

Celebrate an unsung hero of our city

FORGET the boring barbs that unimaginative journalists hurl at Milton Keynes on slow news days *writes Michael Synnott, of urban strategy consultancy Bigenoughdreams Ltd.* Take it from me, having spent most of the past 13 years introducing senior overseas urban planners to our city, it is not the UK gutter press which interests our global neighbours. It is Milton Keynes' gutters... and lakes, roads, street lighting and redways.

In fact, the entire design of the public realm of Milton Keynes continues to fascinate and draw thousands of influential visitors to Milton Keynes each year.

An unsung hero in this regard is civil engineering company Pell Frischmann which is marking the 20th anniversary of its arrival in Milton Keynes. It has been responsible for the design and construction of much of the taken-for-granted infrastructure in the city since 1988 (street lighting, roads, redways) as well as some of the most spectacular bits.

Like many other long-established names in Milton Keynes, Pell Frischmann is part of a larger company. Established in 1926, it is the UK's largest family owned and run engineering consultancy business, with headquarters in London, 15 other UK offices nationwide and more than 1,000 employees worldwide - 50 are based in the Milton Keynes office.

Company chairman Bill Frischmann was attracted to Milton Keynes in 1988 when the Development Corporation externalised several key functions including civil engineering and infrastructure. The initiative also saw the arrival of other names locally such as law firm Denton Wilde Sapte, landscape architects Landscape Town and Country and architects PDDL.

Pell Frischmann had barely settled into its Central Milton Keynes offices when it was set a major challenge: to design Britain's first new canal aqueduct in more than 50 years. The plans for the city called for the extension of the V6 Grafton Street between Bradville and Stonebridge and the Grand Union canal was in the way. So a structure of a bygone era was revived to clear the way for the highways of the future.

"There were times when I'm sure our engineers wished they could have talked with the old 19th-century canal engineers," recalls Mark Bollington, who had just arrived in 1989 but now runs the Milton Keynes office. "Not only were we trying to do something that had not been done for at least half a century, we also had to keep the canal open and operational throughout two entire summer boating seasons."

The Milton Keynes team recently



◆ Michael Synnott

acted as engineers on a prestigious new exemplar development of more than 1,000 dwellings at Upton in Northampton, jointly sponsored by the Prince's Trust, English Partnerships and Northampton Borough Council. Their design received recognition for the innovative Sustainable Urban Drainage System, which incorporated urban swales (depressions in the ground for storm runoff) and wetland areas into the masterplan, thus combining surface water attenuation with habitat and ecological enhancements within the urban design.

I was keen to learn how lessons learned at Upton might have relevance for the future development of Milton Keynes. Should we be concerned that, unlike the 1970s and 1980s, large balancing lakes may feature less in Milton Keynes expansion areas?

"Strategic balancing lakes have served Milton Keynes well, while also providing wonderful recreational spaces for people to enjoy," says Mark. "But localised SUDS will play a greater part in reducing the loading on these facilities in future development. For example, permeable paving surfaces greatly reduce flash rainwater run-off and increasing the time it takes for rainfall to reach key strategic watercourses reduces the risk of further downstream flooding."

A mounting concern for civil engineering firms everywhere is the tightening market for skilled labour. "Finding and retaining labour is a major challenge," says Mark. He concedes that the poor economic outlook may adversely affect demand in the civil engineering sector, particularly in housing. But it is an ill wind that blows no good.

"Since economic uncertainty has set in, we are seeing an increase in the numbers of speculative CVs from graduate engineers, which is welcome in view of the tightening labour market."

An important hedge against domestic uncertainty is Pell Frischmann's growing

Minister backs MK 'as is'

IN A RECENT article in the Sunday Times, housing minister Caroline Flint praised Milton Keynes as it is now and opined that it is evidence of how development is good for nature

"Given that Milton Keynes was built on agricultural land, I'm sure there were people at the time who said: 'This is terrible; we're losing this green environment'," she said. "What Milton Keynes has shown is that you can actually enhance the green environment."

I'm sure many in Milton Keynes would agree with her. Yet do you think she can be aware that it is her government - now led, according to most popular accounts, by a 'sub-Prime' Minister - that seems determined through its unelected quango English Partnerships to destroy our 'urban Eden'?

How ironic, then, that Flint should use the success of Milton Keynes, pre-English Partnerships' on-going destruction, to justify the even more undesirable and ill-thought-out eco-towns. You couldn't make it up.

And yet, as the days lengthen and the sun shines, there is hope. Milton Keynes Council's elected councillors have learned a few hard lessons at the hands of the electorate, there's a new acting chief executive at the council who perhaps doesn't quite hate the most popular elements of the place so obviously as her predecessor and even the old guard at Milton Keynes Partnership has been changed by the early resignation of both its chief executive and its chairperson and replaced by those we can but hope have some common sense.

Already we see a new consciousness at play over the issue of our trees; with English Partnerships making genuine efforts to preserve trees removed for construction work. As I drove to work this morning, I even saw Crest Nicholson carefully digging around the roots of a plane tree to remove it for an access road to the South Oakgrove site. At last!

Talking of trees, a plane in Mayfair, London has been valued at £750,000 based on a new system devised by local authority tree officers called Capital Asset Value for Amenity Trees. It takes into account the species, size, health, historical significance and the number of people living nearby and will be

international order book, for which its overseas subsidiary Conesco won a Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2007.

The company has strong Indian connections through chief executive and major shareholder Sudhu Prabhu and is engaged on numerous projects associated with the phenomenal growth of India's economy. Mark's team have been involved in the design of a £200m motorway project in Jamaica and are working on the design of new highways and bridges in the United Arab Emirates.

Pell Frischmann is also working in Iraq where, in collaboration with

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adopted by every local authority in the UK to prevent the massacre of trees blamed for subsidence in buildings by insurance companies.

In London alone, the value of trees is estimated at £6.4 billion, with most street trees said to be worth between £8,000 and £12,000 each. In New York, using a scheme called Stratum which takes into account several factors including a tree's impact on property values, its absorption of carbon dioxide and how much its shade helps to reduce energy consumption, it was calculated that each of New York city's street trees provides an annual benefit of about \$122 (£62).

Using either system, it would mean Milton Keynes' trees must be worth several hundred million pounds - and, given that Urban Eden's experts conclude that by now well over 305 plane trees and 1,010 trees of other species have already been cut down and well over 2,000 planes and about 600 trees of other species are under serious threat, putting a value on them might save them overnight. We can but hope.

The next major hurdle for those in charge of our city is to come to terms with the widely-held wishes of those to

whom they are directly or indirectly accountable and who would like to see an extension of our grid system, redways and underpasses into the new areas and for houses to be built with adequate parking spaces.

Surely they're not too blind to see the problems they've created in the already socially-failing new communities of Broughton and to a lesser extent Monkston Park where, apocryphally, motorists 'abandon' their cars wherever they can - even on central reservations - and have disputes with neighbours over perceived parking transgressions?

Do those who promote this type of development still believe they can 'force' people out of their cars? While there are so many houses already with adequate parking why would anybody choose to live there, no matter how attractive the housing?

Which brings me rather sadly to Tattenhoe Park, a new development on the western flank of Milton Keynes. The first phase of home building on this important greenfield site has now been made public and work is set to start to transform it into a new community of 168 dwellings in about 12 months' time.

Most significantly, what is determined is that not one single house will have a garage. Why? Because, apparently, your government thinks that garages occupy valuable building land that can be better used to house people.

The fact that you have a car, which you might wish to protect in a garage is irrelevant. 'Leave your car in the street, you second-class citizen' seems to be the mantra, although almost certainly it won't be built wide enough to do so safely. Or, possibly, you'll be able to leave it in an un-overlooked compound round the back where it can be safely vandalised by other people's children. Either way yet another new shiny slum beckons.

However, the good news is - and I'm not making this up, honestly - every dwelling will have a dedicated space for one bicycle. So that's OK, then, although it's rather a shame they're not extending the redways on which to ride your one bicycle with your partner and children perched precariously on its handlebars.

Do you think we should tell Caroline Flint? Cheerio.

For students of local economic planning the Pell Frischmann story provides important insights. A national company was attracted to Milton Keynes by the prospect of acquiring a team of highly skilled professionals with an exciting portfolio of work. They continue to benefit from these advantages but use the skills gained to assist the development of the parent company, which then buffers an important local service provider against domestic economic uncertainty.

So raise your glasses to the next 20 years of Pell Frischmann in Milton Keynes.