



PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 14 May 2024

Inquiry to determine fate of historic Norfolk bridge

Thousands of pages of statements and evidence have been published ahead of a public inquiry which will help to decide the future of a historic Norfolk bridge.

The rare concrete structure, which spanned the dismantled Midland & Great Northern Joint Railway at Congham near King's Lynn, was infilled by National Highways in 2021 under permitted development rights which relate only to emergency works remaining in place, by default, for no longer than 12 months. However, infilling was intended to be permanent, resulting in the scheme becoming unauthorised.

Although retrospective planning permission was sought, the application was refused by the Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk last October, prompting an Enforcement Notice to be issued which required the infill to be removed. But the state-owned roads company submitted an appeal to the Planning Inspectorate which will be determined through a public inquiry beginning at the Duke's Head Hotel in King's Lynn on Tuesday 21 May.

Ahead of the event, inspection reports relating to the bridge have been uploaded to the Council's planning website, as well as financial documentation, background information and an exchange of letters between the Council and National Highways.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of The HRE Group of engineers, heritage campaigners and greenway developers, said: "The release of asset management records have revealed a much clearer picture about the circumstances and decision-making that resulted in the bridge's infilling. We look forward to that evidence being fully tested.

"More than 360 objections to the retrospective planning application were indicative of strongly held views on this matter, compounded by the lack of community consultation prior to infilling taking place.

"This was an impressive and unusual structure - a rare survivor amongst the small collection of bridges completely rebuilt using a system of precast concrete components first introduced by the pioneering engineer William Marriott. Its burial within hundreds of tonnes of stone and concrete represents a loss to the region's industrial heritage."

The inquiry will hear evidence from expert witnesses representing both the Council and National Highways, with key issues being the bridge's condition and historical value, as well as relevant planning considerations. The HRE Group is also taking part.

--ENDS--

Attachments

ConghamArchive©M&GNTrust: An archive view of the bridge shortly after its reconstruction. (Credit: M&GN Trust)

ConghamAfter©TheHREGroup: The bridge was infilled by National Highways under emergency permitted development rights in 2021. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamRoad©TheHREGroup: The structure carries St Andrew's Lane - a narrow and lightly-trafficked road passing through Congham village. (Credit: The HRE Group)

ConghamBefore©NorfolksDisusedRailways: Precast concrete components and concrete brick was used to rebuild the bridge in 1926. (Credit: Norfolk's Disused Railways)

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

Statements and evidence submitted to the inquiry can be downloaded via this link...

<https://online.west-norfolk.gov.uk/online-applications/enforcementDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=RKRTJMIV0JD00>

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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.