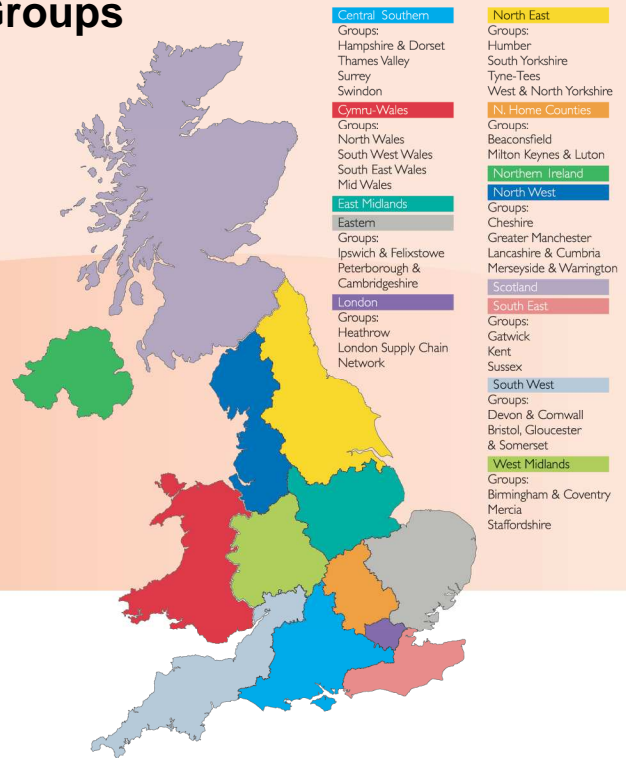


News from the Nations, Regions & Groups

CILT(UK) South Central Region Hampshire & Dorset Group

27 October 2010

Waterborne freight: can its environmental benefits be realised in these hard economic times ?



Members of the Hampshire & Dorset Group of the Institute welcomed Dr. Mervyn Rowlinson, of Shipping & Intermodal Logistics Research as their guest speaker at their Southampton Solent University venue. The Group's Chairman, Mike Heckford FCILT, in his introduction, noted that it was six years since Dr. Rowlinson last presented to members and they therefore looked forward to an interesting progress report on the fortunes of moving cargo by inland and coastal waterways.

Responding to his welcome, Mervyn Rowlinson expressed equal surprise at the fact that he last addressed the Group in 2004 and added that developments in waterborne freight carriage had perhaps not realised the expectations that he had forecast at that last meeting. In that interval, Dr. Rowlinson has published a very authoritative book (the details of which appear below) on the subject which he reported had been well received. However, as is so often the case, events such as global financial mayhem and other unforeseen factors had made some of its content economic history rather than current affairs.

Mervyn took the audience through a brief summary of significant factors affecting waterborne cargo services since the 1997 governmental initiative, led by the Department for Transport, to encourage more environmentally sustainable alternatives to a high dependence on road transport. Here, Mervyn noted, the significant 'Pareto' fact that just 20% of goods carried represent some 80% of total value of all cargoes. Coastal shipping cannot compete for high-value cargoes in general but, along with rail, it can offer significant carriage cost reduction for journeys in excess of 250 kilometres. There was some transfer of freight to rail as a result of this government reminder of environmental benefit but the sea experience was very patchy at best.

By 2003, Mervyn continued, factors such as the German 'Stammtisch' initiative to curb an irresponsible minority of long-distance owner-drivers and a forecast shortage of professional LGV drivers seemed to promise a diversion of as much as 3.5% of road freight to waterborne routes. By 2008, however, the credit crunch of the previous year had driven down demand to the point where hopes of capturing such a diversion had faded. This crisis in coastal shipping was clearly shown by an absolute decline of 2% in market share, the demise of a large operator (Laphorn Shipping of Rochester) and an influx of Russian-owned river ships leading a 'race to the bottom' in coastal freight rates.

Setbacks to the case for increased use of waterborne transport were unwelcome, Mervyn admitted, but there were success stories to celebrate. A slide showing Mervyn's own 'hands-on' role in managing a barge-load of aggregate in South Yorkshire was entertaining, another illustrating 'marine motorways' in operation such as Palermo-Genoa and Venice-Patras gave food for thought as they represented distances such as Felixstowe-Glasgow in our own country. It was also encouraging to see progress with actual coastal shipping routes such as Southampton-Greenock and Liverpool to road transfer sites on the Manchester Ship Canal.

Summarising the case for waterborne transport, Dr.Rowlinson said that he was not being anti-road in wanting to have the benefits of waterborne transport recognised and commercially exploited. The objective should be to ensure that the efficient fuel consumption and environmental benefit of reduced road congestion should be recognised as factors supporting an incremental modal shift to water transport. This must be a progress that is not hindered by either fiscal measures that subsidise road use or the development of waterside sites for residential or leisure use. Finally, he reminded members of the possibilities for taking advantage of the potential of some of our river estuaries to offer alternatives to road routes.

Dr.Rowlinson had been expecting to have some student presence in his audience but his visit had unfortunately coincided with half-term. Happily, the audience did contain a number of well-informed members who were able to update the speaker on several topics and this meant that Mervyn's presentation gradually morphed into a very enjoyable and illuminating seminar for all of those present. A particularly welcome local response that we learned about was the joint initiative between Marine South East and the Port of Poole under the auspices of the European Commission's PROPOSSE project to promote short-sea shipping. We will now be looking forward to reading about the increased use of waterborne transport and will not leave it another six years before Mervyn Rowlinson's return to our local programme of membership events.

Mervyn Rowlinson : Shipping Freight by Water in Britain and Ireland : calculating Economic Cost and Environmental Opportunities
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