

# Builders lift the lid on Europe's longest cycle tunnel

Nadeem Badshah

An ambitious plan for Europe's longest underground cycle route finally has light at the end of the tunnel.

Campaigners are hoping to transform a disused Victorian railway line that links two Welsh valleys into an attraction for tourists on two wheels.

The two-mile (3.148m) Rhondda Tunnel once carried coal trains 1,000ft below the mountains from the mines of Rhondda to the ports in Swansea Bay, until it was closed in 1968 as part of the Beeching cutbacks.

It has now been opened up to the daylight for the first time in 50 years, with the removal of a concrete seal that covered a vent shaft. Before the tunnel can open as a tourist attraction inspectors must carry out tests funded by a £90,000 community grant.

The Rhondda Tunnel project has attracted support from the public and Welsh celebrities including Michael Sheen, 49, the Hollywood actor.

The site is owned by Highways England, which is willing to hand it over for the cycle path to be built. Tony

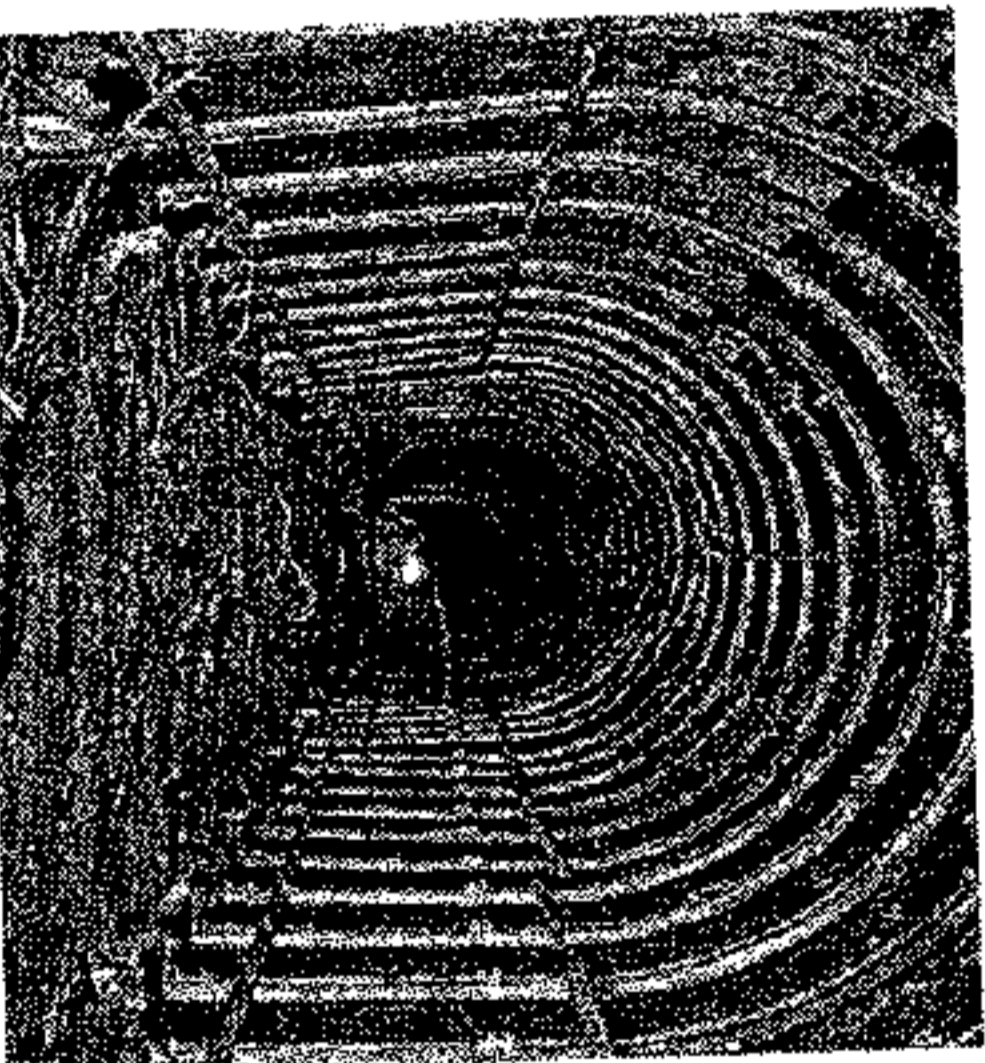
Moon, secretary of the Rhondda Tunnel Society, described the removal of the concrete cap as "a fantastic day".

"We are progressing steadily in the right direction and hope that very soon after the report from the detailed examiners [Balfour Beatty] the tunnel will come out with a clean bill of health," he said. "This will then give the all-clear for either the Welsh government to take ownership of the tunnel from Highways England, or perhaps a joint share with Neath Port Talbot council, Rhondda Cynon Taff council and the Welsh government."

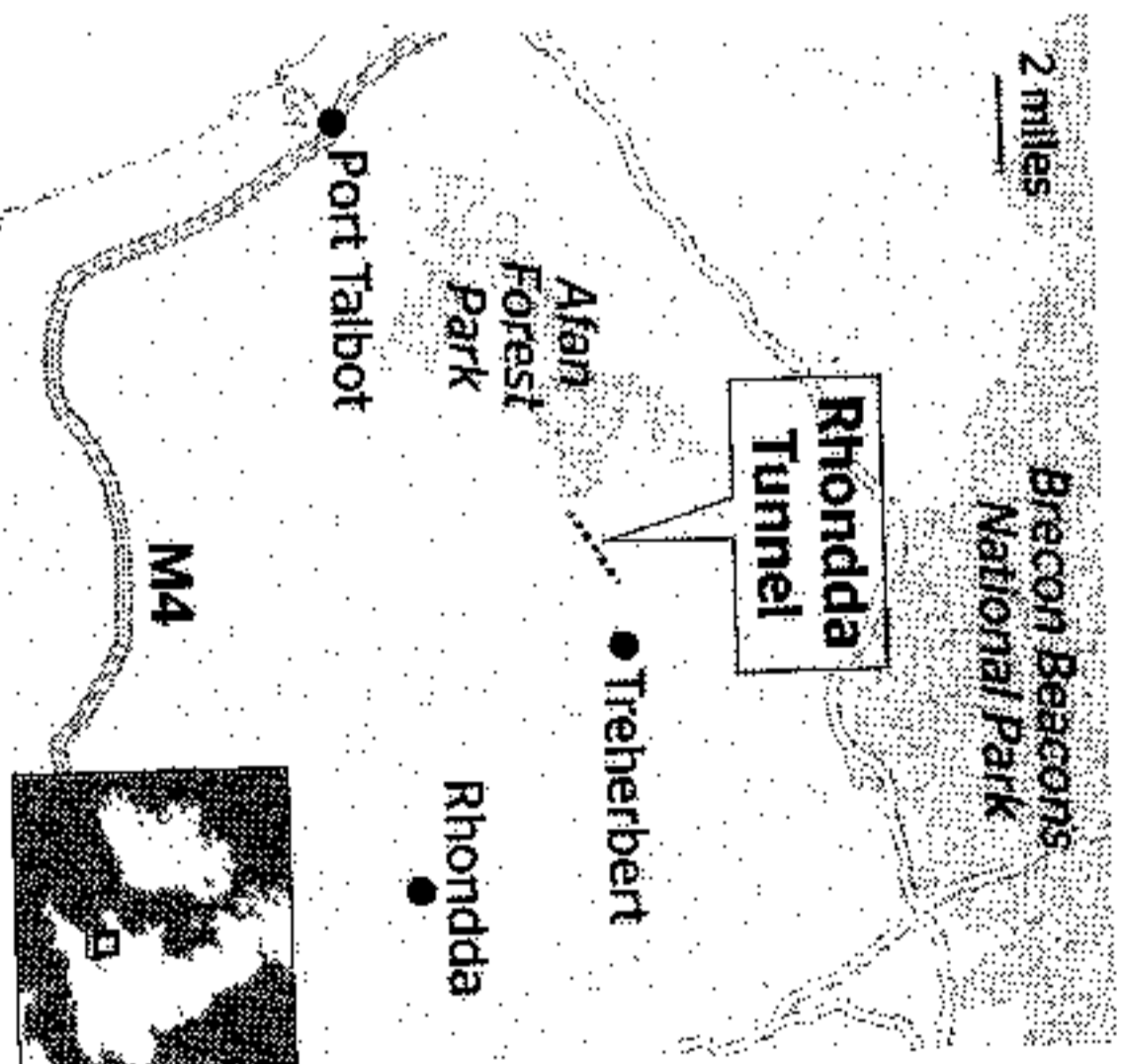
In January, surveyors said they were optimistic that the tunnel could be restored in its entirety. The main survey will now take place, in which tunnelling engineers will carry out a thorough inspection to find every defect and estimate repair costs.

The tunnel was opened in 1890 during the coal boom after a five-year building project overseen by Sydney William Yockney, the chief engineer and a former pupil of Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

If the transformation is completed it



The Rhondda Tunnel has been sealed for 50 years and will now be surveyed



will become the longest cycle tunnel in Europe and second in the world only to the 4,000m Snoqualmie Tunnel, east of Seattle in the Cascade mountain range in Washington state.

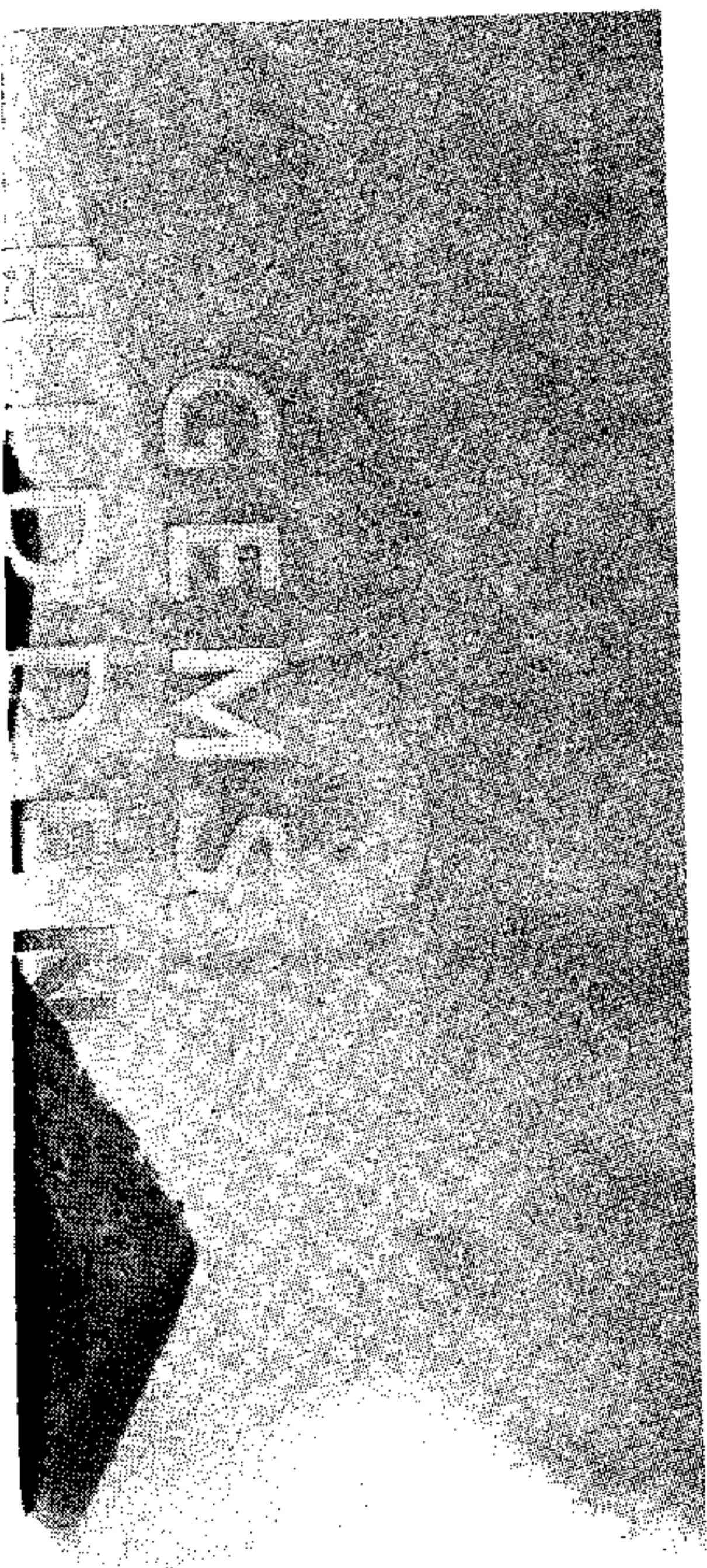
In 2017, campaigners in Yorkshire were aiming to turn the 2,287m Queensbury Tunnel between Halifax and Bradford into a cycle path but it needed repairs that were expected to cost £3 million. The Queensbury Tunnel was built by the Great Northern Railway between 1874 and 1878. Work was delayed when two of the seven construction shafts had to be abandoned due to water ingress. At least ten builders lost their lives.

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## Thatcher's lav-hv aides

Hero until one day Arnie's tone changed as they sat side by side in make-up. He suddenly seemed interested in McKellen's theatre



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