

October 2019

‘EVENTS DEAR BOY, EVENTS’ – ATTRIBUTED TO HAROLD MACMILLAN

It seems that the prime minister was asked what could throw his government off course and he was reported as saying ‘events, dear boy events’. Occasionally one is involved in an event that that can change a great many things. Some events are newsworthy for the wrong reasons but the resulting changes have a long-lasting benefit. The history of the construction industry right up to the present day is littered with ‘events’. The disaster at Aberfan in 1966 is one event of a great many that I have taken an interest in in the last 50 years or so. I was on the site at Aberfan that grey 20<sup>th</sup>. October morning trying to work out how much of the adjacent large diameter water mains had been carried away in the slide. Many years’ earlier two important water mains had been laid immediately upslope of the school buildings in the bed of the long-abandoned Glamorganshire Canal. The old canal bed provided a very practical route down the densely populated valley for these large diameter pipes which carried water from the Brecon Beacons down to Cardiff and adjoining areas. The torrent of coal waste stripped the mountain side of its surface soil and a wave of soil in front of the actual mine waste carried away the water mains. Later I calculated that about 2million gallons of water escaped into the toe of that he slide and made a desperate situation much worse. The water supplies to a great many people in Southeast Wales were badly affected.

A few days later I was able to start making enquiries with suppliers about materials that we would be needing to replace the water mains that had been lost. We needed steel pipes that would be laid as temporary pipelines to replace those that had been destroyed.

I telephoned a national supplier of steel pipes. I said to the sales manager that my name was Ivor Richards and that I wanted 1400yds of unlined 18” pipes please. “Mr. Richards”, he said, “These will be on a very long delivery where do you want them for?” “Aberfan” I said. There was a moments silence, “Ivor, give me a delivery address, how soon do you want them?” I have never forgotten that conversation, how could one?

I hope that this illustrates the way in which events can affect people.

What I saw at Aberfan and found in other villages around Wales were communities suffering neglect and indeed abuse one might say because their quality of life has been squandered for the sake of jobs and because of a lack of foresight and imagination on the part of those managing the industries.

It took a disaster to bring us all up short. At the time George Thomas, the Secretary of State for wales, said that this sort of thing must never happen again. Exploiting mineral riches had involved a great deal of environmental damage and many human tragedies. After Aberfan things changed for the better in a number of directions, respect for the environment being just one of them.

I have had the good fortune never personally to experience another event like the one at Aberfan or the need to arrange works in such situations. That conversation about steel pipes ‘gave me a lift’ in what were very dark days.

But on a much lighter note I was told in another conversation about rehabilitating derelict land “You are changing the face of Wales” and in another “Because of what you have done perhaps the children at Aberfan did not die in vain”. I was pleased by the first one and rocked backwards by the second.

Ivor

## GOOD CONNECTIONS ARE VITAL

Mr Andy Haldane, the chief economist at the bank of England, says that the poorest areas in the UK are probably the North east of England and Wales.

The gap between these areas and the richest in the south east of England and London had narrowed between 1900 and 1980 but it has since got much worse now standing at 150%. Mr Haldane put this divergence down to a list of six factors and the first on his list was connectivity. This means that our roads and railways and public transport services are nowhere near good enough to influence the rate of growth that we need to see in these areas. In Wales we are back where we were in 1900!

Assessing our quality of life or wellbeing in Wales is guided by the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which tells us that we must become more prosperous and act in a sustainable way amongst several other objectives by which we must measure our wellbeing.

Improving the physical communication between communities and between businesses is where our highway improvement projects come into the reckoning. Any improvement in the economy due to improved connectivity may be difficult to measure directly but what can be measured is the cost of hold-ups at circulation 'black spots' around the major ports for example. These hold-up-costs run into hundreds of £millions every year so the benefits of removing these will be tangible (when they happen) and can provide confidence to our highway planners that less dramatic improvements in traffic flows do have a beneficial and cumulative impact on the economy. We are told by economists including Mr Haldane that our productivity in the UK is improving only slowly and that the rate of increase will have to improve if we want to spend more on improving our quality of life.

So let's get on with improving the infrastructure.

Idris.

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