

**William Hamilton Holmes: 40 years with Scott Wilson: 16 Jan1961 – 2001. Jim McCafferty**

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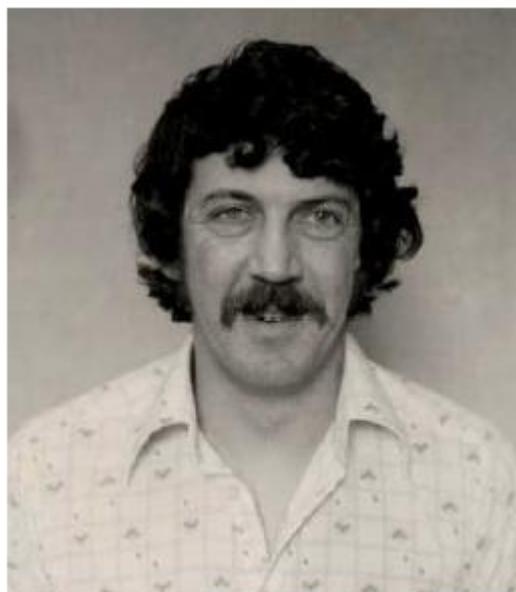
I first met Billy Holmes when he returned to Glasgow office in 1971. I was learning to be a roads engineer, having served my term as a bridges man with **Brian McKenna, Bob McGowan** and others. **Bob McKittrick** was there too. Billy arrived in a Land Rover trailing an enterprise dinghy, both of which he had somehow acquired from the M6 Site Staff at Kendal. They were never returned!

Billy and I became the best of pals and shared many exciting exploits which I see from his attached 'Staggering Tales' that he has diplomatically excluded. One tale of Billy, who was a bit of a party animal before he married Marjory, was that one morning he failed to turn up at the office and couldn't be contacted by phone. A search party was sent to his flat but there was no sign of Billy amidst his Bachelor Pad debris. Later a second search party was sent back. This time they followed the noise of quiet snoring and located Billy warmly wrapped up in a sort of cocoon of bedclothes dangling out of sight having slipped down a 6 inch gap between the bed and the wall.

Best Wishes to Billy from all in Scotland, and elsewhere I'm sure. We'll have a bit of a party when he gets back to work following an operation on his shoulder.



*Billy Holmes (to the rear)  
with the giant calculator  
at 6 Park Circus, Glasgow, 1964*



*Billy Holmes - after he'd been to  
London in the swinging 60's*

**A Brief Reflection On 40 Years At Scott Wilson Billy Holmes [McCafferty; Hodgen; Cullen; Ijaiya; Moncrieff; Swift; French; Rakusen; Denton-Cox; Hackney; Margesson; Cooper; Munro-Lafon; Blackwood; Glasgow; London; Lagos Baghdad; Abuja; Jerusalem etc]**

Last Friday (12th) I got a call from **Jim McCafferty** reminding me that on 16th January I will have worked for Scott Wilson for 40 years. He asked if I could write a short piece on some of the events during this period that had stuck in my mind, particularly anything amusing. I agreed. He then advised me that the piece would need to be completed and sent to ScottLight by Tuesday at the latest. I have therefore cobbled together a brief resume of the thoughts that come to mind.

On Wednesday 11th January 1961, I received a letter from Scott & Wilson Kirkpatrick & Partners, Consulting Civil and Structural Engineers offering me a position with the firm. The principal conditions were:

A 5-day week, 9am to 5.30pm;

Lunch break of 1-hour;

Wages of £7 per week;

Overtime to be paid at straight time. I was advised that the situation would not be regarded as a permanent one!! The office was in a nice cul-de-sac called **Park Gardens** overlooking Kelvingrove Park, the firm having moved from a tenement at **252 High Street**, a rather less salubrious area the month before.

The principal staff members were **Roy Hodgen**, the boss, and **John Cullen** and I discovered that the work involved Transportation Planning. I didn't have a clue what that was. Roy was very absent minded. He once put his suit in a cleaners, lost the ticket and couldn't remember which cleaner. I don't think he ever found it. John was not quite so bad, although he did tend to wear different socks on occasion.

My first major involvement was helping to organise an O-D Survey in **Glasgow for the Comprehensive Highway Study**. The survey data was coded at **252 High Street** by university students on vacation. It was during this period that I discovered that John had not been exaggerating when he described the High Street office conditions. His office did indeed have a coal bunker and the only toilet facility available was an outside wc which we shared with the staff and customers of a ladies' hairdresser situated round the corner.

**John Cullen** encouraged me to consider taking up civil engineering as a career and since I now knew what Transportation Planning was, I decided to do so and became a permanent member of the firm's staff. I became involved in the design of motorway alignments and major grade separated interchange layouts for the **Highway Plan for Glasgow** which was largely completed by 1963 and published in 1965. The office staff increased and in 1963 we moved to **6 Park Circus**.

In 1964 I started working on the final design of **Townhead Interchange Stage 1**, part of the Inner Ring Road. There were no computer programs to make life easy in those days and everything had to be calculated by hand. There was only one calculator in the Roads Section, a huge piece of equipment which was situated on a large trolley. We had to queue up to use it.

At this time we had a Nigerian graduate called **Hamzat Ijaiya** working in Glasgow. I clearly remember him one cold frosty day sitting on a night storage heater saying to our principal engineer, "I no go out in that **Mr Moncrieff**. If I go out in that I die." I suppose it was understandable with 2 feet of snow on the ground. We also had a young technician who was accident prone. One day **John Cullen's** new desk, for which he had waited 3 months, was delivered. John organised some responsible members of staff to carefully lift it to his office on the top floor leaving the technician to carry up the drawers. In the interest of efficiency, the young man loaded the 6 drawers on top of each other put them on his head and climbed the stairs. All went well until the final turn at the top of the stairs when a slight loss of balance sent 5 drawers crashing down the stairwell to end as matchwood in the reception area at the bottom where the receptionist nearly died of fright. The 6th drawer remained safely on the technician's head. John was heard to say, in all seriousness, "It would save the company money if we just told him to stay at home and sent him his wages every week."

In 1966 I joined the site staff supervising the construction of **Townhead**. This was exciting stuff. A depressed section of the motorway passed through a site which had been used as a chemical plant for more than 100 years. As the excavation proceeded, the colour of the ground changed dramatically from day to day, between bright reds, blues, greens and yellows. Quite early in the earthworks a scraper hit and burst one of the twin 24 inch diameter water pipes carrying the Monkland Canal through the site. The effect of the 90 foot head of pressure was spectacular and thereafter there was always an attentive audience for the excavations.

After a year on site, I was asked to go to the **London office** to help **John Swift** of the Bridges Section set up a geometric design facility for **Apapa Road / Ijora Causeway** in Lagos, Nigeria. It was intended that I stay for up to 6 weeks and train someone to undertake the necessary geometric calculations required for the project. The London office at that time was situated in **Winsley Street** occupying the

4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floors of the Waring and Gillow block on Oxford Street just to the east of Oxford Circus. I stayed at the Berners Hotel which was situated within a couple of hundred yards of the office. After 3 months no one had come forward to be trained and after discussions with **John Swift** I agreed to transfer to the London office on a permanent basis. I suspect that someone in the accounts department had started to ask how long a junior engineer was going to be accommodated in a fairly expensive London hotel.

I completed the geometric design for **Apapa Road** and worked on the structural design of a table top / suspended span bridge deck at one of the interchanges. I then transferred to the Traffic Planning Section in London to work on a number of projects starting with **Oxford Central Area Study** followed by **Archway Road Study** with various smaller jobs in between.

During this period I recall the arrival of a number of new recruits to the firm, **Geoff French, Ron Rakusen, Richard Denton-Cox, Keith Hackney** and **Pete Margesson** spring to mind.

London in the late 60's and early 70's was an exciting place to live and work. During my time there I usually managed to live within 5 or 6 tube stops of Oxford Circus in places ranging from Shepherds Bush to Islington, including an 18 month spell just off the Kings Road. I'm not sure if a young engineer could afford to live as close to the centre of London now.

I recall my first attempt at rock climbing one weekend in North Wales with **Dick Cooper**. He had taken me up a climb on Saturday which was rated as 'severe' and I found that not to be too difficult, especially with the security of a rope. On Sunday he told me that the climb we would be doing was technically less difficult but that it had good exposure. This expression meant nothing to me. We climbed for quite a while and eventually I turned a corner and looked down to check my next foothold. I nearly died of fright when I realised that there was nothing under me for what seemed like 5000 feet. I realised then what 'good exposure' means.

In 1971, I returned to Glasgow to work on the design of **Renfrew Motorway**. By this time the horizontal and vertical geometry, the setting out and even the earthworks quantities were all done by computer programs making life a lot simpler.

I began to spend short periods abroad, usually one trip per year lasting between 3 weeks and 3 months. One of these trips took me through Lagos en-route to Ibadan and I was able to see the **Apapa Road** project complete and open to traffic. It was disappointing to say the least. I had spent a lot of time ensuring that the road would operate safely at speeds of 50 mph while in reality traffic congestion on Apapa Road meant that it took more than half an hour to travel a mile. The presence of local traders armed with trays walking around and between the cars selling a wide variety of goods made it obvious that the rate of travel we encountered was fairly typical. Ah well, such is life.

In 1979 I went to Iraq to work on the **Baghdad Transportation Study**. Life in Baghdad was quite good although there were sometimes difficulties getting things done in a reasonable timescale. I remember **Jerome Munro-Lafon's** succinct comment at one of the progress meetings, "I can see a light at the end of the tunnel, unfortunately it's getting smaller." Things got a bit worse with the start of the Iran / Iraq war in 1980 which caused the closure of the international airport and led to shortages of various items. The airport closure made it necessary to enter and leave Iraq via Amman in Jordan either by taxi or by bus. A bus journey could result in a number of problems. Bus drivers were liable to fall asleep at the wheel which wasn't a major problem if the cab was accessible from the passenger section but was a bit more worrying if the cab was isolated. I have seen passengers shouting and banging on the cab wall to try to wake a sleeping driver. On one journey I could only get a seat at the back of the bus and was a bit concerned that being located next to the toilet might not be too pleasant. After a few hours of regular usage, however, the air remained reasonably fresh and it was only when I went to make use of the facility that I discovered why - all the toilet consisted of was a circular hole cut in the floor of the bus. The shortages were a real nuisance. I recall following a delivery van for several miles to buy a gross of toilet rolls at his next delivery point

I returned to Glasgow in 1981 and got married the following year on 12th March. One month later I left for Kaduna, Nigeria to work on road design for the new federal capital, **Abuja**. This was a 2 month on, 2 month off arrangement where I reciprocated with **Hugh Blackwood** and it lasted for about a year. Since then I have remained in Glasgow except for a 5 week trip to **Jerusalem** a couple of years back to do some highway planning work on their proposed urban motorway system.

I find it strange that I can still clearly remember many of the events that took place 30 to 40 years ago but have to check my diary for what I did last week.