

PRESS RELEASE: Monday 21 August 2023

Cumbrian bridge emerges from infill “vandalism”

Community groups have welcomed work to restore a historic railway bridge in Cumbria’s Eden valley following its controversial infilling in 2021.

National Highways buried the attractive masonry arch at Great Musgrave in 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete despite inspection reports describing it as being in Fair condition, with only a few minor defects. The structure was repointed in 2012, restoring its capacity to 44 tonnes, but the state-owned roads company claimed it was weak because a small number of mortar joints had reopened.

The bridge was a valued landscape asset, intended for eventual reuse as part of a link between two heritage railways.

A request from the now-defunct Eden District Council not to start infilling was rejected by National Highways and the scheme was instead pushed forward under emergency permitted development rights that only last for 12 months. A retrospective planning application for the infill’s retention was turned down in June 2022 and an enforcement notice subsequently issued for its removal.

The work has to be completed by 11 October and the vital road over the bridge has been closed until then, prompting complaints locally about the significant disruption to nearby communities and farms. For larger vehicles, the diversionary route between the bridge’s two ends - which are just 30 yards apart - involves a journey of almost 14 miles.

“Lots of people believe they’re getting their own back on us for rejecting the infill scheme”, says Tim Wells, chair of Musgrave Parish Council. “They are meant to be responsible public servants, but we just feel bullied by them. They make it sound as though it’s our fault. The council asked them not to start their infill scheme, but they refused and forced it through under emergency rights. That’s why we are where we are.”

The area around the bridge is currently secured by fencing and the site is monitored by CCTV cameras. Over the past few weeks, stone has been removed from embankments at both sides to reveal blockwork walls beneath the arch, built to retain the concrete when it was pumped into the void between them. Contractors have since cored holes into the solidified concrete before breaking it out to reveal the bridge’s stonework. Once the material is removed, National Highways intends to carry out repairs.

“It’s good to see this sorry saga slowly coming to an end”, says Mike Thompson, Project Manager for the Stainmore Railway Company, one of the heritage operations affected by the infilling. “But we have some concerns about what happens next. Specialists in masonry arch

structures assure us that Great Musgrave bridge had a capacity of more than 44 tonnes before infilling, but we expect National Highways will strengthen it anyway, just to make a point.

“On the old railway from Penrith to Keswick - which has been proposed for reopening for many years - they carried out two other bridge infill schemes in 2021, using steel arches to form a passageway through the concrete for the track. But the arches aren't big enough for trains, so if the line is ever relaid, the structures will have to be rebuilt. That would obviously be a problem if they did the same thing at Great Musgrave. The opening beneath the span must be returned to its original size.”

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, heritage campaigners and greenway developers, said: “The re-emergence of Great Musgrave bridge is obviously very welcome, restoring a valued landscape asset that's embedded in the community's history and might yet play a role in its future, spanning a proposed link between two heritage railways.

“But this saga leaves a bad taste and many unanswered questions. National Highways has implemented a new management process since the structure's vandalism prompted the government to intervene and halt the company's infill programme. But what about the culture that was driving it: has that been transformed?”

National Highways' planning application to retain infill at another legacy railway bridge near King's Lynn is expected to be determined by the local council's planning committee in the next six weeks. So far, more than 350 people have lodged objections to the scheme, which resulted in the burial of an early and rare-surviving concrete structure, built using a modular system devised by renowned engineer William Marriott.

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveNorth©TheHREGroup: The masonry arch bridge is slowly emerging from the 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete used to bury it. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveSouth©TheHREGroup: It is not yet known how much damage has been caused to the bridge's stonework as a result of the excavation process. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveSetting©TheHREGroup: Great Musgrave bridge is located between Appleby and Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria's Eden valley. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBefore©TheHREGroup: Prior to its infilling, the masonry arch bridge was locally valued as a landscape and heritage asset. (Credit: The HRE Group)

KeswickLineBridge©TheHREGroup: One of two bridges on the former Penrith-Keswick line that were infilled using steel arches that are too small for trains. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

Supporting Documents (PDF): screengrab from National Highways website referring to 2012 repointing and restoration of capacity; email exchange between NH and Eden District Council; planning enforcement notice from EDC.

A video report about the circumstances around the Great Musgrave bridge infilling is available via this link...

https://youtu.be/Z4OIS4UD_2E

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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=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxlwWc>

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.