

# Repairs - a bridge too far...

ACCORDING to the subject of this month's column: "There are probably 1,200 bridges in the Milton Keynes area because, with different ownerships, nobody knows for sure. That possibly makes the number of bridges per square mile greater than anywhere else on the planet."

My subject is someone about whom there has already been a good deal of publicity and news coverage and whose employment tribunal claim for wrongful dismissal may well have come to a conclusion by the time you read this. So powerful is the tale he tells that he is due to feature on the BBC East programme Inside Out on December 3.

Who is he? Former Milton Keynes bridge inspector - in fact Milton Keynes' only bridge inspector - now famous whistleblower George Harlock. He was employed by support service provider Mouchel which, under a Public Private Partnership arrangement with Milton Keynes Council, was contracted to provide a Bridge Management Service as defined within the Service Level Agreement for Bridges.

There are two stories here really: the state of Milton Keynes' bridges and how their deterioration has allegedly been allowed to proceed largely unchecked and the way those responsible for their maintenance have apparently sought to 'let go' perhaps the only man prepared to alert others to the inherent dangers.

In this sorry web of claim and counter-claim some things are clear because they are sworn as true. Here, for instance is an extract from a statement from Milton Keynes Council's principal auditor: "On 22nd November 2010 I sent a letter to Mr Harlock confirming that the disclosure he had made to the Council was a qualifying disclosure under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and as such his employment rights were protected as specified within the legislation." Nevertheless Harlock was made redundant on April 20 2011.

In his witness statement to the Employment Tribunal, to which I have had

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access, Harlock presents much that might concern us. For instance this: "I specifically informed 'a named Mouchel manager' that, of the 943 inspections carried out in the previous three years, only 56 had been checked or signed off by an engineer as required by the Code of Practice. Also that none of the inspections I had carried out in over a year since I started in June 2008, as an engineer with no previous experience of bridges, had been checked or signed off.

"I also gave my view that if more attention was not paid to strengthening the bridge management function within Mouchel and getting more maintenance done, that there would be serious and expensive repercussions for Mouchel, [Milton Keynes Council] and the citizens of MK."

It is hard not to be sympathetic to Harlock's plight. Denied access to arguably essential training on more than one occasion, in November 2009 he decided to take two days leave, pay the £260 fee himself and attend a one-day course at Sheffield Hallam

University. This was for bridge inspectors, run by a specialist bridge engineering department at the university which had also been very instrumental in designing Milton Keynes' bridge management system. The content of the course focused on spotting the various types of defect and evaluating their severity and extent.

In case you are wondering, here are some examples of our defective bridges:

### Willen Lake Floodspan Westbound on H6

THIS bridge was reduced to one lane of traffic in the middle for some six months before strengthening work on it began in the summer of last year. An engineering assessment on the outer deck edges found it to be only capable of safely supporting a three-ton load. A 40-ton lorry mounting the verge could have been in serious trouble.

The circa £1 million repair, completed last December after months of closure, should have ensured that the deck expansion joints on this three-span structure were less likely to leak water on to the central piers than before the repair.

It was salt-laden water from winter ice treatment that had caused the serious corrosion in the reinforcing bars that weakened it. Harlock photographed huge icicles underneath it in February this year, suggesting that this part of the repair had failed due to bad design or lack of proper supervision.

### Grand Union Canal bridge The Black Horse, Great Linford

THIS remains a safety hazard for any motorist who loses control on the eastern approach as the crash barrier is still lying on the grass thanks to its rotten wooden posts - just as they were when Harlock first inspected it nearly four years ago.

If Mouchel or the council have any plans to fix the sub-standard parapets requiring deck-edge strengthening as well as the safety fences, they ought to tell Harlock and he can stop dragging BBC camera crews there to film it.

### Bridge 84 over the Grand Union Canal, Woolstone-Springfield

RECENTLY filmed and badly cracked, this bridge has had the cracks recently cemented up by the Canals and Rivers Trust (only the redway surface is the responsibility of Milton Keynes Council) but the fundamental problem remains that the ends of the bridge rotate outwards as the clay on which they sit dries out, due to new housing on the Springfield side.

A proper reinforcing project to hold the arch together cannot currently go ahead as there are bats roosting in the brickwork. 'Officially' they cannot be disturbed despite the considerable risk to them - and us - of collapse.

You'd have to be batty to use this bridge. Literally.

Let's hope that, if we all make enough noise, our bridges will be properly maintained. Anything less would be insanity, in my opinion.

In case you were wondering, the former bridge inspector is now doing something different, namely starting up the boat-building and repair business Wolverton SuperFactory Group Ltd.

Cheerio.

## A Day in the Life

DEBBIE HOUGHTON  
Head of Hair, Beauty & Hospitality  
Milton Keynes College



## It's all about learning for staff too

SOMETIMES when you work in education something a student says or does can simply light up your day.

Milton Keynes College has just entered a seriously prestigious partnership with the Francesco Salon group. With a fully functioning Francesco Salon on site, our students are learning how to produce a whole range of styles strictly in accordance with best practice on the High Street.

One of our students today was doing what is called a "one length horizontal cut", a particular shoulder-length cut which can be quite challenging. The result was stunning and the student told me how much easier she was finding it thanks to the new Francesco training she is being given here. That young woman could go to any professional salon and reproduce the exact same style - and that is exactly what we are about.

Of course, it is not just the students who are constantly learning. We staff have to be continually updating our skills just to keep up. In fact, in a few weeks time, we will all be tested alongside the students on our ability to produce the whole range of cuts - 17 in all. There are gold, silver and bronze standard awards to be had and, as head of department, if I do not come through with gold... well, it does not bear thinking about!

Fashionable hair design is not the only thing I need to know. Today I was given a crash course on how to operate the tills in the catering department. I am not regularly expected to take my turn on the check-out (and I am grateful for that because it is exhausting) but I have to be able to step in and help if there is a crisis.

Fortunately, I was given excellent tuition by catering manager Simon Wallis and I think I got the hang of it fairly quickly... but one just cannot afford not to keep learning.

Following on from the success of the Francesco's partnership, we have another of equally high calibre in the pipeline.

Our beauty students will soon be gaining work experience and excellent on-the-job training at the glorious Whittlebury Hall Spa near Towcester. My deputy Maria Bowness and I went to visit them today and we left in no doubt that the students will gain enormously from their experiences on some delicious and helpful treatments.

We are great believers at Milton Keynes College that hands-on experience is vital to go alongside lessons learned in the classroom and we try very hard to make sure both are of the highest quality. We also strongly believe that, for our staff to be as good as they can be, they - we - must all learn from the best.

I had some very exciting phone conversations today regarding forthcoming visits to Jamie Oliver's Fifteen restaurant and Westminster College, by most people's reckoning the best catering college in Britain. They have very kindly allowed us to visit them to discuss their training programmes and to see how to adapt some of their philosophies and techniques to our own.

Jamie Oliver, a former student of Westminster, has a well-deserved reputation for an almost fanatical commitment to training as so many television programmes have shown, so we will be going to see his staff to pick their brains too about apprenticeship programmes.

Being a head of department at Milton Keynes College is all about learning - and not just for the students.

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