

UK Project Management Round Up



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INTRODUCTION

It hardly seems a month since the main project of the year finished – the UK General Election closed with the result we all now know. This completion of the democratic process was supposed to unleash a flood of new or delayed projects but so far there has been little sign of the expected tidal wave. Instead, there are several other projects that have completed, some delayed decisions and the threat of a new megaproject. We also have a few

COMPLETIONS



Photo: British Geological Society

One small but significant project completed this last month. Rats have been eradicated from the island of South Georgia. This may not seem a big deal, unless you are a ground nesting seabird, but rats escaped from ships calling at the Island and multiplied until there were estimated to be millions loose.

These creatures took to eating the only source of food available and hence destroyed more than 90% of the bird population. Now, after a campaign that lasted some 5 years and cost in excess of £7.5 million of which UK government provided £750,000 the island is free from this invasive pest. The first phase completed in 2011 when the overall plan was tested and found to be viable. After an intensive fund raising period which allowed 3 Bolkow – 105 helicopters to be purchased, the second phase, a major drop of poison took place in the first half of 2013.

The final phase was completed by the large poison spreading activity took place. Covering some 100,000 hectares, this is the largest habitat restoration project yet

undertaken. Early results show some significant improvements: the South Georgia pipit has pulled back from the brink of extinction. Other notable varieties on the increase include the South Georgia pintail and several types of albatross.

Another successful project took place millions of miles from Earth – the Philae Lander that touched down – several times – on Comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko has re-booted and sent down 85 seconds worth of data. This is a much bigger deal than it sounds as the data has been transmitted via the orbiting Rosetta satellite which is now being repositioned to improve the strength of signals. All this is being done remotely but a very large multinational project team based at the European Space Agency.

IN PLANNING

It seems that Sir Tim Smit, who was the power behind the Eden Project (right) back in the 1990's, has further plans in mind. Opened in 2001, the Eden Project had a galaxy of project people working on it, including Nicholas Grimshaw who was the designer, Anthony Hunt and Associates as the engineers and Davis Langdon acting as project managers.



Eden Project (photo Plymouth University)

Construction was carried out by the McAlpines, Sir Robert and Alfred, while Arup provided services, economic consultant, environmental engineer and transportation engineer. Land use consultants led the masterplan and landscape design. Overall, the project took over 2½ years to construct, opening to the public in early 2001. Sir Tim is reported to be planning a giant “Ark” that will showcase the West Country. The plan is to construct the Ark on a 230 acre site near Junction 27 of the M5 Motorway. Sir Tim has been quoted as saying he wants to reinvent the way people travel and enjoy where they are. Other attractions are likely to include a themed hotel, outdoor leisure activities, a surf lake and beach. Press reports also claim that there is some opposition to these ambitious plans which it is feared will draw visitors away from existing attractions.

Another new idea is the plan by the British Library who are trying to prevent the decay of a major archive of sound recordings including the voices of famous actors and poets such as Sir Laurence Olivier and Sylvia Plath. Some 500,000 recordings are thought to be at risk and the British Library has received a grant of £9.6 million. According to reports in the Times, another 500,000 are also at risk unless additional funding can be secured. Apparently, the endangered recordings include some of the most recent as recordable CDs but poor design makes them the least reliable. The number of recordings to be saved is mind numbing. Some 25% of the 14,000 acetate lacquer recordings have been transcribed and about 75% of the 8000 cylinder recordings have been digitized. Other formats include reel to reel recordings and cassettes.

MEGA PROJECTS

We seem to have plenty of these! Perhaps the most important but least attractive is the London Super Sewer. Coming in at an estimated £4.2 billion, contracts are being tendered for a planned tunneling start in 2016. The objective of the project is to prevent the release of raw sewage into the River Thames when excessive rainwater run off can flood the Victorian sewer system designed by **Sir Joseph Bazalgette** more than 150 years ago.



Andrew Mitchell, Thames Tideway Tunnel PM
photo courtesy Utility Week

The contract deadline has been extended by a month to allow bids to be ‘sharpened’ as the bids from the two principal bidders were deemed too close to call. The project is badly needed but has attracted quite a lot of criticism over the planning period. Some Members of Parliament claim that Thames Water, the sewer owners, have squandered the £1.5 billion paid to its overseas owners while it has avoided paying corporation tax.

Others are concerned that the tunneling will somehow cause damage to the property values. There has also been criticism of the pay received by the Project Manager, Andrew Mitchell who joined the project from Crossrail earlier this year. Thames Water paid half his long term bonuses he would have lost on the transfer and the total pay package is reputed to be around £900K.

We had expected to hear where the new third runway is to be built, either Heathrow or Gatwick are the front runners with the so-called Boris Island in the Thames considered an outside bet. Now we learn that Manchester is also investing to double its capacity. The 10 year plan includes expansion of Terminal 2, self-service check-in facilities and a larger security hall. The work will also include improvements to Terminal 3 as well as create new food and retail outlets. Press reports claim that plans will allow passengers to go through the United States' immigration process before they board transatlantic flights. Manchester is also planned to be on the route of High Speed 2 and work on this project is due to start in 2017. Airport work is estimated at about £1 billion.

Meanwhile the war of words over possible runways at Gatwick and Heathrow rumbles on. The results of the Airports Commission lead by Sir Andrew Davies was due to report before the General Election but the results were held back and are not now expected for another month. There is some speculation in the press that the Government may kick this particular political football into the long grass, we shall see.

HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

The mega project of the year so far is the Palace of Westminster. The buildings, see below, are falling to pieces.



Palace of Westminster

The original Palace, which is the meeting place of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, was destroyed by a fire in 1834. The new Palace was completed in 1870 after a 30 year build which followed the design competition won by Charles Barry who proposed the popular English Perpendicular Gothic style. Barry was assisted by Augustus Pugin, a leading authority on Gothic architecture and style, who provided designs for the decorations and furnishings of the Palace. As a project, it suffered the usual problems of extensive delays and cost overruns. Both leading architects died before the final construction work was completed. Work on the interior decoration continued well into the twentieth century.

The Palace contains more than 1,100 rooms organised symmetrically around two series of courtyards. The New Palace covers some 8 acres and much of it was reclaimed from the Thames, which is the setting of its principal 873 ft façade, called the River Front. The Palace suffered from bomb damage during the Second World War when the House of Commons was destroyed. Winston Churchill had the site cleared and plans drawn up for its reconstruction, which began in 1948 and was completed in just two years.

It should come as no surprise that a building with such a long gestation should have a few problems. Press reports claim that there is extensive asbestos contamination, deteriorating stone work, poorly laid communication cabling, a leaking roof and many windows do not fit properly. A £2 million report has been published that outlines the various options to address the repairs. These options vary considerably but none appears to consider the total replacement of the building with a modern, cost effective and efficient new build. Reasons for this unwillingness to consider such an option revolve around a sense of tradition and the iconic status of the Mother of Parliament. However, a replica could be left on site and the Palace turned into a tourist attraction.

The main options are costed at £7 billion if Members remain in situ or £4 billion if they move out for the duration. More telling is the estimate of duration. If MPs remain on site, work would take 32 years compared to 6 years for the “full decant” option.

RAIL PROJECTS



Image courtesy The Daily Telegraph

It has been a mixed month on the railways. First, HS2, the planned high speed link to the North of England which is targeted on releasing the potential of the so called “northern powerhouse” to boost commercial opportunities. The first contracts, priced at more than £1 billion, have been unlocked in the aftermath of the General Election.

The Green Party and UKIP were opposed to plans to build the new rail line but their candidates were not elected thus reducing opposition to the plans in Parliament. HS2 Ltd, the company set up to manage the project, has begun the tendering process for the enabling works such as demolition, site preparation and moving infrastructure. This contracting process should be completed by the end of this year prior to the passage of the Bill through Parliament next year. The Government has made 120 changes to the HS2 Hybrid Bill currently before the HS2 Select Committee. Work is on schedule to start Phase 1 construction in 2017 after new plans were drawn up after consultation with local communities.

Transport Minister Robert Goodwill said: “This motion is a major step forward both in terms of getting HS2 through Parliament and getting this vital railway built. “The changes to the Bill show the government is listening to communities along the HS2 route. By working together, we can ensure this vital railway is designed in the right way, so we have spades in the ground in 2017 as planned.”

Elsewhere on the rail network, the news is not so good. Almost as soon as the election was over came reports that the new Government is to preparing to delay, scale back or cancel a number of key projects, with the electrification of the Midland region reportedly at most risk. This news comes against reports of potential fines for poor punctuality on several commuter lines. The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) issued a report that indicates Network Rail might be in breach of its operating licence due to poor maintenance. The report points to poor performance on 3 key routes and that there are “risks to delivery” on 6 other regions. The report claims that 6 out of 10 delays were due to Network Rail failures. Currently more than 10% of trains are more than 5 minutes late, against a target of 7.5%.

ORR claims that Network Rail has delivered far less work than planned and that this raises concerns over its ability to deliver future projects on time. One example of poor project management cited was the over-running engineering work that caused delays for well over 100,000 commuters. However, Network rail responded by noting passenger numbers had doubled in the past 20 years, infrastructure is more reliable and safety better than in any other European country. The latest rail monitor report covering the 6 months to March 2015 showed that track renewals are 7% behind schedule, signaling upgrades 66% behind and that overhead cable improvements 77% behind. The report also indicates that 30 of 84 planned projects are behind schedule.

There have been reports that the Department of Transport is investigating Network Rail's portfolio of major projects, valued at some £12 billion. A report is expected before Parliament goes on its summer holidays in mid-July. Performance on major projects such as the Trans Pennine electrification and Great Western upgrade has been strongly criticized. Network rail plans its portfolio around 5 year "Control Periods" and is 1 year into the latest version. Maintenance projects estimated at around £38 billion are scheduled but reports indicate that the Department of Transport has lost confidence in the estimation process. A portfolio approach is essential as projects are interlinked, thus the upgrades on the Great Western line are needed before the arrival of the latest Hitachi trains purchased under a £4.5 billion Government PFI contract.

The Secretary of State for Transport, Patrick McLoughlin, announced on 25 June 2 (the appointment of Sir Peter Hendy as Network Rail's new chairman). He made the announcement to Parliament during a statement on Network Rail delivery, in which he called on the new chair to review the company's programme of investment and report back to him on it in the autumn.

Announcing Sir Peter's appointment Patrick McLoughlin said: "The current Transport Commissioner in London Sir Peter Hendy is someone of huge experience, who helped keep London moving during the Olympics, he will be a huge asset to Network Rail in overseeing their delivery in coming years."

CONCLUSION

As always in the project world, there is good news and bad news. I think the main point to emerge from the last month is the continued high level of investment in infrastructure projects. Somewhat more concerning is the state of the Houses of Parliament and the associated programme costs. Still it is good to know that in one small part of the world, seabirds will be able to breed and hopefully be pulled back from the brink of extinction.

About the Author



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