

July 2019

AND THE NAME OF THE GAME IS?

Working with nature.

Designing a new highway is not a problem from an engineering point of view. Providing an alignment that is 'sweet' in terms of the new road fitting into the existing topography is something that is second nature for an engineer, more is involved than just balancing the cut and fill of earthworks. Well I think so anyway. Mind you preferences and fashions do change in engineering circles, for example some engineers have been designing roads with lots of sweeping curves and relatively short straights and others using longer straights and short curves. You will find examples of both approaches up and down the country. Try the Ludlow bypass for an example of the first and the Abergavenny bypass for one of the second. Neither of these were designed by us but I have travelled both of them very frequently and the contrasting experience of driving along them hits me every time I use them. Overtaking a slower vehicle is possible on both roads but requires a change in approach between doing the manoeuvre on one road compared with the other.

These days' problems arise when the environmental elements of a team can raise difficult issues that are not based on recent design preferences but on more fundamental issues. For example we have heard environmental designers saying 'Should we be building a new road at all?' "You want to do what? Do you really want to do this here?" My colleagues wonder what games these people are playing at and why they are involved in designing infrastructure at all. None of us can afford to play games. Around what are serious issues involving wellbeing of all of us.

In a multidisciplinary team coordinating these views is no easy matter, even for someone who is experienced in dealing with these potentially disruptive elements and is probably not one that a 'run-of-the-mill' engineer can take on. At RML these tasks have fallen into the laps of experienced landscape specialists who may have been trained as landscape architects but have worked in an engineering environment for years. Coordinating the competing views that abound in the environmental world calls for tact and a broad understanding of what is reasonable and achievable. Having differing views is healthy but dogma and prejudice can get in the way of reasonable design solutions that the client and the team, especially the engineers can accept, ones that they once were able to ignore. Construction has moved on and in general I would say that the industry now has a healthy respect for nature. We still need better infrastructure by way of roads, railways and pipelines and lots more of it if we are to improve wellbeing.

This is not a game and our approach is one that recognises the inherent adaptability of nature as well as its ability to accommodate our needs. What we do guard against is abusing nature and our experience of working with nature helps us to meet dogma and prejudice with reasoned arguments and solutions. As a word exploitation has many negative connotations but many years ago John Locke said that 'Nature never makes excellent things for man or no usage'. We believe in exploiting this capacity of nature to make 'excellent things' by using it respectfully.

DO YOU EVER FEEL LEFT OUT?

It is that time of year, the solstice is behind us and Idris tells me that the mammoths are getting twitchy. I am beginning to feel twitchy too because I think that I am on the outside of a lot of things that other people are excited about. We keep being confronted by more and more requests for analyses on obtuse topics and I feel that I must be missing something. To address or avoid this I have been advised to consider joining the gang who seem to be hell bent on felling trees to make paper and filling the resulting pages with garbage that serves no useful purpose. Andrew comes across these people quite frequently and he tells me that they are part of the 'let's have one of those so that we don't feel left out' school of thought. I am sure that you have come across them too. They add very little to life or progress, but add considerably to verbiage, lost trees and stress in fellow humans. If we are not careful we will end up with far fewer trees – and I like trees.

Where can one find these people? I do not recommend that you waste your time in seeking them out. Have no fear - they will find you in due course, if you are one of those who like making or doing things that would improve our wellbeing.

What these people will demand alongside detailed designs, environmental assessments and method statements are a series of documents dealing with:

- A Health Impact Assessment
- A Language Impact Assessment (in Wales)
- An Economic Impact Assessment
- A Social Inclusion Report
- An equality impact assessment
- A register of thoughts and actions relating to the wellbeing of future generations (in Wales)
- An assessment of the cumulative effects of different proposals, not only yours.

Of course there may be more but producing this list has just wearied me.

Is there any guidance on what these weighty-sounding documents should contain and how the topics should be approached? Not really. I would say that you are on your own. So sit down quietly and reflect on what this is all about. You might be inclined to think these people who are asking for more and more belong to 'back-watchers anonymous' but I couldn't possibly comment.

What this means is that every thought, calculation or line on a drawing has to be justified. And this justification will involve a considerable amount of further study, research and discussion with third, and fourth, parties whose opinions can carry considerable weight. To cause you more concern, many of these groups with whom you will hold discussions will take no responsibility for any responses that they might make on your work. All in all you know my feeling about where over-analysis can take us – nowhere at all since the end result is so often paralysis. Examples of this abound all around us.

Yes, you may feel that you are very much on your own but talk to us, 'it's good to talk' as someone once said!

We used to write guidelines on many things in years gone by, so watch this space. We may find the time to write a few words about some of the topics.

Ivor

Put some nice trees at the top, or the Guidelines??

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