheme under emergency permitted development rights that only last 12 months. The application was rejected by Eden District Council in June - with 911 people submitting objections - and the bridge has to be restored to its previous state by 11 October this year.

Infilling cost £124K and National Highways has earmarked a further £431K to remove the material and carry out any other necessary repairs. Prior to the work, the bridge had a few minor defects of no structural consequence.

By September, the Stainmore Railway Company intends to provide a second car park at its base as part of preparations for an event being organised with the Town Council - ‘Kirkby Stephen in the 40s’ - which will involve a number of sites throughout the area.

“We’re going to need about 200 tonnes of stone”, says Mike Thompson, the railway’s Project Manager. “Buying it would be a significant expense for us, so we thought National Highways would be keen to help given the trouble and offence it caused by infilling Great Musgrave bridge without consulting us. The stone being excavated from around the structure would be ideal for the car park.”

A request was sent on 28 February but, two days later, National Highways told the railway that “Unfortunately we will be unable to offer you any of the infill material as it has already been found a home as part of the scheme negotiations that have been underway, enabling us to deliver the project at the best value for the taxpayer.”

“They’ve missed an opportunity to win back some goodwill here”, reflects Mike Thompson. “We would happily have promoted their donation of stone to the project. To make the

argument that they want to get best value for public funds is a bit rich given the amount of money they've wasted on this unnecessary infill scheme. We're disappointed by their attitude."

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group which has been campaigning against National Highways' infilling and demolition of legacy railway structures, said: "Volunteers from the Stainmore and Eden Valley railways work hard to benefit the local economy and were understandably aggrieved when National Highways blocked the route of their proposed extension by infilling a bridge that posed no meaningful risk.

"Donating just 12% of the infill material for the car park project would have been a positive first step towards making amends for the upset they caused.

"If a small amount of money had been spent on reassessing the bridge's capacity to take account of repairs in 2012, it would have been found that the structure could carry HGVs of 44 tonnes. That would have delivered 'best value for the taxpayer'. Instead this fabulous Victorian asset - much valued by the local community - was perceived to be weak on the basis of an out-of-date assessment and then infilled, resulting in the taxpayer potentially facing a bill of more than half-a-million pounds."

Last month, National Highways carried out exploratory coring of the material in which Great Musgrave bridge is buried, to inform preparations for its removal. The work is expected to take place in two phases, with a potentially lengthy pause between them whilst plans are developed for repairs and possible strengthening.

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveBridgeBefore©TheHREGroup: The masonry arch bridge at Great Musgrave was a valued historical feature in the local landscape and needed for a proposed heritage railway extension. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBridgeAfter©TheHREGroup: The structure was infilled with more than 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete without any dialogue with the two railways, the Parish Council or the Local Highway Authority. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBridgeCoring©TheHREGroup: Fencing surrounds the site of recent coring work in the stone embankment on the bridge's south side. (Credit: The HRE Group)

KirkbyStephenCarPark©TheHREGroup: The Stainmore Railway Company needs to surface a new car park prior to a planned event in Kirkby Stephen in September. (Credit: The HRE Group)

SupportingDocuments: The email exchange between the Stainmore Railway Company and National Highways; the minutes of a meeting between NH, Eden District Council and Cumbria County Council.

Contact details

Media enquiries: campaign@thehregroup.org

Twitter: @theHREgroup

Facebook: @theHREgroup

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, following controversy over the infilling of an attractive masonry arch bridge at Great Musgrave, Cumbria. 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=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxlwWc>

In the summer of 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 up to £31.9M over ten years, and two contracts for inspections/examinations with a headline 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. Any proposed infill schemes will require Ministerial approval and planning permission by default.

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 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.