

RML Newsletter round-up

February 2016

ANALYSIS MUST NOT LEAD TO PARALYSIS

Multidisciplined analysis makes the heart beat stronger

Analysis is the prime instrument that we use at RML and it leads to our hearts beating more strongly. Why is this? At RML we have been called upon to examine and report on a great variety of topics. We have enjoyed the challenges and still do. Each challenge raises the 'tempo' right through the office.

Our subjects have ranged from vegetation on highway slopes to the problems of unstable mine shafts, from the rehabilitation of metalliferous mines to the use of vegetation in civil engineering. We have produced reports, studies and guidelines on good practice for the European Commission, several for the UK government, the Department of Heritage in the Irish Government, the Regional Government of Tuscany, and the Welsh Office (forerunner of the Welsh Government) to name but a few.

Finding the time and allocating the expense to carry out an analysis is a fundamental part of any successful approach to problem solving. A multidisciplinary analysis provides one with a holistic view, do you remember those? At one time the holistic approach seemed to be on everyone's lips as the newest idea on the street, but it is now an accepted part of everyday life. John Ruskin put it so neatly when he said that "Not only is there one way of doing things rightly but there is only one way of seeing them, and that is seeing the whole of them."

A mixture of engineers, landscape architects, environmental scientists and planners has provided RML with both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities came about because clients recognised (and still recognise) that our eclectic mix of specialists who had worked together for a considerable time should result in open-minded thinking that would produce something innovative and worthwhile. By way of challenges, RML first had to earn and maintain this reputation by implementing a multidisciplinary approach, and then writing about and illustrating our opinions in interesting and constructive ways.

The open-minded bit was easy because it came naturally; colleagues have heard me say before that minds are like parachutes, they only work effectively when they are open. I would define the main characteristic of employing an open mind is the avoidance of obfuscation. Obfuscation is a human trait demonstrated by many people and can be the death of a great deal of forward thinking and action. I will discuss the problems raised by obfuscation in a later newsletter.

Writing about concepts requires a particular skill that I mentioned just the other day in [Words and their impact](#) (December 2015); one needs to find words and structures for the text that maintain interest and a wish to continue reading.

Relevant illustrations are important too. I would like to demonstrate this by providing an example from an early study that one of my colleagues produced on the subject of mine shaft treatment. Mine shafts are not perhaps the subject to stir everyone's emotions. The study was carried out from ecological and landscape viewpoints and I would suggest that this is an approach that would not occur to many people. Because of its simplicity and directness in presentation the analysis was extremely helpful to the whole team, especially for the engineers who were used to working with images that generally lacked the spontaneity demonstrated by the landscape architect. Landscape and ecological

assessments of topics as varied as powerlines and wind turbines, new housing, quarries, and riverbank stabilisation and major highways all figure in our current work load.

I like to think that our clients understand that this same open-minded approach is applied to design and construction for unconventional projects such as skate parks (April 2015). To bring innovation and thinking to a reality we do build some projects through our sister companies [RML Bioengineering Ltd](#) and [Groundcover DBM Ltd](#). Bringing our ideas to a reality is particularly pleasing and beneficial on a personal and a professional level and at this level I can confirm that one's heart does beat a little faster and stronger.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director

February 2016

DIFFUSION PART 2, IT'S ALL ABOUT CONVICTION.

“If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap.....the world will make a beaten path to his door.”

Attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

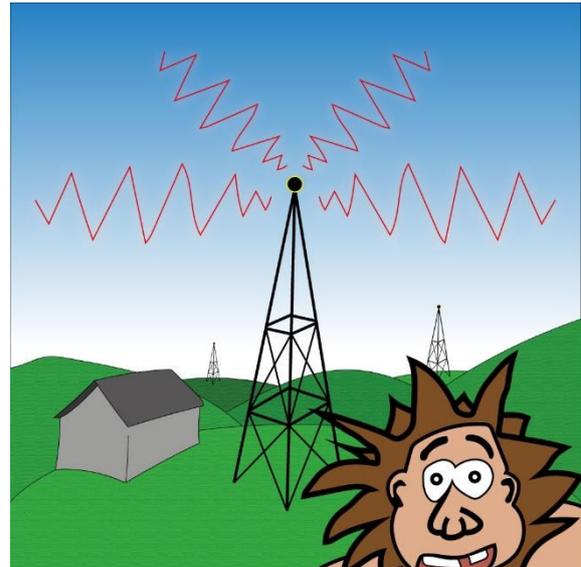
Preaching to the converted is an old trick used by those who want to enhance their standing without taking too many risks. Preaching in a foreign land as a missionary is not so comfortable, even uncomfortable, and can lead to frustration and despair especially when one's message is casually or cruelly rejected.

Being no more than a back-door engineer and not necessarily a businessman, I have found that 'preaching the gospel' of new, environmentally friendly practices based on a multi-disciplined approach has been particularly difficult at times. Believe me please, great fun too. Of course getting a message across is helped a great deal when you know you are right.

Conviction is the key element. I knew that what I wanted to do was absolutely right and necessary; well, I would wouldn't I?

Recognition by others of what you are trying to do, even if they are only few in number, is so important and being encouraged to talk and write about 'your topic' expands the impact of what you are trying to do.

After a little while one is presented with the chance of producing guidelines that are intended to be used by the whole industry. This is diffusion. Producing guidelines can lead one into thinking that 'you have arrived' in a technical sense and you may well have 'arrived'. From a business point of view these documents are a disaster since all and sundry have been given the benefit of your knowledge and experience. I have commented recently that reputations are like gold. Being the author of Guidelines can define a reputation but the implicit gold can become tarnished by certain organisations accepting only the cheapest price.



Writing technical documents can be fraught, one of my engineer friends who was also a client, actually found that engineers' reports depressed him on account of the poor way in which they were presented. The complaints that he made were about style, shape and grammar, and the absence of light and shade; he felt that his chosen profession should provide him with enjoyment as well as satisfaction. The worst case that I came across was an engineering report that extended to seven volumes, had little or no structure such as cross-referencing and gave me a headache every time I picked it up; it did nothing for the reputation of the engineers who wrote it or for our profession. I have often wondered what the client made of the report, whether he ever read the thing apart from a list of conclusions. I was in the unfortunate position of having to read every bit of it, several times over.

Idris commented in January last year in his note [Writing is for reading](#) that there seems to be little point in writing things that people will not want to read especially if it brings little pleasure. In my experience technical documents do require reading several times over and this should be in the minds of authors.

Where has the last year gone?

Of course if you like writing then it can show through in the text.

I must finish on a positive note. Emerson was right. Being recognised for your expertise and your contribution to engineering is very special and when clients tell you that and bring you interesting things to do then all is well in the world.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director

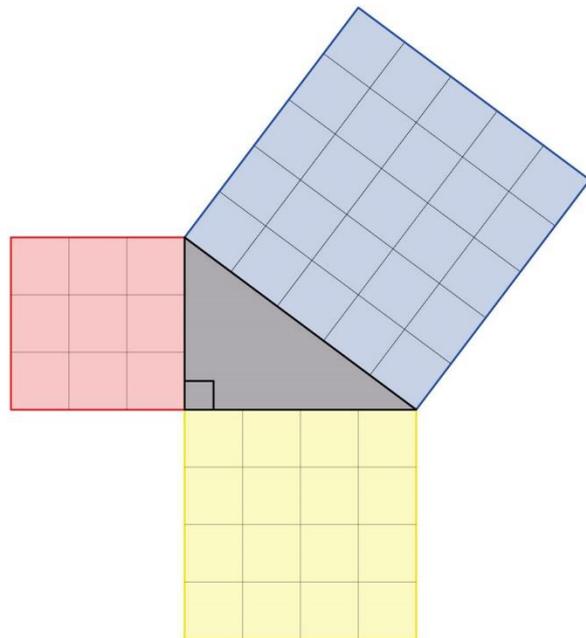
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Preparing young people for the world of work is being neglected.

It seems that in schools basic life skills and tools are only weakly put in front of pupils without much emphasis being placed on their importance. This situation is having a seriously negative impact on the ability of the construction industry to deliver urgently-needed houses and infrastructure.

In The Times on August 18th last year it was reported that “There are too few people entering construction”. In the industry we are all aware that ‘we’ are not turning out enough carpenters, bricklayers and plasterers never mind a host of other professionals. These people need to measure, weigh and calculate a hundred times a day and basic mathematics is fundamental if they are to work successfully.

In a workshop dealing with skills in the construction industry which was held a few years ago our MD Ivor Richards was asked to present to specialists in education what aspects of construction he thought should be taught in schools. Ivor’s description of ‘soft’, sustainable, green engineering involving fauna and flora was well received but he caused great dismay amongst the audience when he mentioned that Pythagoras is a basic requirement and illustrated the famous theorem with a simple diagram. In schools it seems that geometry is a ‘dead duck’, but in practice the theorem is the 3.4.5 rule by which an engineer or a tradesman establishes a right angle, once learned and applied, it is never forgotten. Few in Ivor’s audience even knew what a right angle was. Basic knowledge relating to circles and gradients, never mind densities and weights and measures in both imperial and metric systems, were beyond them. We still get involved in imperial measures when we are involved with older buildings, and some not so old.



A Minister for Education said only recently that children should learn their times tables by heart and was ridiculed for saying so because computers will now provide the answers. But if you’ve just dropped your mobile phone or lap top down a manhole, what then? In our time we have all dropped things down manholes haven’t we?

Many universities have to run ‘catch up’ courses for undergraduates who are not sufficiently numerate. On November 11th 2015 The Times reported that Mr John Longworth, the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce was complaining that many school leavers and even graduates were unemployable because they lacked people skills and a basic knowledge of mathematics. A study conducted for the chambers showed that 69% of employers felt that schools were not doing enough to prepare young people for the world of work.

Recent comment in educational circles focussed on the experience of introducing a group of Chinese teachers into an English school and how they found that the classes were generally unruly and difficult

to manage. The Chinese are used to discipline and they teach by rote. UK educationalists consider that teaching by rote is not the best way to educate people and inculcate knowledge. Since teaching disciplined children what to do is accepted here as being totally wrong I would say that our system of educating people has lost its [sense of purpose](#). Melanie Philips, writing in The Times on 10th August 2015, believed that our young people are ‘trapped within their own limitations’ of imagination and curiosity and with little prospect of release. The UK approved approach is to value a child’s innate qualities more highly than anything that can be imparted by the teacher.

The undisciplined approach in teaching in the UK is in marked contrast to what we find in the world of work generally and especially in environmental management which I experience daily at RML. In the environmental sector one is told what to do by way of regulations which control every aspect of the work of many environmental specialists. Imagination and curiosity are not encouraged. Ivor and I fret daily that regulation destroys innovation and more importantly on a personal level the joys of discovery about nature and the environment.

This reversal of the approach between school and work is striking and both approaches seem to be wrong. We need some kind of balance between opposing ideals. I fear that in most schools this balance is absent. In their application, but not their intent, regulations seems to be misplaced in a field such as environmental management where diversity and change is the norm. [Don’t we need a reasonable sprinkling of common sense, a sense of purpose?](#)

Kind regards

Idris

Senior Ranter and Problem Solver

February 2016

AVENUES TO POWER:

15th Century to the Age of Enlightenment

We take a step back in history, to before the so called Age of Enlightenment to a time when the medieval world was dying. Gunpowder broke the power of the Barons and brought down their castle walls and suddenly they could appreciate the finer qualities of where they lived as a view from a window or a saddle. Appreciation of countryside for all our late medieval ancestors included the pleasure derived from observing fecundity, and feeling the comfort and safety provided by well-tended, familiar agricultural home-places.

Released from their defensive walls, the medieval landed classes began managing the semi-wilderness of hunting forest to create a setting for displaying wealth and to add pleasures to the excitement of the chase. With special licences the wealthy, with royal favour, could empark smaller areas of land to keep deer close to their homes. These parks were laid out and managed to provide a setting for the hunt as a display of wealth and influence. They built towers for elevated non-participants so that they could watch the hunt and admire the skill of the hunters. Banqueting halls were built close to where the course of the hunt was designed to terminate. Here lavish feasts were laid on for the hunters and their guests. Indeed, today we use a stylised version of these places for horse racing. Signs of these

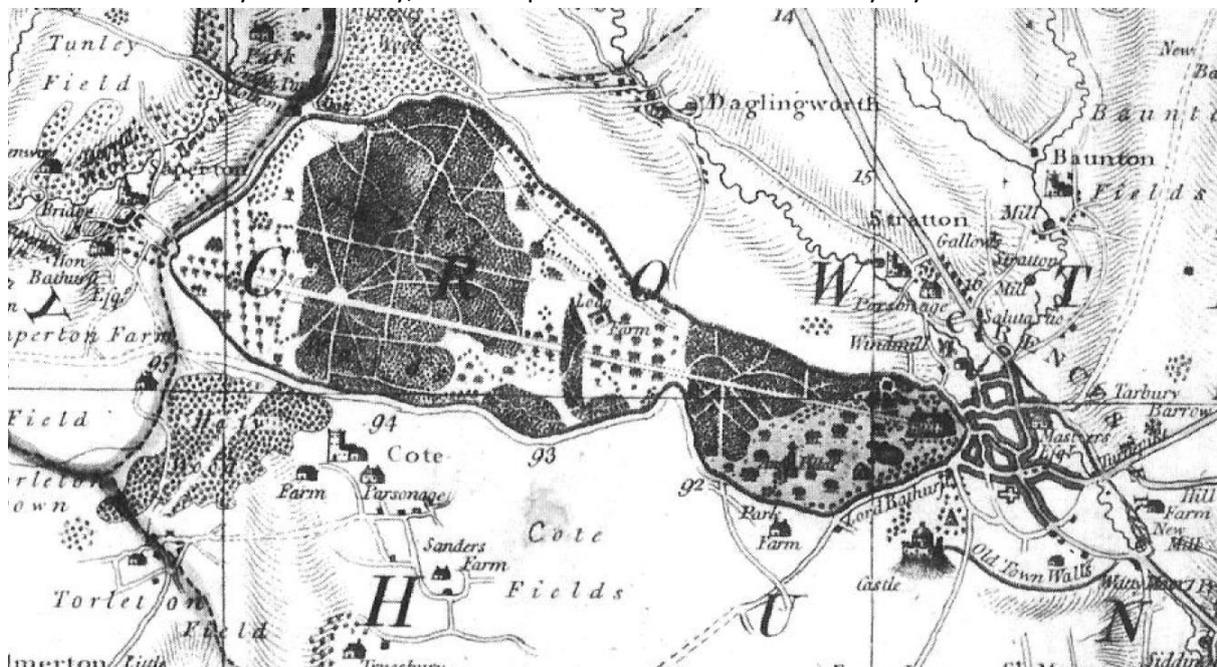
high status landscapes with their stands of ancient trees can still be found today influencing our modern patterns of land use.

Early in the third millennium RML were appointed by the Irish Government to research and develop an inventory of heritage gardens and historic designed landscapes throughout the 26 counties of Ireland¹. Historic mapping and fieldwork showed us how the politics of power and religion had effected a working landscape. Here we found evidence of post medieval designed landscapes created for 16th and 17th century English and Scottish adventurers who settled and created 'plantation' communities. These people also designed estate landscapes which were arrogantly superimposed on the homeplaces of Irish people.

Similar places were being created in Britain and in Europe although perhaps created with less violence. This was a time when formality burst from the bounds of orderly gardens and orchards and brazenly marched out across open countryside. Avenues of trees were set in straight alignments or following drives and boundaries. The avenue was a symbol of control; protecting and territorial; a demonstration of power and status.

In Ireland the newly powerful adventurers built brash houses that became the focus of new estates. They planted straight avenues that trampled the rights of the local population. Avenues would conjoin with those of neighbouring estates to demonstrate shared politics, cooperation and fealty. Some Irish counties must have become spider's webs of loyalty that expressed the territorial control and political power of the new masters. Indeed some estates were laid out to demonstrate changing loyalties.

There is the famous, but now lost, landscape laid out with hedges and avenues in the form of a thistle that was visible only from the sky, which expressed its owner's secret loyalty to the Stuart cause.



Cirencester Park, Gloucestershire 1777. Extract from the Map of Gloucestershire by Isaac Taylor, published 1777. Note the way that the straight alignment through the park and the radiating avenues extend into the rural landscape and even mimic the radiating Roman Roads that meet in Cirencester.

¹ <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/Surveys/Gardens/>

As an aside, I should mention that the long-suffering British, and Irish, both peasants and their animals, who had managed our landscapes over countless generations, suffered the consequences of enlightened farming when it brought about the destructive Acts of Enclosure.

“Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay”

commented Oliver Goldsmith in 1770.

We may boast of our undulating British landscapes of fields, hedges, drystone walls and woods, yet it is a deeply impoverished version that we have inherited. The Enclosure Movement resulted in the neat ordering and enclosure of the landscape with quickthorn hedges. Perhaps for the first time in British history designs for entire parishes were drawn-up and then the landscape modified wholesale to comply. Consider the meandering streams that were straightened; the dingles, hollows and hidden corners that were filled and drained; the woods and wood-pastures cleared; ancient springs defiled and their yew trees felled, sunken lanes buried, huge old pollard trees that marked ancient boundaries cut down, wet floral meadows lost and much-loved waste ‘improved’. All destroyed in the name of enlightenment and rationalisation. And to add further injury the country people, who for generations uncounted had worked the soil, were cast from their home-places to become urban fodder.

In Welsh the word for home-place is ‘cynefin’, while pining for a lost home place is hiraeth. I take this a bit further in my next email.

Kind regards

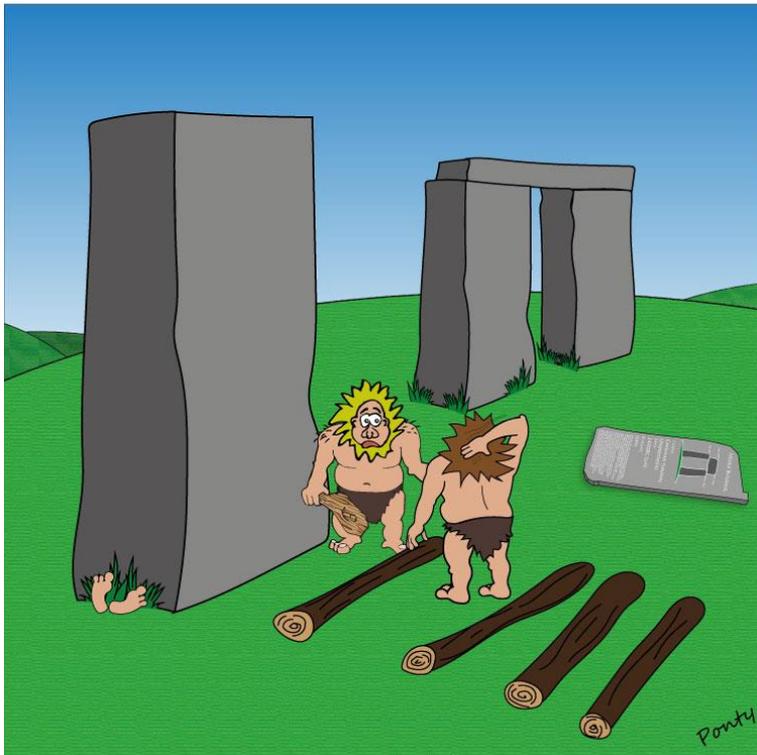
Andrew

Principal Landscape Architect

February 2016

Wait for a mammoth, none come and then several come together

Work on our stone circle in the world's navel continues apace. Already the inner ring of stones are being installed and the plain is echoing with the cries and shouts of eager construction workers. "A little to me. Now to you, Blart. Up a bit your end Grunt, to your left. That's it, mind your head, Fred."



"Easy with the front end, Grunt...That's it, hard over, hard over."

"Mind where you step, Fred, it's a big hole."

"We're over the hole now, is that near enough?"

"It's spot on, Blart!"

"No! A tad to your left, that's right, no I mean that's wrong!"

Don't push Blart! Don't let go, Grunt!"

"Whoops!"

"Where's Fred. FRED! Has anyone seen Fred? FRED!"

Our one time local procurement professional, Mr Purchase, has

found a warm welcome with the Chief Refusals Officer in the Refusals Team of the Permits and Licences Section and his team and they are chasing clouds somewhere near the Gogmagog Hills. A great relief to us all. As I am patting myself on the back and celebrating progress with a short nap I am disturbed by a lot of shouting. When I open my eyes I see it is a group of young men and women smartly dressed in business furs. They are standing around and holding some lumps of wood to their ears and talking loudly and importantly. I catch one of these 'guys' shouting, "That's good for me, if it's good for you. I'll get me people to talk to your people and we can put this one to bed."

Nearby a young woman is squeaking at her lump of wood about 'rolled up milestones', 'critical paths' and 'hold points'. My! They sound really clever.

"Good afternoon." I say to them as a group. *"Is there anything I can do to help?"*

A large male voice by my right ear shouts, *"Hey, we are from JacoCapitPBaecAtkcom."* I assume he is directing this statement at his lump of wood, but then he repeats it more loudly and I realise he's speaking to me.

"We are here on behalf of our big international client to locate a site to build stone monument, which we understand is the world's second most important navel."

"No it's the world's only and most important navel and I am already building a stone circle here on behalf of my client."

Without a break in his flow he continues, *“We are from JacoCapitPBaecAtkcom Consulting and we are bigger and more international than you and we know better too, because we’ve got an office abroad and lots of slaves and a strap line after our name.”* He draws breath *“So, there!.....And our monument is going to be bigger than yours!”*

His colleagues gathered around us and nodded energetically in agreement.

“What will it look like?” I ask, hoping to find a happy compromise.

“It is to be of finely cut stone blocks, laid 755ft wide by 655 ft. long and 480 ft. high with sloping triangular sides that meet at the top”.

I pause to consider my options. Then, *“I don’t think we can help you. All the land is taken hereabouts.”* I tut-tut sympathetically and watch their disappointment.

Some weeks later rumours of a huge contract reached us. Apparently, the Egypt office of JacoCapitPBaecAtkcom Consulting have plans to build something big over there. I congratulate myself on the way in which I have cleverly encouraged the competition to build their pointed but completely pointless stone monument in such an uncivilised corner of the world.

“I wonder where Fred went”.

Kind regards

Idris

Senior Ranter and Problem Solver

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55 WELL STREET, RUTHIN, DENBIGHSHIRE LL15 1AF

Tel +44(0)1824 704366, Fax +44(0)1824 705450

email: rml@rmlconsult.com web: www.rmlconsult.com

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