

HIE is still hiding the truth about the funicular at Cairn Gorm

Description



This photo accompanies all HIE's news releases on the funicular. It appears to have been specially selected to hide the extensive repair work which has been undertaken on the funicular viaduct and which is still not complete. Photo courtesy HIE website

ANNUAL MAINTENANCE AND REMEDiation WORK CONFIRMED FOR CAIRNGORM FUNICULAR

Published: 02/05/2025

Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd has confirmed dates for essential annual maintenance on the funicular railway.

On 2nd May Highlands and Islands Enterprise announced ([see here](#)) that having re-opened the funicular on 27/02/2025, after one and a half years of repair work, it would be closing it again on 12/05/2025 – just ten weeks later – for another three weeks until 2/06/25:

“while the company’s in-house engineering team carries out works including rail grinding, gearbox repairs, undercarriage lubrication, and testing and inspection of the rail welds”

AND

“At the same time, Balfour Beatty, working on behalf of estate owner Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), will return to complete their programme of remediation works on the railway viaduct”.

To be fair, in its new release announcing the funicular was re-opening in February ([see here](#)), HIE did state “Balfour Beatty will return to Cairngorm during a less busy period in late spring or early summer to carry out some final remediation works that are not essential for safe operations.”. It did not explain, however, what those remediation works were or why after one and a half years repair work Balfour Beatty still needed to complete their programme of remediation. Nor has it explained why “the company’s in-house engineering team” – a reference apparently to its subsidiary Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Ltd (CM(S)L) – could not have carried out the works described while the funicular was being repaired.

Balfour Beatty’s remediation works

In February HIE tried to explain why the repairs had taken so long:

“A combination of the scale and technical complexity of the remediation programme, plus the challenges of working in an exposed mountain environment in often harsh weather led to the works taking longer than had initially been expected.”

This was just another feeble excuse from HIE. The harsh weather at Cairn Gorm has been known and reported on since before the funicular was first built and yet still appear not taken into consideration when planning works!

The latest news release does provide at least provide an explanation of the current remediation works:

“the remaining works will deal with non-urgent matters that will benefit the long-term durability of the structure, which is over a mile in length”.

“Examples include fine-tuning some joint assemblies to improve performance and minimise the risk of corrosion over time, as well as fitting tapes and caps to extend the working life of metal bars that would otherwise be exposed to the weather.”

The fitting of tapes and caps which Parkswatch had advocated in December 2023 ([see here](#)) is welcome but should not have required another closure but there are reasons to believe HIE is not being entirely honest about the “fine tuning of joint assemblies”.



This photo, at the passing loop, better shows all the steelwork which has been added to the funicular viaduct to hold it together. Note the figure working on the structure. Photo courtesy CM(S)L webcam.

As HIE reported in February, the funicular was shut in August 2023 after it was “discovered that the tension of some ‘scarf joints’ that link beams and piers was below the recommended level. Further inspections revealed that the issue was extensive and that further strengthening of beams and diaphragms and regrouting of base plates was also required to return the funicular to safe operations.” The passing loop was a major point of works for the whole of the shutdown from August 2023 until Balfour Beatty left the site after removing all scaffolding in December 2024. Much of the current “fine-tuning” work is now being carried out at the passing loop. Why?

The “annual maintenance work”

The latest news release describes the “rail grinding, gearbox repairs, undercarriage lubrication, and testing and inspection of the rail welds” by its in-house team as annual maintenance which CM(S)L usually carries out *“in November, but has brought the timescale forward this year to run in parallel with the remediation programme and minimise inconvenience to visitors.”* I wonder how many visitors would be inconvenienced in November compared to those inconvenienced by the current closure, particularly given the fine weather this May? The works described, however, bear further comment:

(1) The importance of rail grinding to reduce vibrations has been mentioned in previous parkswatch posts ([see here](#) for example) – but, apart from a section at the passing loop which had obviously been worked on when I visited in October 2024, this was not carried out before the funicular re-opening in January 2023 as can be seen from the following picture!



The shiny mid- section is where the bogie wheels are touching the centre of the rail with lateral shiny bits where the wheels touch now and again.

(2) The funicular bogies were supposed to be replaced in 2024 so undercarriage lubrication is only using a grease gun to pump in fresh grease, and,

(3) Testing and inspection of rail welds is a specialist job which has in the past been carried out by an outside contractor! It should have been done 3 months ago just before the funicular re-opened!

What next?

If, as in the 1st press release, “ *All safety – related matters have now been concluded*” the obvious question is why has Balfour Beattie required another three weeks to complete what are described as fine-tuning work? It raises questions about whether the work carried out until December was safe enough to allow the funicular to re-open in February? The continued attention to the passing loop suggests that there are still structural problems which will need continued attention. The big question therefore is “How long will the funicular operate after these latest repairs are completed on 02/06/2025 before further work or “*to complete their programme of remediation works*” will be necessary again? Assuming it does resume service on that day.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. funicular
4. Governance
5. HIE

Date Created

May 17, 2025

Author

graham-garfoot