

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 12 December 2023

## **Spring deadline to restore buried Norfolk bridge**

National Highways has until 10 April 2024 to remove more than a thousand tonnes of stone and concrete used to bury a historic railway structure.

In spring 2021, the state-owned roads company infilled St Andrew's Lane bridge at Congham, Norfolk, 17 months after telling the Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk that the project would be carried out under permitted development rights - known as Class Q - that only apply to temporary works in emergency situations.

National Highways' failure to remove the material within 12 months - as it was obliged to do to comply with the rights - resulted in the Council asking for a retrospective planning application which members of its planning committee voted 14-0 to refuse due to conflicts with local and national policies relating to heritage and landscape.

The company has stated its intention to appeal against the decision to the Planning Inspectorate. However, the Council has now issued an enforcement notice requiring the bridge and surrounding land to be returned to its previous state within three months of the notice coming into effect on 10 January 2024. Any appeal has to be submitted before this date.

According to National Highways, the bridge was in "very poor condition" and "we do not feel that the [Council's planning application] decision adequately reflects the safety concerns we have for Congham Road bridge". However, a 2019 inspection report provided to the Council describes the structure as being in Fair condition, whilst its carriageway-supporting girders were assessed as having a capacity of 40 tonnes. St Andrew's Lane is narrow and lightly trafficked, with low speeds due to restricted visibility.

The bridge was reconstructed in 1926 using an innovative system of modular concrete products pioneered by engineer William Marriott. National Highways claims there are two better examples elsewhere in Norfolk, but these mostly comprise traditional brickwork or masonry. St Andrew's Lane bridge was more elaborate and the only survivor built entirely to the Marriott system.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, heritage campaigners and greenway developers, said: "National Highways acted opportunistically at Congham, unlawfully exploiting Class Q rights to undertake permanent works for routine asset management purposes. Although the bridge had a collection of defects, there was no emergency or any prospect of one, as demonstrated by the 17-month delay before the project actually started.

“To convince the Council of its case, the company misrepresented its own engineering evidence and sought to downplay the bridge’s historical significance. No traffic survey was conducted to help in assessing the risks associated with the structure, resulting in actions that were unjustified and disproportionate. They didn’t even seek the Parish Council’s view.

“The bridge was valued by the community and locals want to see it restored; we therefore welcome the issuing of an enforcement notice. Work to remove the infill should start immediately, but we expect NH to fight on.”

Costing £127K, the infilling of Congham bridge was one of 51 such schemes completed by National Highways since it assumed responsibility for the Department for Transport’s Historical Railways Estate in 2013. None has been started since the government paused the company’s controversial programme in July 2021, but six structures are intended for infilling next summer, subject to planning permission being granted.

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### **Attachments**

ConghamAerial©TheHREGroup: St Andrew’s Lane bridge has been buried in more than a thousand tonnes of stone and concrete. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamRoad©TheHREGroup: The structure carries a narrow and lightly-trafficked lane, with restricted visibility. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamBefore©RichardHumphrey: An inspection report recorded Congham bridge as being in Fair condition prior to its infilling. (Credit: Richard Humphrey)

ConghamArchive©M&GNTrust: An archive photo of the bridge which was rebuilt to the ‘Marriott system’ in 1926. (Credit: M&GN Trust)

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

SupportingDocumentsCNG (PDF): the Council’s enforcement notice; the Council’s decision notice; the 2019 inspection report for the bridge; the Class Q notification letter sent by NH’s consultant in October 2019.

### **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 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](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.