

PRESS RELEASE: Thursday 12 October 2023

Cumbria's historic "overloaded" bridge to reopen without strengthening

A Victorian railway bridge in Cumbria's Eden Valley, which National Highways infilled amidst claims it was weak, is set to reopen without a weight restriction or any form of strengthening being needed.

The masonry arch structure at Great Musgrave, engineered by Sir Thomas Bouch in the early 1860s, has been closed for 13 weeks whilst 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete were removed from around it to comply with an enforcement notice - the deadline for which was yesterday (Wednesday 11 October) - issued by the now-disbanded Eden District Council following refusal of a retrospective planning application.

In June 2021, the state-owned roads company caused controversy by exploiting emergency permitted development rights to bury the 160-year-old structure despite planning officers asking for work not to start. National Highways' engineer claimed that "the bridge was being overloaded and that works were required to prevent the failure of the bridge and avert a collapse." However, just 16 months earlier, an inspection found only a small number of minor defects, with NH recording the structure as presenting "no significant risk" to public safety.

As recently as six weeks ago, National Highways had claimed that it needed to "carry out additional necessary strengthening work so the bridge can continue being used safely by the public". However, after a new capacity assessment was completed, the company has admitted that its "refurbishment work" - which has only involved localised repointing and repairs to stonework damage caused by excavation of the concrete infill - "will remove the need for a weight restriction, restoring the bridge to full capacity."

According to campaigners, there is no meaningful difference between the condition of the bridge now and how it was before infilling.

"It's a breath-taking turnaround by National Highways", says Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, heritage campaigners and greenway developers. "For the past two years, they've told anyone who'll listen that the bridge was weak and infilling was necessary for safety reasons. But this contradicted all the available engineering evidence.

"The new theoretical capacity assessment changes nothing in practical terms. They knew that the bridge was fine - or, at least, they should have - on the basis of inspection insight. But they contrived an alternative reality about a potential collapse to justify what, in truth, was an opportunistic act of vandalism for liability reduction purposes, facilitated by the local council's initial acceptance that the work could be carried out as permitted development.

“It’s been a costly shambles from start to finish and the taxpayer has a right to understand the circumstances. The bridge’s return to its rightful place as a historic landscape asset is welcome, but the fact that no strengthening was needed completely undermines National Highways.”

The company has not yet published the new capacity assessment or revealed the cost of removing the infill. It had set aside £431K for the work, but this included a strengthening scheme which has proved to be unnecessary. £124K was paid to contractor AmcoGiffen for the original infilling.

The blockage at Great Musgrave threatened to derail the longstanding plans of two heritage railways to reopen the line under the bridge as part of a five-mile link between their bases at Warcop and Kirkby Stephen East stations. They were not consulted about the infilling, contrary to statements by National Highways.

“The first we knew about it was when one of our volunteers drove over the bridge and discovered that the contractor had set up a compound”, says Mike Thompson, Project Manager with the Stainmore Railway Company. “We were powerless; everyone connected with the operation here felt angry, upset and bullied.

“We’re obviously pleased that the bridge has been restored to its previous state so we can again focus on our extension northwards. But to discover that this whole shabby affair was for nothing sticks in the throat. How was it allowed to happen? Where was the oversight? It raises important questions about National Highways’ culture, honesty and competence, and therefore its suitability as the custodian of our legacy railway assets.”

Meanwhile, National Highways has made clear its intention to appeal after the Borough Council of King’s Lynn & West Norfolk refused the company’s retrospective planning application for the infilling of a historic bridge in Norfolk. The structure, on St Andrew’s Lane at Congham near King’s Lynn, was the last surviving complete example of a bridge built using a system of modular concrete components first introduced by the eminent engineer William Marriott. It was infilled under emergency permitted development rights in spring 2021, at a cost of £127K.

--ENDS--

Attachments

GreatMusgraveNorth©TheHREGroup: The masonry arch bridge has emerged from 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveSouth©TheHREGroup: The 160-year-old bridge was designed by engineer Sir Thomas Bouch for the Eden Valley Railway. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveInfill©TheHREGroup: The material removed from around the bridge is now piled up on the former railway trackbed, 100 metres further north. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveArch©TheHREGroup: Some of the repointing and stonework repairs in the arch. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveRoad©TheHREGroup: The road over the bridge has been resurfaced prior to its reopening. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

SupportingDocuments (PDF): screengrab from National Highways website referring to the restoration of capacity; 2020 inspection report; Eden District Council's enforcement notice; email exchanges between NH and Eden District Council.

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=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.