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The Thinking Woman's Railway
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Your reference:- 13/00444/FUL
Case Officer: Carly Perkins

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Teignbridge District Council,
Planning Department,
Forde House,
Brunel Road,
Newton Abbot
TQ12 4XX

RAILWAY RECONSTRUCTION

Dear Ms. Perkins,

**Planning Application for Permission to Demolish
Greenwall Lane Bridge, Exeter Railway (7m. 4ch.)**

Only a few months after a government minister, wading through floodwater, made the customary empty promise that something would be done about the resilience of the West Country's rail links, the first effective action of the state is to apply to demolish a bridge on a former diversionary route, continuing the "scorched earth" policy practised for sixty years.

Unlike the gritty engineers who built the railways, who could make learned but instinctive judgements on the spot, those charged with destroying old infrastructure are modern types who seem always to make worst-case predictions, as if to shield themselves from any blame.

So they say that Greenwall Lane Bridge is about to fall down, or may do in the next 100 years. The answer is to demolish it as soon as possible.

Denying that the arch of the bridge is distorted would be like saying that the tower at Pisa is not leaning, but this does not mean it will soon collapse.

If a responsible, far-sighted approach were taken by authorities, mindful that today's predominant transport is made possible by the extravagant consumption of cheap oil, the principle which would be applied here would be: no matter what damage and incursions this route has already suffered, from now on the remaining formation and structures will be protected, so that reconstruction engineers have as much as possible to start with and can decide themselves what must be demolished.

If the arch of Greenwall Lane Bridge is then replaced by spans of steel or concrete, the engineer will have had the advantage of the abutments and wing walls having been left in place.

The bridge crosses a little-used public footpath; any danger to walkers or users of the agricultural access would be minimised by inexpensive holding repairs.

Bridges with distorted arches are not unusual. Here is one on the Bristol & Exeter main line at Rewe, near Exeter. Some



time before the "Weak Bridge" signs were erected, this writer, leaning on the parapet, had felt it move as a train passed. Vehicles greater than three tonnes regularly cross the bridge.

If in future the arch of Greenwall Lane Bridge became dangerous and had to be taken down, there would still be no reason to demolish the rest of the structure. A mile up the line towards Exeter, the steel girders of Cotley Lane Bridge were taken away and the abutments and wing walls remain beside the road today, no longer the liability of BRB (Residuary). The purchasers of the land on either side of Greenwall Lane Bridge should have been required to erect fences to prevent access to the structure.



No outside body has been considered which may have helped fund repairs to Greenwall Lane and no other opinion has been sought. BRB (Residuary) merely takes the estimated cost of repairs and sets it against the extinguishment cost of demolition. The only purpose of BRB (Residuary) is to offload its liabilities; it has no responsibility to provide for the future. It is empowered to ignore if it wishes any appeal for a constructive solution in a given case.

Nevertheless, Teignbridge District Council, in preferring not to see demolition and the unnecessary landfill it would create, could insist that BRB (Residuary) approaches an interested third party before rubber-stamping their application.

The last time BRB (Residuary) sought planning permission was in the case of Perridge Tunnel, where a madcap scheme to stabilize an internal collapse was put forward.

This railway engaged a specialist firm whose engineers claimed to have been able to repair the tunnel for about the same amount as it was proposed to spend on blocking it. Despite BRB (Residuary) agreeing to listen to the tunnelling experts at this railway's expense, no meeting ever took place and BRB scrapped the plans, happily wasting a huge sum of public money. It opted instead for abandonment and sealing up of the tunnel, overlooking the need to drain the approach cutting.



The structure on this line seen by the most people is the rebuilt bridge over Marsh Barton Road in Exeter, still today traversed by freight trains and the occasional excursion. Few who pass beneath it realize that it was once part of a 16-mile branch, even though many of the surrounding street names recall villages in the Teign Valley.

The second most obvious structure is Greenwall Lane Bridge, the only one remaining which is clearly visible from a main road. It is something of a monument to the branch and a reminder to many of a system of transport that was never given the chance to shape itself for the modern world, now desperately in need of some alternative. This is not reason enough to keep the bridge in tact, but its symbolic value should add weight to the practical considerations.

Network Rail is a puppet very largely concerned with its operational estate and does not burden itself with transport policy or a strategic view. The bulk of its staff will not know that there are 400 miles of abandoned railway in Devon and Cornwall, and that over 200 stations have gone (52% of the Teignbridge passenger mileage is closed). None of it is considered to be their business.

Despite repeated claims that the estuarine and coastal main line is secure, the reality is that a combination of severe weather events could sever the route completely and a prolonged blockade would be disastrous for the network west of Exeter.

Until 1939, there were two bypass routes from Exeter and a new main line, avoiding Dawlish and Teignmouth, had won parliamentary approval and was at the advanced planning stage. (The plans were not officially abandoned until 1949.) The term "resilient" may never have been used, but it would then have been a fitting description of the railway.

In 1958, the Teign Valley was thrown away, having only been substantially upgraded as a diversionary route 15 years earlier, and in 1968 the former Southern line beyond Okehampton was closed, leaving the Great Western main line at times lashed by waves and threatened by the cliffs. The railway is now vulnerable, not resilient. And if the Transport Minister had been honest, he would simply have said: "The railway carries 5% of all traffic and nothing much is going to be done to make it less vulnerable."

He could have made such a glib statement because for so long there has been blind adherence to the car and the lorry as the common means of transport. From his department down to the smallest council planning office, there is no acceptance that the vast edifice of fragmented, sprawling, lavish development - the unsustainable mobility and convoluted supply lines - that road transport has made possible depends upon a single commodity; and this at a transient point in its supply history when it is cheap and plentiful.

The weakness of road transport is its very extravagance. The guided systems can run on less of any fuel, finite or renewable; they make possible organized, concentrated development and movement; they are shared and accountable and at best are an intrinsic part of their communities.

Yet, in 2013, there is still unbridled road expansion and the disused rail network continues being destroyed by the state; a transport campaigner can look in vain for planning guidance on the subject of railway route protection.

In summary, the principal objections to the demolition of Greenwall Lane Bridge are:-

- 💡 It is unnecessary; a less than thorough repair would guard against a brick falling on someone; weak bridges are not unusual.
- 💡 It would cause a lot of extra road traffic and material being taken to a tip.
- 💡 There has been no consultation with an outside body that may help to fund repairs to this publicly-owned structure.
- 💡 No other opinion has been sought.
- 💡 Even if the arch were in danger of collapse, complete demolition would be unnecessary, as the example at Cotley Lane proves.
- 💡 The bridge is the most clearly visible of the remaining structures and as such stands as a monument to the Teign Valley branch line, still fondly remembered by many in the area.

It is requested that BRB (Residuary) be pressed by the council to explore a more constructive approach.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Burges
Owner & Operator