

Asphalt Through the Looking Glass
by
Roadodendron

'The time has come' said the Mad Hatter, pouring himself another cup of tea, 'to address ourselves to Asphalt'.

'Ridiculous!' said Humpty Dumpty. 'If you address yourself you might get delivered and I have no wish to go to Asphalt, wherever that is'.

'I think', said Alice, rather primly, 'that you should say "Whatever it is" and not "Wherever it is." Asphalt is not a place, you know.'

'But', replies Humpty Dumpty, 'I have heard on the highest authority' – and here he glanced meaningly at the King – 'that it occupies a very high place in road-making'.

'Can't be very high if it's on roads' mumbled the Doormouse, turning over in his sleep.

'Well, for that matter', said Alice, 'I can tell you that it is also used on roofs – very high roofs sometimes'.

Whereupon the King, who had already written ASHPHALT in his memorandum book (you will notice that, like so many uninformed people, he had spelt it wrongly), added the words ROADS and ROOFS and underlined them.

'Perhaps' he said gently, 'our young and learned friend would tell us just what this asphalt is'.

'Well', began Alice, a little diffidently, 'Asphalt is a sort of mixture of.....' and here she hesitated and Humpty Dumpty interrupted very haughtily.

'Far too vague! You say a "sort of mixture", but you might just as well say a "mixture of sorts". That kind of explanation gets us nowhere.'

Alice felt a little annoyed by this rather rude interruption so she replied with some heat, 'It is all described in a British Standard, anyhow.'

The King looked up with interest at this and commanded in a loud voice, 'Forward my Standard Bearer!' and a courtier with a long staff appeared before him.

'Have you the British Standard?' asked the King. 'I beg your pardon your Majesty, but do you mean the Union Jack?'

The King turned to Alice and asked if that was what she meant.

'No, your Majesty, I was thinking particularly of British Standard 594.'

'Never heard of it', said the King. 'Have you?', he asked his Standard Bearer.

'I'm afraid it is not among my collection', the Standard Bearer replied, 'but I will go immediately to Park Street and get one.' And he jumped on his horse and galloped off in the direction of Hyde Park.

'I suppose we had better adjourn the meeting until he returns' said the King, with some relief, but just at that moment there were sounds of a commotion approaching from the opposite direction.

'Off with his head!' could be heard in the shrill voice of the Queen, who was obviously in a shocking temper. Following her, in front of a small crowd, were two soldiers supporting a person in very shabby clothing holding an old broom in one hand and a bucket of small stones in the other.

'My dear', said the King to the Queen when she got near to him, 'whatever has upset you?'

The Queen, who was somewhat out of breath from all her shouting, spluttered, 'This abominable wretch has had the effrontery to defile my own special road – the Queen's Highway – with some filthy black sticky stuff which has completely ruined my court shoes'. And she took off her shoes and showed the soles all covered with what looked like black treacle.

'My man', said the King, sternly the prisoner, 'What is the meaning of this?'

'Please, your Majesty', mumbled the prisoner in a trembling voice, 'I was only repairing a pot-hole'.

'What is your profession?', asked the White Rabbit, assuming the air of a Public Prosecutor.

'Please sir, I am a road contractor'.

'Now that seems to me', said the King, 'a very silly profession', and he wrote ROAD CONTRACTOR in his book. 'We haven't enough roads as it is so we cannot allow people to

contract them further. It would be much more sensible to be a Road Expander rather than a Road Contractor’.

‘What is your name?’ continued the White Rabbit.

‘Please sir, I am called ACMA.’

‘Would you mind spelling it’, said the King, ‘as it is such an unusual name.’ So he wrote ACMA in his book and looked at it with a very puzzled expression. The White Rabbit bent over and whispered in the King’s ear, I understand he is of mixed parentage. That may explain it’.

‘Ah, I see’ said the King and wrote MIXED PARENTAGE under the prisoner’s name.

‘And on whose authority were you interfering with the Queen’s Highway?’ he asked the prisoner, who replied in such a low and nervous voice that he could hardly be heard. ‘The County Surveyor, your Majesty’.

The King, who evidently had not heard very well wrote in his book THE COUNTESS OF AIR and said rather absent-mindedly ‘I don’t think it is really any concern of hers’.

‘Off wither head as well!’ shouted the Queen, who by now had recovered her breath, ‘no one has the right to interfere with my road.’

‘I suppose’, said the King, in a somewhat more gentle tone, ‘that you did this with the best intentions’, and when the prisoner nodded agreement he wrote BEST INTENTIONS in his book.

‘But it does seem to me a rather messy way of doing the job. Couldn’t you have done it better?’

‘Oh yes, your Majesty replied the prisoner more happily. ‘I should have liked to have done the job properly with asphalt or coated macadam.’

‘Yes, yes of course’, added the King, quite confused with the mention of coated macadam ‘and why didn’t you?’

‘Not enough money’ replied the prisoner.

‘Quite’, said the King, realizing that the conversation was taking a rather embarrassing turn and to change the subject he asked the prisoner ‘Do you make much money out of road contracting?’

‘Very little indeed’ said the prisoner mournfully. ‘Yes I can see that from the look of you’, said the King, ‘and do you have to do it all single-handed?’

‘Well, your Majesty, explained the prisoner, ‘I am really the Managing Director, but all my staff have been on a Management Course and now they only want to manage. So I have to do the work myself.’

‘Ah!’ said the King, ‘I’m pleased to see that yours is a progressive company.’ And he wrote PROGRESSIVE in his book.

At this moment the Standard Bearer galloped back with a copy of British Standard 594 which he handed to the King who immediately started to read it and very soon came to the definition of Asphalt.

“Asphalt”, he read aloud “is a natural or mechanical mixture of bitumen with a substantial proportion of solid mineral matter.” ‘I should like to have written that down but the words are rather incomprehensible’

‘Do you understand what it means?’ he asked the Road Contractor.

‘Oh yes, your Majesty, as a Member of the Institute of Asphalt Technology the meaning is quite clear to me’.

‘Remarkable’, said the King, ‘you must be a very knowledgeable man. Perhaps you would come round to the Palace one evening – after hours of course – and explain it all to me’.

‘With pleasure, your Majesty’, replied the Road Contractor, feeling a little happier by the turn of events.

‘My dear’ said the King to the Queen, ‘this man seems to be quite a useful sort of chap. Don’t you think we might let him keep his head?’

The Queen was by this time feeling a little less angry but she asked, ‘Bur what about my shoes?’

‘Quite so’ answered the King, and he turned to the White Rabbit and asked which of the King’s Regulations covered the question of damage to the Queen’s shoes.

The White Rabbit looked quickly through his papers and said it was his considered opinion

that it was a clear case of either malfeasance, misfeasance or non-feasance.

'Dear me' said the King, 'I had not realized how many feasances might have been committed. If you would help me with the spelling I should like to write them all down'. Which he did, but spelt the middle syllable as FEE in each case.

'I think I now see the course of justice', he said, 'and at the same time pursue my favorite hobby of making puns, for which, as you know, I am rather celebrated. I declare the prisoner guilty of malfeasance and pronounce sentence of both miss-feasance and non-feasance. In other words, you will not get paid for the repairs'.

'That is usually the case', sighed the Road Contractor, although relieved his fate was no worse.

'But', said the King, 'to show that there is no ill-feeling – or should I say ill-feasance – I would like you to quote me for complete resurfacing of the Queen's Highway. About how much do you think it would cost?'

'Well, your Majesty', said the Road Contractor, quite excited at the prospect of some new business, 'it depends on the size of the job. For instance, what length have you in mind?'

'Oh, I'm not very particular about that', replied the King, 'let us say from HERE to THERE'.

'And what sort of width?'

'Dear me', said the King, 'what a lot of difficult questions.'

'Perhaps', added the Road Contractor, 'you might consider a dual carriage-way?'

'A jewel carriage-way', echoed the King, 'what a nice idea. But you see we had to sell our only jeweled carriage to raise funds to pay for the Upkeep of the Monarchy, which, these days, is quite a problem. So we shall have to do without a jewel carriage-way. How much would the ordinary sort cost?'

'Well, your Majesty', said the Road Contractor, 'I cannot, of course, give you an immediate answer. We have recently installed a computer for preparing our estimates and I could not possibly suggest a figure without running the program which is currently being updated'.

'Quite so', replied the King, 'I see yours is a Very Progressive firm', and he put the word VERY in front of PROGRESSIVE which he had written previously. 'I suppose that is as far as we can take the matter this morning. Perhaps you will let me have your quotation – in triplicate, of course - as soon as your computer can produce it.'

'Certainly', said the Road Contractor, bowing gracefully and hurrying off as fast as he could in case anybody changed their mind.

Unfortunately it took so long for the computer program to run that Alice woke up in the meantime and never found out whether the Queen's Highway was surfaced with asphalt or coated macadam.

But it didn't really matter because, of course, both materials are used on 'THE QUEEN'S HIGHWAY'.

This little bit of amusing nonsense was originally published in the Institute of Asphalt Technology's monthly Bulletin sometime in the 1980's and was sent to me by a fellow civil engineer as a fax that was printed out on thermofax paper which, over time, fades to become barely-discernable. I typed it out before it disappeared completely.

Michael Hamilton-Clark