

The plans to reopen Wales' abandoned railway tunnels for cyclists and walkers

The tunnels could provide alternative travel routes and boost tourism

BY DAVID OWENS
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Inside the Abernant Tunnel (Image: Scott Lewis)

Five former railway tunnels across Wales have been earmarked to reopen as cycling and walking routes.

Progress is currently being made on plans to open Abernant Tunnel which runs between Aberdare and Merthyr.

Last month the authorities bidding to reopen the Abernant Tunnel as a direct walking and cycling link between the two towns visited the tunnel.

Representatives from Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf councils, Highways England, Welsh Government and Sustrans Wales met local tunnel enthusiasts for a drive-through as plans to reopen the disused former railway tunnel gather pace.

“We all agreed the tunnel is in fantastic condition and will be a brilliant asset,” said Merthyr councillor Andrew Barry.



Inside the Abernant Tunnel (Image: Merthyr Council)

The Abernant Tunnel has benefited from the expertise of the Rhondda Tunnel Society, the organisation working to reopen the disused Rhondda Tunnel, which has been brought on board to help with the reopening of the Abernant Tunnel.

Stretching 3,443 yards from Blaencwm in the Rhondda Valley to Blaengwynfi in the Afan Valley, the Rhondda Tunnel was closed in 1968. Both ends of the tunnel were filled in and landscaped over between 1979 and 1980.

Completed in 1890, the Rhondda Tunnel is a feat of Victorian engineering built to connect the coalfields of the upper Rhondda with Swansea Bay. And there it has lain buried ever since.

When reopened it will be the longest cycle and walking tunnel in Europe, and the second-longest in the world, reconnecting the communities of the Rhondda and Afan Valleys as a pedestrian and cycling route.



Inside the Rhondda Tunnel (Image: Graeme Bickerdike)

The Welsh Government recently awarded the project £250,000 from its Active Travel Fund to help it become a reality, with Rhondda Cynon Taf and Neath Port Talbot councils also agreeing to get on board with the project.

The funding will be used to work out just how much it would cost to reopen both tunnels.

“The Rhondda Tunnel Society has already achieved so much, but now there’s another huge step and that’s understanding what work is needed inside and outside the tunnel to bring this to fruition,” said Rhondda Cynon Taf council leader Andrew Morgan.

“There is much we need to consider – how much would it cost to build a car park, and a visitor centre, what lighting would be needed. It has to be fully measured and costed.

“Some of that work has already been completed by the Rhondda Tunnel Society, but by the end of this financial year we expect to have a report that has all the information that would tell us if we were to open the tunnel exactly how much it would cost. That would then allow us to say to Welsh Government, we want to bid for X amount.”

Councillor Morgan added: “There’s a whole funding package we will need to put together once we know what the costs are. And, of course, local authorities may want to add contributions if we can see the economic benefits.”

He said he had already had a meeting with Welsh Government Minister Ken Skates, and had discussions with the council leaders of Merthyr and Neath Port Talbot. “We’re all pretty much on the same page with it,” he said.



When reopened the Rhondda Tunnel will be the longest cycle and walking tunnel in Europe (Image: Graeme Bickerdike)

Despite the amount of work that lies ahead, Councillor Morgan is confident he will see both tunnels reopened in three to four years. "My view is it's a case of when, and not if," he said. "My view is also it can't be one tunnel, it needs to be both."

Councillor Anthony Taylor, deputy leader of Neath Port Talbot Council, said the reopening of the old Victorian railway tunnel, which would lead to the reconnection of the Afan and Rhondda valleys, could bring a major economic boost as a tourist attraction.

He added: "The Rhondda Tunnel project could provide walking and cycling enthusiasts with a brand-new attraction and also link our Afan Valley directly with the Rhondda."

Stephen Mackey, chairman of the Rhondda Tunnel Society, believes the reopening of the former railway tunnels has the potential to regenerate communities.

He said: "We have done research on other abandoned railway tunnels that have found a new life as cycle/walking routes and found that they are hugely popular.

"South Wales has the highest density of traffic-free cycle routes anywhere in Britain, and we want to see the Rhondda Tunnel be the centre of a network of rides and walks, many circular, that will bring visitors from all over Britain and the wider world."

Despite plans to reopen both the Rhondda and Abernant tunnels by 2022, they wouldn't be the first former railway tunnel in Wales to be given a new lease of life. That honour goes to Tregarth tunnel in Bethesda which reopened in May last year after four months' work at a cost of £430,000.



Tregarth Tunnel (Image: Gwynedd Council)

Known locally as Tynal Tywyll, the blocked former railway tunnel between Tregarth and Bethesda now offers an uninterrupted route between Bangor and Bethesda.

Since the 11-mile long Lôn Las Ogwen path was opened cyclists and walkers had been forced to walk along the A5 for a mile-long detour, but the tunnel has changed that.

Councillor Dafydd Meurig, cabinet member for planning and regulatory matters at Gwynedd Council, said: "After closing the railway almost 60 years ago, the tunnel and viaduct and their special construction had been forgotten, but by opening the path they will be given a new lease of life."

Two further tunnels are being looked at with the potential to reopen.

The Usk Tunnel is part of Monmouthshire council's Integrated Network Map (INM) which aims to improve cycling and walking routes in the area. The 234m tunnel would offer a walking and cycle route that avoided the busy A472 through the town.

The other route, the 364m Pennar Tunnel, situated between Pontllanfraith and Newbridge, is the furthest off development and has yet to be included in Caerphilly council's Integrated Network Map. If opened it would provide a cross-valley route that would avoid a busy road.

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