

UK Project Management Round Up



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INTRODUCTION

At last the Winter is nearly over. Although we are not seeing much sunshine, the days are drawing out, spring flowers seem to be in bloom – at least they are in my garden. Snowdrops are almost over and the daffodils well on, trees are beginning to show the first shoots of green. That is the positive side! With Spring also comes the rapid growth of weeds and the onset of more tasks. It is always thus for project people!

It seems that no matter what my intentions might be, I cannot escape Brexit. The papers are full of it, along with its impact on infrastructure, finance and social cohesion. It looks like we will be in for an interesting time. This month, I intend to cover a range of topics, some less stressful than Brexit. I'll start with some good news, move onto archeological projects, some more 'interesting' project challenges and then sweep up anything left over, doing my best to avoid the 'B' word.

GOOD NEWS

I expect many of you go to the cinema, movies or theatre, depending on where you come from – personally, I only see films on planes. However, there is good news here as some 200 films were made in UK last year. All film production is project based, carefully planned and even more carefully monitored. So it is good news when a production company makes a film such as *Star Wars VIII: The last Jedi* or *Alien: Covenant* and the films made in UK last year entailed a spend in this country of some £1.6 billion. This is a 13% increase in revenue with £1.35 billion spent by overseas production companies. This gives new meaning to the concept of Talent Triangle®!

Also on the good news front, I have to report a special build by Rolls Royce who produced new, special purpose model. This is an electric vehicle build for St Richard's Hospital in Chichester, near the Rolls car production facility in West

Sussex. The target market is not luxury seeking mega rich but children who can use the new model, the SRH, to drive themselves to the operating theatre. The intention is to help reduce stress and pre-operation anxiety.

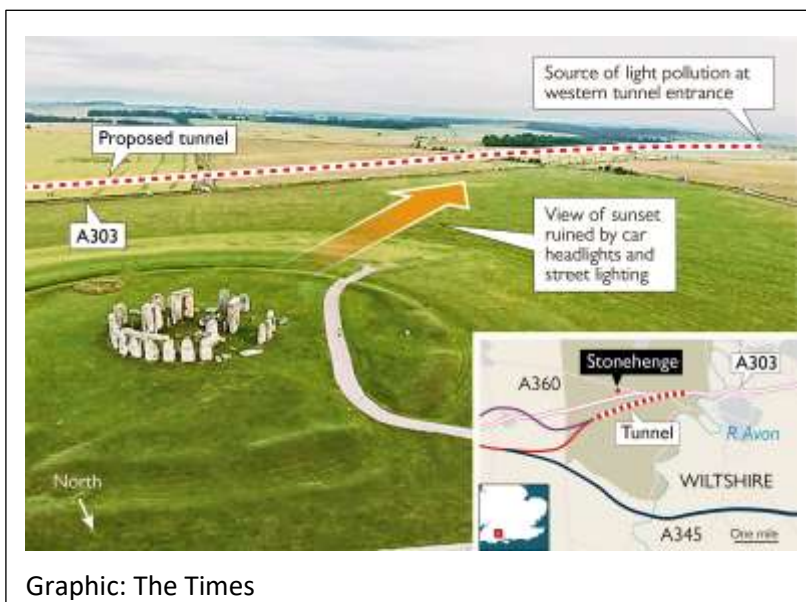


Rolls Royce SRH (photo: SWNS South West News Service)

The car is powered by a gel battery and is capable of 10 mph although this will be reduced to 4 mph in the hospital. The car took 400 hours of skilled voluntary work to build. The SRH, which is 165cm long and weighs 135kg, was delivered to the hospital at the end of February.

ARCHEOLOGY PROJECTS

This is a follow on from last month when I reported a project that impacts on me – hence I am a stakeholder for the Stonehenge Tunnel project. In case you missed earlier reports, this project aims to reduce the traffic blockages near the ancient monument. The problem is due in part to the volume of tourist traffic visiting the Henge but mainly to the termination of dual



carriageway (and thus a fairly fast road) at the traffic roundabout where the road to the site turns north. The road – the A303 is a major trunk road that takes a very large volume of holiday traffic as well as many commercial vehicles.

The result is a major bottleneck that has plagued travelers since I was a small boy. The 'solution' reported recently is a 1.8 mile tunnel which is to be built at a cost of some £1.4 billion. Naturally, any proposal to do anything in the area of a UNESCO World Heritage site is bound to attract a great deal of comment. There are those who demand a solution but object to any traffic management scheme to by-pass the site and others who object to light pollution they claim will prevent the observation of sunsets because road lights and car headlights will obtrude. Then there are those with concerns that the construction will damage the undiscovered archeology in the area. You just can't win!

There are, however, schemes that are aimed at preventing damage to historic sites. The main one is the requirement to carry out archeological surveys to determine whether there are any remains that need to be protected. This scheme is not universally popular as it can cause some lengthy delays to new builds while archeology excavation takes place but it is a good British compromise that allows work to go ahead but allows rescue archeology to take place. Outcomes are usually clear but every now and then a problem arises – as it did in Norfolk recently. The site owner discovered a major burial site when preparing to carry excavate a flood alleviation lake. The discovery was thought to mark the period of transition from pagan to Christian burial practices and the builder was forced to fund archeological work on site. Usually, a survey is carried out to find any remains so that work can be planned that avoids the archeology but in this case, the survey found no significant remains. All would have been well had not a friend taken his metal detector to the soil dug out of the test pits and found some 200 pieces of pottery. The builder has been left with a bill for more than £250,000 and 81 empty coffins.

This situation highlights the problems faced by developers. On the one hand, this country is rich in archeology and there is a general feeling that it should be preserved wherever possible. On the other hand, more building needs to be done, be it road construction, housing or commercial development. Trying to achieve a balance is very difficult especially where high value items are found. In the last 10 years, several very important finds of golden artefacts have been reported under the Small Finds scheme which encourages metal detectorists and other to report finds. The Norfolk case has left a project manager severely out of pocket and might encourage others to avoid reporting. Sounds like a lose-lose situation.

PROJECTS IN TROUBLE?

Actually, I am not sure these projects are really in trouble. The first project has not started yet and according to reports in the papers, it seems unlikely that it will. In 2014, a new bridge over the Thames was proposed. Supported by Bozo Johnson, then London Mayor and now Foreign Secretary and a host of the Smart Set and others who appreciated the aesthetics but not the business case. Now it seems the business case is taking centre stage. Some £60 million was committed to the plan but it turns out that the planned cost has risen from the original £150 million to £185 million. Not only that, the Garden Bridge Trust has not completed planning permission and faces a funding shortfall despite spending £22.5 million. Criticisms include the overall design, high annual maintenance costs and poor route selection.

The latest claim is that there has been double counting on the benefits. It remains to be seen how much more public money will be poured into the scheme but the business case does not look good.

Another project in trouble, although of a different kind, is a flood defence scheme. Part of the defence scheme involved the construction of a breakwater built on the Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation. Apparently, this work would cause loss of valuable habitat for the marine honeycomb worm. The current sea defence cost more than £5 million and includes arrangement of 75,000 tonnes of rock, a timber groyne and a raised promenade. Ceredigion County Council is discussing various options with the Welsh Government. Meanwhile the worms are safe from disturbance.

Rail projects continue to attract attention. High Speed 2 (HS2) seems set to appear in court as further noises are made over the contract award for the Birmingham to Leeds extension. The £170 million contract has been awarded to CH2M which has caused some observers to raise the issue of conflicts of interest as the acting CEO of HS2, Roy Hill, is an employee of CH2M. The newly appointed CEO, Mark Thurston, takes up his post later this month. Mr Thurston is currently managing director of CH2M in Europe. This looks like one for the Courts.

Other rail news concerns the changeover of the four largest franchises. These has been delayed for a year as officials admit they need to alter terms and conditions to enable Train Operating Companies to make sufficient profit.

Progress continues at Crossrail. The operating company, MTR, who operate the Mass Transit Railway in Hong Kong. MTR runs a shadow service on the eastern part of the line but this become identifiably MTR when the new trains stock is delivered from Bombardier's Derby factory. The new trains are 200 yards long, can carry up to 1,500 people in the wi-fi enabled and air conditioned coaches, and will operate at a rate of one every 2 minutes.

Meanwhile, out west, there is bad news concerning the West Coast electrification project. Last year, the Government announced delays to the £2.8 billion project with completion then scheduled for 2024. The sections delayed are: Oxford to Didcot Parkway, Bristol Parkway to Bristol Temple Meads, Bath Spa to Bristol Temple Meads and Thames Valley branches to Henley and Windsor. Now comes further news of delays and the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has claimed that the project has suffered "serious management failings". Apart from the delays announced in November 2016, the cost of the project rose by £1.2bn in the space of a year – Committee members said this is "staggering and unacceptable". MPs said it was a "stark example of how not to run a major project".

And then to the South comes news that a proposed new railway line between London and the South Coast has been abandoned as it was considered too expensive. The line was to have linked Gatwick Airport and Brighton. Interestingly, the Department for Transport claimed that the money would be better spent on upgrading the existing line. Seems they have not noticed the problems upgrading the West Coast line.

AND NOW SOME GOOD NEWS

Two news items caught my eye this month. The news that engineering entrepreneur Dyson are to build a 500 acre campus in Wiltshire hit the national press headlines. This development is part of their £2.5 billion plan to dedicate resources to robotics and artificial intelligence in order to compete with US tech giants. The firm, headed by Sir James Dyson, has more than quadrupled his workforce to some 3,500 of whom about half are scientists and engineers. Press speculation is that the new campus will enable the workforce to increase to about 14,000 people. This expansion seems aimed at broadening the scope of the business to take from the design and manufacturing of consumer durables such as high end vacuum cleaners to battery development, robotics and AI. These plans come just as mounting fears of investment withdrawal post Brexit have been circulating. Interestingly, Google announced an expansion of its UK workforce by creating about 3,000 new jobs while IBM has committed to building four cloud computing centres and expansion plans have also been announced by Apple.

Finally, a national newspaper has reported that apprentices can do better than graduates. The report cites the example of Germany where workplace based training has for decades been an important part of preparing the workforce for employment. In UK, traditional apprenticeships began to lose popularity in the mid 1960's as the value of the schemes were challenged on a variety of grounds, mainly linked to duration, lack of useful training and financial grounds. More recently, the Government has seen apprenticeships as a useful way for non-academic young people to gain work place skills needed to improve the economy. Current plans to rapidly expand the number of places available by funding places through a levy on companies with a wage bill of more than £3 million have been criticized by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a left wing think tank, who claim that the scheme is doomed to fail as the Treasury will regard the levy as an extra tax and businesses would not provide effective schemes. The evidence to support these claims was not explained. The report claims that work place based skills (mainly trade and craft skills) are no longer needed and so higher and degree apprenticeships are needed. Certainly, this is true for project management which has long been seen as practice based occupation well suited to such apprenticeships. Thus, the Association for Project Management has been at the forefront of such schemes and has sponsored over 100 applicants. But we all know that any training scheme depends on standards, all projects must be monitored and ways found to measure progress and effectiveness. Can we do this for the next generation of Project Managers?

I'll be back next month with more news of the PM Scene in UK but one last bit of news on Brexit – PMI Ireland is holding its largest national conference which will concentrate on conditions post Brexit! There's no escape....

About the Author



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Miles Shepherd is an executive editorial advisor and international correspondent for PM World in the United Kingdom. He is also managing director for MS Projects Ltd, a consulting company supporting various UK and overseas Government agencies, nuclear industry organisations and other businesses. Miles has over 30 years' experience on a variety of projects in UK, Eastern Europe and Russia. His PM experience includes defence, major IT projects, decommissioning of nuclear reactors, nuclear security, rail and business projects for the UK Government and EU. Past Chair and Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM), Miles is also past president and chair of the International Project Management Association (IPMA). He is currently Director of PMI's Global Accreditation Centre and the Chair of the ISO committee developing new international standards for Project Management and for Program/Portfolio Management. He was involved in setting up APM's team developing guidelines for project management oversight and governance. Miles is based in Salisbury, England and can be contacted at miles.shepherd@msp-ltd.co.uk.