

November 2017

STAMP COLLECTING

'As everyone knows, philately gets you nowhere'

Ben Macintyre – Sunday Times 29th April, 2017.

Ben Macintyre was writing about US President Quincy Adams making his father-in-law Superintendent of Stamps in the USA, who then slipped into obscurity. Professor Rutherford thought that apart from mathematicians and physicists most scientists were little better than stamp collectors.

Ben's comment along with the professor's struck a chord with me. Professor Rutherford may have had a point, I reckon that I was stamp collecting when I studied geology at UCL. Many scientists may have been stamp collectors but when engineers realised that they needed advice on environmental matters botanists and ecologists became useful members of a construction team. In the 1970s and 1980s I saw site investigations used by civil engineers dealing with derelict and contaminated land morph into site characterisations which demanded to be interpreted by multidisciplinary teams. Then the practice spread across all facets of civil engineering.

Increasingly we are finding that data collection has become a significant element of our work alongside design. We use the data which we have collected as the basis for preparing method statements for example. Developing a method of how to get something done is one aspect of design which has always existed but was never discussed outside the drawing office. Indeed I found some engineers were averse to discussing their work with anyone else and I know that in the 1960s my progress as an engineer suffered as a result. Never once did I hear anyone discuss their work for the benefit of the rest of their colleagues.



Actually writing the method down and presenting it to your colleagues or in public is a particularly important aspect of today's approach that brings the engineer's thinking out into the open and raises questions that have to be answered. This helps engineers to progress in their profession.

Some 40 years ago I had been asked to produce conventional results with materials that were new to civil engineers. I felt that we needed to work with 'stamp collectors' and expand the design team if we were to succeed. The environmental lobby grew quite quickly through the 80s and 90s. The team witnessed further progress into complex assessments on which to base the environmental impact of our activities, both actual impacts and forecasted ones. The depth of data and analysis that is required to carry out these assessments can be exhaustive because the public and their representatives are encouraged by regulations and regulators to ask simple questions. When was nature simple?

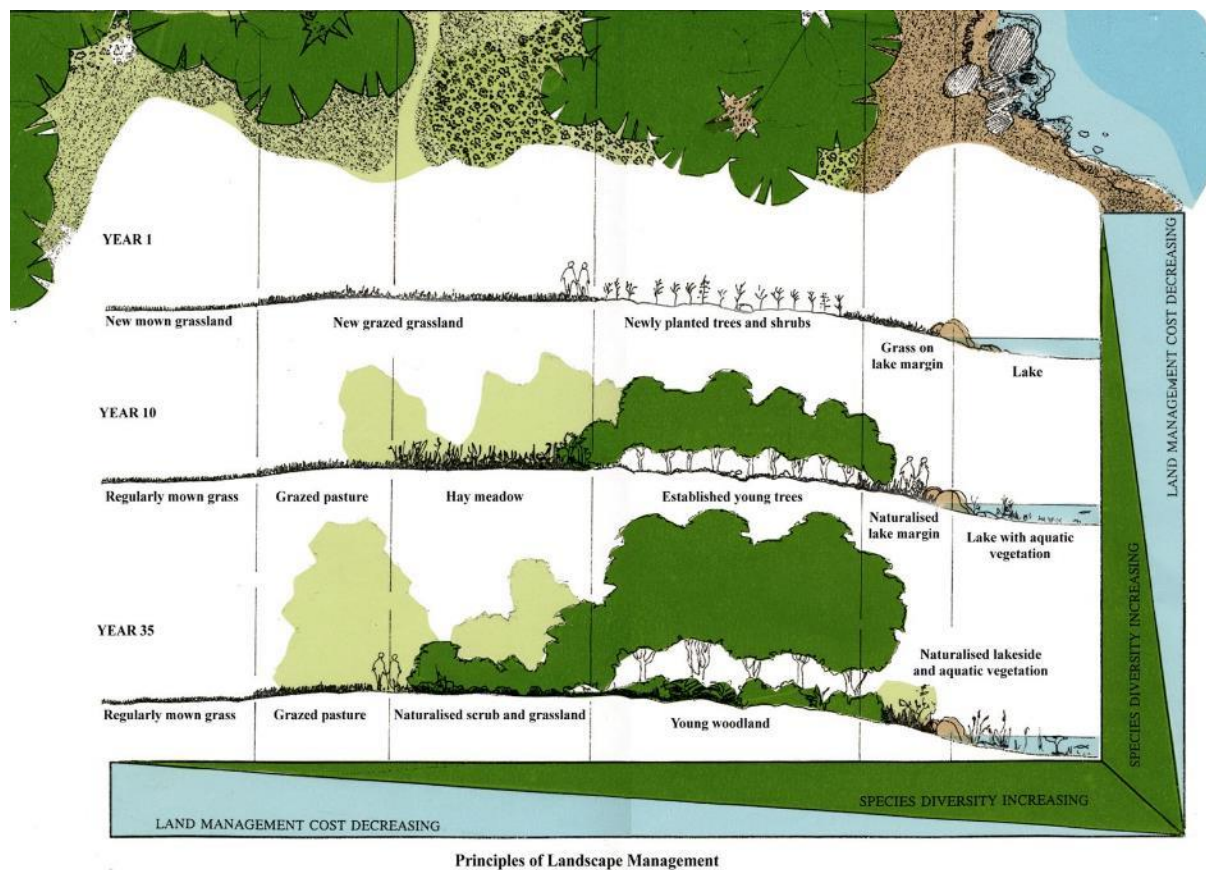
The physical processes involved in digging and backfilling a trench has not changed that much but the activities that surround it have. Multi-disciplined teams are a response to society's demand that the environment must be respected.

Collecting and cataloguing information can be a valuable exercise. But only of real value in civil engineering when the purpose is to better inform those who have to design and carry out work. In my world this work usually involves disturbing soils as well as fauna and flora in order to build things. Conforming to the regulators' requirements, box ticking, is not so difficult but working with nature and pleasing the public is not so simple.

Being better informed by the data is only half the battle. One needs to be wise as well. Wisdom is derived from experience. On this point I feel a little comfortable with RML offering advice since my colleagues have a great deal of experience, and dare I say it wisdom too. They have been at the forefront of seeing the demand for more and more information about construction methods and results grow over the last 40 years. Looking back is something that I can do and I marvel at the steps that have been taken by civil engineers to embrace nature. The trick then is not to let over-analysis lead to paralysis.

I am confident that our experience in managing environments is the key to a successful end result since time is equally as important an element as are processes and materials in influencing how nature works. Management is all about time and time is of the essence when one is working with nature.

It is pleasing to be able to illustrate in a favourite diagram of mine how management, time, process and materials combine to influence a complicated thing such as landscape development.



Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd.

Tsunami – a rapidly rising tide or wave that can be overwhelming.

Mr. Leo Quinn, at Balfour Beatty, told us a few months ago that a tsunami of work is heading our way, well I hope so for the sake of all of us. We have been through some lean years and we all know that our infrastructure



is poor when measured using a national or an international yardstick. I discussed this last month when Ivor talked about connectivity. Ivor learned at a meeting of the ICE last year that in the last 10 years, yes 10 years, the Welsh Assembly has invested just £30million in Welsh railways. It strikes me that the impact of that amount of expenditure is too small to measure. In the last 3 years or so £400million has been spent on cycle ways in London. Have you had any discussions about cycle ways and cyclists with London taxi drivers recently? If so then I guess that your ears were well scorched. I would say that cycle ways were a political 'nice to have' for London, nice for cyclists in London too if you ignore the particulates. Cyclists face extreme dangers every day in all of our urban areas and in narrow winding roads so loved by William Blake.

But what about the rest of us?

I hope that some of this tsunami reaches parts of the country that other programmes have failed to do without actually damaging what is there already. Avalanches are also short term events that can have a similar impact as tsunamis. In mountainous areas avalanches are characterised as being out of control, over in a flash and accompanied by a great deal of noise. Let's hope that our National Infrastructure Commission's call for a National Infrastructure Assessment is not just a lot of noise and the assessment will actually lead to a plan that might be politically fireproof and deliverable. Not much chance of that since the Commission reports directly to the Chancellor and it is for the government to decide how and presumably when the Commission's recommendations should be taken forward as *policy* (my italics).

When did a fine policy butter any parsnips?

In the last few years in civil engineering we have become used to preparing and dealing with assessments and applying them to agreed programmes of deliverables. In projects where RML have been involved the objectives have been delivered too since they are part of an enforceable contract. Many of the people serving on the Commission are eminent leaders in our field so they should know what assessments are for and the impact which they have had on our working practices. Are they wasting their time? Let's hope not.

On reflection one cannot imagine for one moment that the government, any government, will allow itself to be bound by such an assessment no matter how well considered. So what is the point? Politicians may well be better informed but none the wiser.

I hope that Mr Quinn has seen something coming that really exists. We had better get ready.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd.



‘If this sounds unduly simple then you must have misunderstood what I have said’

Alan Greenspan.

Alan Greenspan was talking about the management of major economies, something that is a complete mystery to most people including bankers, so he was correct in warning his audience not to jump to conclusions. Managing the environment can be made to sound simple and deceptively straightforward too, but it never is.

Like economies ‘the environment’ is a most complex set of infinitely variable conditions and involves as players, such as plants and animals who do not always follow predetermined rules. As well as materials like soils that are complex systems in their own right.

Construction always involves disturbing some existing conditions and restoring a site to those original conditions sounds simple enough and method statements can be prepared that have this as a long term aim. However nature can only work slowly in restoring some disturbance and we aim to help nature along the way by implementing long term programmes that are based on our emotional and technical understanding of the place where we are working. So if our proposals sound simple then as Alan Greenspan has suggested you have misunderstood what we have said. Our methods are based on a deep understanding of place, materials and time.

But in public one must address these things simply so that all members of the team and outsiders understand what is required and this is the age old problem. Distilling a myriad of facts and variables into a seemingly simple analysis can lead to misunderstandings.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd.

Faint heart ne'er won fair hand

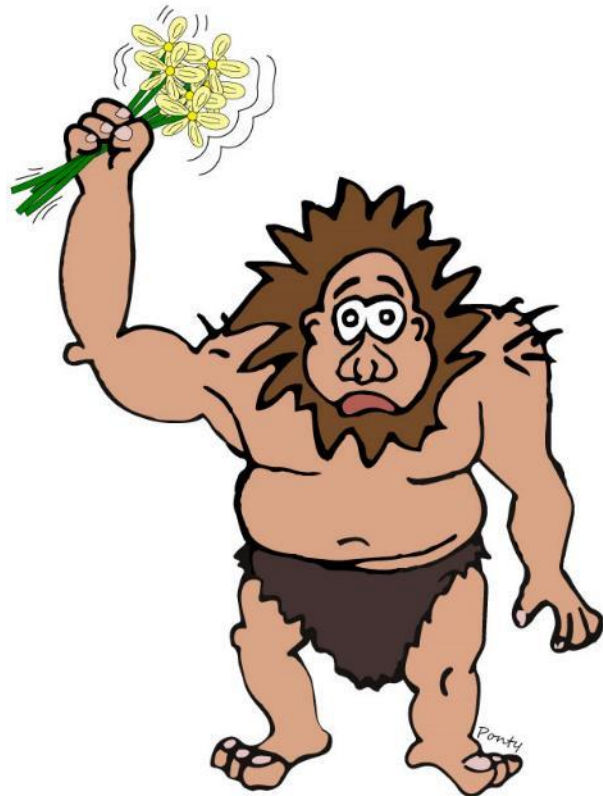
proverb

Faint hearts never won a tender either.

How do you put a tender together, or win a 'fair hand', certainly with a heart full of hope, otherwise why bother?

Herewith a few thoughts based on years of experience about what you need/must do in order to put a meaningful tender together - or win a fair hand:

- Be professional – analyse but don't paralyse
- Read the brief – (body) language is important
- Have an understanding of what is required – if in doubt ask
- Have a clear view of your own capabilities and capacity – know your strengths
- Have a clear understanding of your priorities – are you keen?
- Display a positive approach – show that you are really interested
- Make your best offer - don't be half-hearted
- Presentation is important – look your best
- Make an offer that meets the needs - pitch it just right, no more no less
- Suggest a programme that is right for both parties – long or short term
- All of this must lead to a contract – with witnesses "I do" will be enough



Then you have to perform on price and programme – deliver what you have promised.

I am very pleased to note that RML have been awarded some important projects in the last few months so we must be doing something right.

Kind regards

Idris

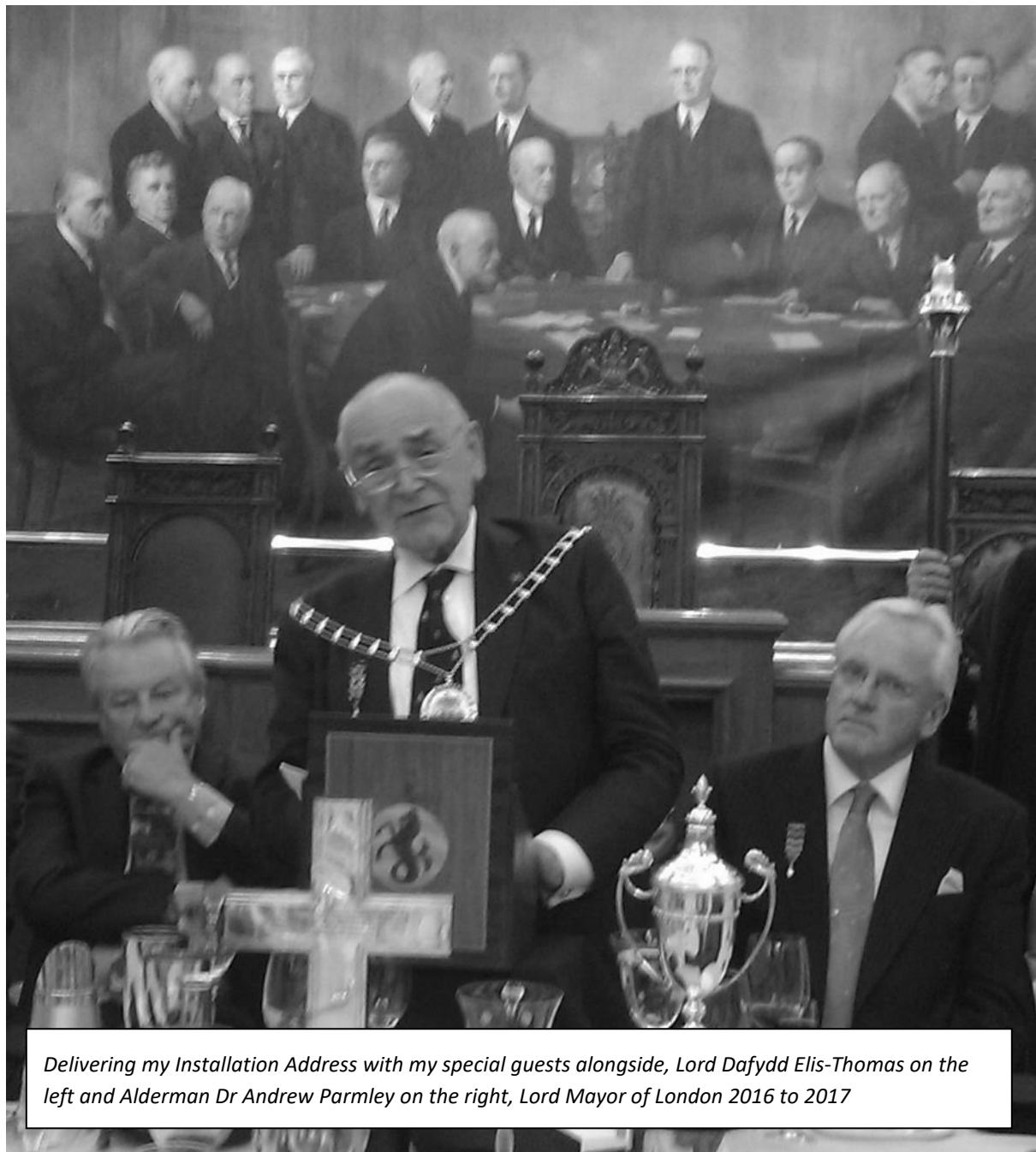
Chief ranter and problem solver
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EMOTION AND TRUST – THE CATALYST FOR PROGRESS

“Economic growth along with environmental damage and human tragedy was the norm until 1960s; then we had the disaster at Aberfan. The disaster changed everything...Marjorie and I entered a world driven by emotion and trust.”

Ivor Richards, July 2013.

In July 2013 I was installed as Master of the Worshipful Company of Water Conservators, a livery company in the City of London. The Company's objective is to promote the science, art and practice of water and environmental management. In my address to the Company at my installation I recalled my experience as an engineer at Aberfan on the morning of the disaster in October 1966 and how that affected the rest of my life. I explained that the general reaction to the disaster was to recognise that mineral waste heaps needed to be better managed.



Delivering my Installation Address with my special guests alongside, Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas on the left and Alderman Dr Andrew Parmley on the right, Lord Mayor of London 2016 to 2017

I related how my wife Marjorie and I experienced and saw things very differently. We entered an emerging world, a world that was driven by two factors: emotion and trust – first a passionate vision for improving lives in severely degraded societies - and secondly trust from technical and political managers that we would deliver that vision. Their trust was essential if we were to make progress because there were no guidelines or guidance available to us. We discovered that we had to lead and learn as well as unfold the future, step by step. A future that would involve making new landscapes with the intention of developing new lives. Experience was valued but not allowed to hinder. As engineers we bent other disciplines to our will. Taking the lead was exciting. In 2009 Otto Scharmer called this 'leading from an emerging future' and in his words involves seeing an opportunity to make

a difference, connecting personally with what wants to emerge, and then acting quickly to gain momentum.

Following Aberfan my emotions did run purposefully and some of us did move quickly to deal with environmental disasters all over Wales. After visiting Snowdon and the adjacent slate quarries I reported "These tips are not a danger to the public, but it is obscene that such dereliction exists in this most beautiful place". Many of my projects then progressed on this heart-centred analysis. Hwyl and trust had penetrated to the very top of the administration, so different from today's situation where facts and compliance with regulations are required before anything can happen. Hwyl was pure emotion. Trust was the catalyst for progress.

I fretted in front of my fellow Conservators in 2013 and still do today that innovation and imagination, hwyl and emotion, are incompatible with regulation and regulators. I feel that due to over-reliance on regulations the progress made by young professionals will suffer as a consequence. Regulations induce stubbornness and I have discussed this only recently when I mentioned in September the approach favoured by Neil deGrasse Tyson.

What we experience at RML is that approval for most actions comes through expensive hierarchies with variable competences at different levels whereas all of this used to reside with a single person who trusted fellow professionals.

Trust and emotion were important then and surely they are today aren't they? Sadly I believe that trust has all but disappeared and a friend, Edward Greenhalgh, commented on this to me the other day in response to my 'Reflections 2017' saying that "Your reflections are spot on, honesty, integrity, trust are a thing of the past, the attitude today is to get away with it and just do enough to get paid! You should publish your reflections for all to read, particularly in training manuals. One day standards might re-appear."

We have printed some newsletter under 'Why work with nature', let us know if you want a hard copy. I believe that the day of the page is returning. Emails and PowerPoint are so 20th century. Communication with one another is changing so quickly but the printed word is still valued.

Along with Idris and other colleagues at RML I try to show our emotional attachment to our work. Some clients ask us to help them with quite tricky situations like dormice that will not learn that bat boxes are supposed to be for bats, slopes that fail in inaccessible locations and new highways needed through sensitive landscapes.

We ask them all to hold on to their trust in us.

Kind regards

Ivor

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