

August 2017

REFLECTIONS ON ANOTHER ANNIVERSARY

I reflected on 'things' this time last year and have looked in the mirror again and reflected a little more on an anniversary marking another year of existence as RML. At certain times the 1st of August 1984 does not seem all that long ago but in truth it has been quite a long road with interesting turns along the way. It was also on 1st August, in 1972, that I left the 'comfort' of a local government job as Resident Engineer on a major contract for the City of Cardiff Waterworks Department and joined consulting engineers Robinson Jones to focus on the reclamation of mineral workings.

These are sad days and my heart goes out to all those affected by the events in Grenfell Tower. Some people in the industry are putting the basic reason for these sad events down to the proliferation of 'design and build' contracts where the role of the architect is much diminished. Some years back RML did research work funded by the European Commission on a structural panel that had a core of polyurethane which was highly flammable. Fire performance was a key element that we examined.

In thinking about responsibility for quality I am feeling a little nostalgic for the days when engineers were the masters of their own world, they produced designs and contract documents and then supervised and certified the work for payment.

This nostalgia has come about because I have witnessed the growing and burgeoning amount of information that we now have to produce when designing a project. It is the amount of information that agglomerates that concerns me, not the writing of method statements and management plans. Many years ago I reported to the Welsh Office that it was no wonder that in many cases engineers created and left behind messes that should never have been allowed to happen in the first place. These messes were created because engineers did not consider that issues like disturbing existing site conditions and reinstating them were things that need concern them, never mind things that they should actually take pains to get right.

Method statements and construction environmental management plans have changed all that but this month I just feel that perhaps things have gone a bit too far. In the last 12 months I have been involved, but only on the periphery you understand, in a number of applications for planning permission for significant earthworks and have contrasted this enormous effort with what I had to prepare as a project manager of major earthworks in the 1970s. As well as engineering drawings I prepared drawings for planning applications that included details of surface finishes and planting and precious little else except for what I put in the specifications that I drew up. I well remember in 1975 a planning officer requesting that I mark on a Landscape Drawing the position of every cutting that I proposed planting, so I had my technician add 2000 to 3000 symbols, circles, circles with dots, squares and squares with dots as well as a few other symbols that represented each individual plant in my landscape design. A few years after planting the site was filled with millions of self-sown seedlings that were derived from my cuttings. What I had not done was explained to the planning officer what my design really entailed. If I had he would probably not believed me anyway.

We have all moved a long way since then and perhaps I have been part of the process. I was involved in doing things differently and I worked in a world where trust was a common currency between professionals. Trust has all but disappeared but I have no problem with us explaining in some detail the fundamental ideas behind our designs. Explaining designs in detail is no bad thing for engineers to spend time on, indeed I would say that this explaining, in good well-constructed English (or Welsh or French or Italian) text, enhances the role of the engineer.

Today's climate of wanting everything spelt out suggests to me that trust as a currency is no longer traded. Auditing now seems to dominate everything but I fear that audits are seen once and then forgotten so what is the point of doing them if trust and valued opinion is not the result?

Under design and build contracts the engineer is no longer 'The Engineer' with a discrete role under a contract with the employer. Peter Deakins, the architect who was involved in the original master plan

for the estate which contains the Grenfell Tower bemoans the loss of authority for the architect under design and build contracts and the loss too of experienced clerks of the works with a distinct role in respect of quality. Along with my engineer colleagues I too miss the old established hierarchy and my role as a Resident Engineer was especially rewarding. On my first day as resident engineer, whilst we were leaning on the site gate, the contractor was told by my boss that he expected all decisions made in respect of the works would be made by me! I had a staff of four including an excellent clerk of the works who could cook too, a very important 'onsite' skill in those days, his name was Ted Prosser. Early on in the project I had to dismiss in turn two agents, the contract managers on site, for shoddy work involving reinforced concrete, quite a soul searching experience I can tell you. Ted's support was vital. In those days a great deal of responsibility rested with the resident engineer and his site team.

Kind regards

Ivor

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