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Cumbrian bridge works challenged as infill removal cost is revealed

Campaigners have voiced concerns about damaged stonework and poor repairs at a historic railway bridge in Cumbria which National Highways exhumed last year at an “eyewatering” cost to the taxpayer.

In June 2021, Great Musgrave bridge near Kirkby Stephen was controversially infilled by the state-owned roads company under emergency permitted development rights, jeopardising the longstanding plans of the Eden Valley and Stainmore railways to connect their operations by reinstating the track under it.

Eden District Council asked for a retrospective planning application to be submitted, but this was unanimously rejected by its planning committee in June 2022 due to conflicts with transport, landscape and historic environment policies. An enforcement notice was then issued, requiring the removal of 1,600 tonnes of stone and concrete by October last year.

On 2 August 2021, in response to a Parliamentary question, then Roads Minister Baroness Vere suggested that “If the fill material is disposed of offsite the estimated cost [of removing it] is £30,000. If it can be re-used to form a walking path, then it is more likely to be £10,000.” However, National Highways has now confirmed that the work cost £352K, almost three times the £124K spent on the original infill scheme. No strengthening or disposal costs were incurred, with the material now being stockpiled on the trackbed just north of the bridge.

“It’s an eyewatering figure”, says Mike Thompson, Project Manager for the Stainmore Railway Company. “Like any voluntary organisation, we’ve become skilled at raising modest sums and doing big things with them, by applying for grants and through fundraising ventures. But this kind of money would be transformational in our sector - it would have brought real progress with our future infrastructure works.

“There are groups elsewhere who face the prospect of having to remove infill from structures for rail and active travel projects they’ve been working towards for years. But how can they possibly afford it at this price? £352K to deal with a single blockage would push most proposals over the cliff of financial viability. The damage has been caused by National Highways through its blinkered approach to managing these assets and a lack of dialogue with stakeholders. They should have to put things right. In that respect, we’ve been very lucky.”

A recent inspection of Great Musgrave bridge has found that masonry damaged when the concrete was broken out was repaired using a ‘restoration mortar’ that masks defects and seals in moisture, preventing the stonework from breathing. According to conservation specialists, the products have a predicted lifespan of around 30 years, but can then decay and

take the stone with them. Several other damaged blocks in the bridge's arch have been left untouched and are expected to deteriorate further.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, heritage campaigners and greenway developers, said, "Given the circumstances, it's disappointing to discover that National Highways has taken the cheap and easy approach to repairing the stonework it damaged. The company's claim that infilling is 'fully reversible' is sounding very hollow.

"The country's legacy railway assets were gifted to us by skilled craftsmen during a period of exceptional ambition and courage during the Victorian era. They will continue to serve us for many more years if we look after them properly.

"We've seen elsewhere that National Highways is capable of undertaking heritage projects sensitively. But the work carried out to Great Musgrave bridge will ultimately require more public money to put right. And they've already wasted almost half-a-million pounds on a structure that, prior to its infilling, was fundamentally fine."

Meanwhile, National Highways has submitted an appeal against an enforcement notice requiring it to remove more than a thousand tonnes of infill from a rare concrete bridge near King's Lynn, Norfolk. On 2 October 2023, local councillors voted 14-0 to reject the company's retrospective planning application for the scheme which had also been carried out under emergency permitted development rights and retained beyond the maximum 12-month period without authority. The structure's future will now be determined through a public inquiry.

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Attachments

GreatMusgraveAerial©TheHREGroup: The landscape around Great Musgrave bridge is slowly recovering, four months after the infill was removed. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveBridge©TheHREGroup: Grass is growing on the cutting slopes on the south side of the bridge. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveRepair©TheHREGroup: Campaigners have voiced concerns about the product used to repair the bridge's damaged stonework and, in this case, a failure to maintain the coursing. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveDefect©TheHREGroup: One of several damaged stone blocks that have not been repaired. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveStockpile©TheHREGroup: The removed infill material is stockpiled on the former railway trackbed north of the bridge. (Credit: The HRE Group)

GreatMusgraveInfilled©TheHREGroup: A view of the bridge taken two months after work to infill it was completed in 2021. (Credit: The HRE Group)

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

SupportingDocumentsGMB (PDF): Baroness Vere's response to the Parliamentary Question about Great Musgrave bridge; confirmation of the infill removal cost from National Highways' website.

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Notes for editors

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 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. Queensbury Tunnel in West Yorkshire was infilled below two shafts, and strengthened at other locations, at a cost of £7.2M.

A map showing the location of the infilled bridges, together with the cost of each scheme, is available via this link...

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1owQSnow1Yj5taYxkzBybTFvnHyxlwWc>

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 intended to progress most of the schemes under permitted development rights, but the following local authorities told the company 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.

The programme was paused by the government in July 2021 due to concerns over its impact on the future development of active travel routes.

National Highways now claims that the threat of infill or demolition has been lifted from all the under-threat structures and any future proposed schemes will be the subject of review and consultation with its Stakeholder Advisory Forum, established in October 2021.