Clean Rivers Trust.
5th Thames Gateway Seminar at Allied and Morrison, London.

The fifth and last of the seminars put on by the Centre for London and Allied and Morrison was also the final one of these events. It will be hard not to miss them as they have been stimulating and of a breadth of vision that has been intellectually useful.

There were four speakers this week who had the least enviable task to outline or bring forward the issues of the Thames Estuary and the development of the proposed infrastructural centres that may allow the capital to continue to hold its ranking as a world transport hub and at the same time allow cargoes, both sea and air to be distributed without disruption to the city. The whole set of proposed initiatives are complex in their goals and all remarkably thorough in their processes of lessoning environmental risk. The whole set of objectives, transport, road, rail, sea and air are addressed as a package, and it appears to be a first for the United Kingdom in that the scheme takes all as one set of interrelated issues that are seen to coalesce.

First up to speak was Richard Everett, the CEO of the Port of London Authority with an appeal to protect the Thames as a marine highway, the three shipping channels that service the various port facilities that bring in 50 million tons of cargoes per year. This delivered 10,000 ship movements per annum; oddly this statement did not continue by stating the tonnage of exports that left these shores. It can not be that the many cargo ships landing the needs of the nation have nothing to take back. Though it might explain why the cost of living is rising.

He pointed out the complex nature of the estuary that he recognised as the area between Clacton and Margate, the many protected sites of environmental importance, the fisheries interests,: fish nurseries, shell fish fisheries, cockles, oysters (Whitstable), white weed harvest, he was unsure what white weed was but he said it had it's importance to the area.

[White Weed; a growth that is not a plant, but is the external skeleton of the hydroid polyp Sertularia cupressina. The harvested material is used by florists and for aquaria decoration. In German waters it has suffered a severe decline, the reason for which is uncertain.]



White Weed.

Mr Everett went on to the remarkable growth of wind farms and considered proposed aviation proposals. The prospect of either the Foster plan or that of Boris Island; the 1970s fiasco of the original 3rd London Airport debate of the 1970s regarding the Maplin Sands site in Essex and its failure to materialise. The infrastructure and transport links or lack of them. The MoD ranges and lost ordnance all helped terminate the then proposed airport as did the oil crisis of the day.

The main issue for the Port of London Authority is the protection of its routes of navigation. The development of the estuary is fine so long as ships continue to have unfettered access to the navigation and not lot a lot else matters.

The second speaker was the Director of the Thames Estuary Partnership, an umbrella NGO that brings both statutory and voluntary organisations to work together towards the goal of good environmental care of the Thames and its environs. This appears to work for general inclusiveness. Jill Goddard spoke with a surety of purpose and gave the impression that not a lot fazed her.

The fact that the Thames is a brown river that had a thriving water column of life that far outweighed its blue counterparts in other parts of the world appeared to give the Director a rye satisfaction. She mentioned the needs of the river as a working river and the needs for keeping the channels dredged the use of dredgings at Rochester recently to reclaim land for the benefit of the environment and in the future, a possible Boris Island?

The river was a canvas that is not empty but evolving and the needs of allowing the water space, the citizenry need access to it and protection from it in the form of tidal barrage. The river though has a special dimension not to be diminished.

As was said, in her role she takes no side but listens to the various opinions with equal equanimity.

The third speaker on the program of luminaries was sourced from the Kent Marshes airport camp, Huw Thomas of Foster (design group 3) and Partners. His was a remarkable presentation in that it put much of the media hyperbole regarding location and identifiable impacts into context. The talk went some way to explaining an almost academic turn of mind to a knotty problem. The idea of taking 40 square kilometres of marsh and in return providing 60 square kilometres of replacement habitat to the north of the estuary. This brought a strange look to the eye of a representative of the RSPB.

This scheme has much that on reflection is attractive; the concept of an integrated infrastructure hub, the rail, air, sea port, the linking of power transmission pathways and other utility pathways in a shared footprint. All the project features were very attractive and sited on the edge of an economically declining part of the area. Job creation would be assured by the scheme, both short and long term, protecting existing communities and taking account of the need to cater for an increased population in the future.

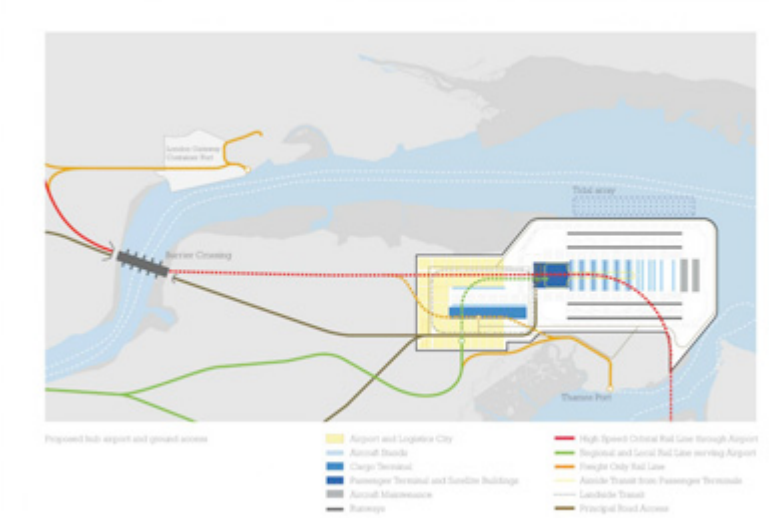
One statement I have pondered since the seminar was that the country can be viewed in two ways; a densely populated country or as a lightly populated city. This made me think of Hong Kong and the New Territories. The statement is equating the UK national parks as the green spaces of City Britain, rather than remote regions in a modestly sized island nation. Such considerations are needed but throw up unnerving visions of a new world that may not be too many peoples taste.

The last of the quartet of speakers was Samantha Dawes, a Conservation Manager of the RSPB responsible for the South East Region. The opening of the talk was aimed to use shock tactics, old industrial land reclamation, was welcome top become managed nature reserves under the RSPB banner, new wind farms in the estuary were acceptable,; this it appears mainly because the environmental research carried out as part of the planning brief showed much that the RSPB was unaware of. In one instance the Thames Estuary is the winter host to 6,000 red throated divers. A fresh ecologist eye had found this bird location out and after some relocating of turbine placements the wind farm known as the Thames Array is being built. The RSPB are fully in favour of sustainable development. In the case of an airport this is a different matter. The implication left was that the organisation would fight the development as they were the best placed to safeguard the environment.

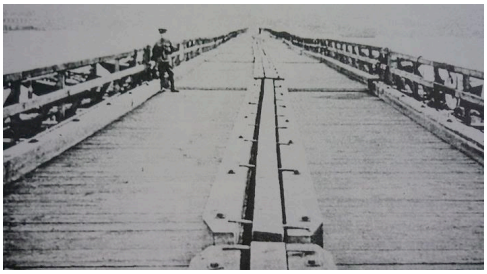
One did feel that the RSPB was happy to support a project if they could have control of land at the end of the day; the possible creation of 60 square kilometres of virgin habitat appeared to be outside their organisations comfort zone.



Foster and Partners Thames Hub.



At the end of the day one wonders ifd the concept of a hub system as proposed is large enough to take the communications and infrastructure forward into the future. The possibilities of harnessing the shale gas of the region, tidal power, and even the possible use of sea planes appear to have not been included. The new crossing and the concept of bypassing the capital appear to harp back to the 1914 bridge across the Thames at Tilbury.



Harvey Wood. 11th December 2011.