

RML Newsletter round-up

May 2016

FORGING A PATH

Which came first, roads or settlements?

The building of roads might be considered the work of great civilisations, but the straightest roads tend to be the work of dictators or military men because they can get from A to B quickly to impose on their citizens. Except for a period of Roman rule, British roads have in general been democratically aligned, that is, they politely step aside to avoid conflict and then do strange things when elected politicians get a bee in their bonnet. A favourite quote of Ivor's is Blake's comment that 'Improvements make straight roads but winding roads are the roads of genius.' There is also a poem by G.K. Chesterton which states 'The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.' Without wishing to cast aspersions, I suspect the same might also apply to Welsh, Scottish and Irish roads too!

Much of RML's work is road related and demands a wide range of professional disciplines and skills. Road design and construction involves us, as landscape architects, in trying to resolve the contradiction between the natural grain and weathered texture of the landscape on one hand and the large scale and sweeping trajectory of fast modern travel. These roads are engineered for speed and safety and take the most convenient route. Of course today roads are created with sinuous alignments that are surfaced in smooth flexible surfaces.



What are the ancient origins of modern roads? Imagine being part of a group of Mesolithic hunters walking through flat open tundra around 14,000 years ago. You migrate north following the retreating ice sheets. Your group follows a leader who is carefully picking a convenient and safe route through the undisturbed vegetation, around boulders, along animal tracks, avoiding mires and fording

watercourses at the least dangerous point. Repeat journeys wear a braided path through the vegetation and soils and this guides other travellers.

Your group needs to cross the open tundra to find and hunt prey and seek shelter. Hunting in early post-glacial Britain required hunter-gatherers to follow the seasonal migrations of grazing herds in much the same way that Native Americans once followed the buffalo across the prairie. The herds follow dry ridges and between safe river crossings and the best grazing. Historians and archaeologists speculate that the modern arterial routes through Britain began life as the migration routes of these vast herds[i].

As millennia passed the climate warmed and humans faced a new challenge. Between 14,000 and 8,000 years ago woodland spread across Britain. For a while the Eurasian continent's migrating herds continued to follow their seasonal migration routes. Their grazing maintained broad swathes of open grassland and light scrub and our ancestors continued to hunt. As a matter of course the warmer climate continued to melt the icecaps and eventually sea levels rose. 'The Continent' was finally cut off by what the French call 'Le Manche' around 12,000 years ago. The vast herds could no longer migrate to Britain, allowing woodland, or what Oliver Rackham named 'Wildwood', to dominate[ii]. As woodland developed and the large migrating herbivores became scarce, lightly-built browsing and foraging species grew more common and were able to exploit a woodland territory throughout the year. These included red deer, and wild boar, for example.



Where did humans live in this wildwood and how did they move around? During the slow transition from open tundra to coniferous taiga and then to deciduous temperate woodland, the hunter-gathering Stone Age people continued to follow the more open landscape of former trans-continental routes between established summer, winter and autumn settlements. Gradually they become more settled in tribal groups with defined hunting territory. In other words they responded by changing their way of life in a similar way to the animals they hunted.

Hunting woodland herbivores, as trees tightened their hold on the land, meant penetrating wildwood. Hunting in the confines of woodland requires individuals to stalk prey rather than giving chase, and this encouraged the use of the bow and arrow in place of throwing spears which were previously used by hunting parties.

When moving between settlements and habitual hunting grounds, people would use the line of least resistance through woodland. A fallen tree might divert a path temporarily. Dense growth of bramble, nettle and thorn which thrives under the open canopy when an old tree collapses, would form a barrier that could outlive memory by forcing a diversion that could persist through centuries.

We can only guess at how these Stone Age folk evolved a more settled lifestyle and began to domesticate animals. There are theories that farmers arriving from Europe gradually displaced the nomadic hunters. Other ideas suggest that both these lifestyles evolved together, with hunters, herders and then farmers trading and interbreeding. Bringing people together allowed them to

exchange ideas and technology and meant that change would have occurred in a diffuse manner. What is important in this story is that people's horizons shrank even more as they came to depend on a fixed territory that provided for all their needs throughout their lives. From each Neolithic farming settlement a network of paths radiated out only as far as necessary to reach the furthest useful source of fresh water, piece of woodland, waste, marsh, pasture or arable land. Paths became permanent where they were in constant use or where land was enclosed by boundaries.

There would have been no use for regional or national routes because few people left their home-place. Travel across Britain was easier by water. The landscape, or home place, was all they knew and they knew it intimately.

Stone Age paths formed a complex network used through the Bronze and Iron Ages. These ancient routes are almost certainly the foundations of many old country lanes and byways that penetrate the landscape of Britain.

In fact, the vast majority of Britain's wildwood had probably been cleared by the end of the Bronze Age and our modern road network and patterns of settlement are proof of the millennia of diligent domestication and clearance of wildwood.

[i] Christopher Taylor, Roads and Tracks of Britain, Dent, 1979

[ii] Oliver Rackham, Trees and Woodland in The British Landscape, Dent, 1976

Kind regards

Andrew

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May 2016

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT - THINGS SHOULD CHANGE

On Monday 23rd May the Times reported that the government had been criticised for not awarding enough contracts to small firms. In many sectors, firms complain that they suffer from ‘protracted tendering processes, energy-sapping bureaucracy and.....fail-safe civil servants’. We all say “amen” to that. Idris let rip in March, May and July 2015 about how we feel about this topic at RML; we are certainly not alone.

Things should change, because Public Contracts Regulations 2015 saw the removal of pre-qualification questionnaires (PQQs) for contracts valued below EU thresholds.

The end of PQQs for contracts valued below EU thresholds may be a welcome relief from the endless form-filling, and particularly the standard questionnaires which seek information that is completely irrelevant to the project.

But has the baby been thrown out with the bathwater?

The original objective of the PQQ stage was to ensure that a) each firm invited to tender was capable of completing the work to the required standards, and b) any ‘pre-qualified’ firm submitting a price tender could be confident that its bid would not be rejected on grounds of technical or business capability. There is now a real risk that all projects below the EU thresholds will simply be put to ‘open tender’ and many more firms will waste the time and effort needed to submit a valid price. Open tendering is common in Scotland, and Award notices frequently show that 10 or even 20 tenders were submitted for studies and report contracts valued at less than £25,000. As it costs each firm a few thousand pounds in time and effort to prepare a tender, the wasted resources commonly exceed the value of work actually awarded.

Only one bidder can win a contract. A few well-chosen tenderers will ensure competition, but any more is simply an unproductive drain on the economy and, at worst, means that excellent firms are ‘bled dry’ to the point of closure.

If each tender invitation spelt out the criteria by which bidders qualify for consideration, then firms would ‘self-select’. Only those that knew they met the criteria would consider tendering. The documents should state that ‘the successful tender will be required to provide evidence to demonstrate that they meet these criteria, before a contract is awarded’. Only the successful bidder would have to go to the trouble of providing evidence, and everyone would become more efficient and viable. Prices might even fall a little and bottom-lines improve at the same time.

Isn’t that what everyone wants?

Kind regards

Steve

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MIND THE GAP, IT'S FULL OF SEA WATER

Idris tells me that the last time that he visited the continent he walked across. I think that this is an exaggeration, he's not that old, but there is no doubt that in his younger days Idris was keen to seek out new ventures in foreign fields. Some of Idris's wilder comments about his experiences on the continent would be considered un-printable in some circles and politically incorrect too.

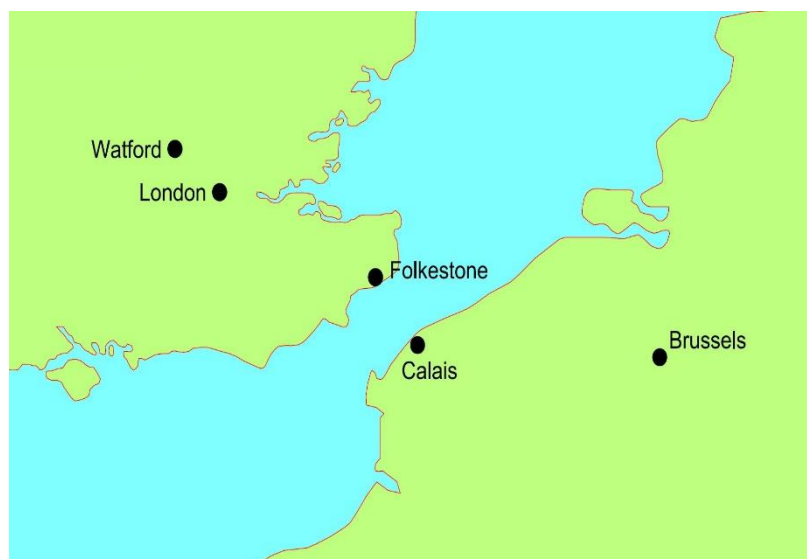
He tells me that far-flung fields were not as foreign as they might appear to some folk now, language and communication was limited to a few grunts and a swing of his club.

A paraphrase and redacted version of his story about seeking work abroad would be along the following lines.

Idris went looking for opportunities to export his undoubted skills and innovative ideas about clearing the wild woods and repairing the damage done to the landscape by the last of the departing mammoths. You may have read Andrew's recent newsletter about "[Forging a path](#)" and the history of the development of roads in Britain. Idris was also exercised about the exploitation of our rich copper resources in North Wales by foreigners who he would quite happily have 'heaved half a brick at' as he says.

Idris had been encouraged to think 'international' by the arch druids based on Ynys Môn (Anglesey) who had been dazzled by the thoughts of unrestricted travel paid for by a new commission that had been set up by people based in the Low Countries. Sometime later Idris was able to reflect that as these people inhabit a low place then their ideas could hardly have the quality that compares with those of us living in more elevated situations, "*After all*", he said, "*Mountains are the beginning and the end of all landscapes and surely such fine thoughts can hardly emanate from people living in low places*" (with apologies to John Ruskin). Never-the-less he went along with the prompting by the druids and he readily admits that he enjoyed the experience. After all the effort for little result he consoles himself with the thought that travel broadens the mind and it was fun whilst it lasted.

Idris came back from these ventures with some very interesting opportunities for collaboration but most if not all of them were won as a result of his own efforts. Without doubt there was need everywhere for 'things' to be improved so he came back and produced 'Guidance', but hauling stone tablets around really did his



hoard nor his back no good at all. It's strange isn't it how some ideas, like tablets of stone being useful for disseminating ideas, hang around for ages.

It transpired that brown-bears could still be found on the continent and that brown envelopes as well as brown bears were quite common over there. The last brown bears had long disappeared at home and as a result Idris lacked experience of brown things whatever they were made of; and anyway he had experience of a new home-grown legal system, a common law which would apply to everyone at home and had been under development for some time. Even in those days, before the 'dark ages' as we now know them, these British laws gave equal rights to both men and women and shared property equally amongst the family. These were ground-breaking ideas that justified Idris in his belief that he was ahead of the game and he was not at all impressed by codes that were in use abroad, codes that had been introduced by dictators. Blimey, they were even talking about straightening roads. Where was the genius in that?

Despite the obvious lack of humour that Idris found during his travels he recalled that the people over there had even arranged song contests. These were over blown politically and nothing compared with what we had at home. In many of our competitions all the contestants sang the same song and it was the adjudicators who were the real stars. There were competitions too for poets and the bards gave the winner a chair which no one was ever allowed to sit on. Now that is class. Variations on this theme still work well in certain parts of the country and one even attracts international contestants.

Kind regards

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