

Railway (& canal) paths ... and the navy

This idea could be generally applicable to any canal or railway path in the Lothians, but as space is limited beside the Union Canal I have assumed a railway path location to be more likely.

Many of our current cyclepaths are a legacy of the canal- and railway-building manias of the late 18th and mid 19th centuries which did so much to make long-distance travel available to most people, rather than just the wealthy. While the canals and railways were major engineering achievements, the basic earth-moving operations were largely done by the muscle power of the humble 'navvy'.

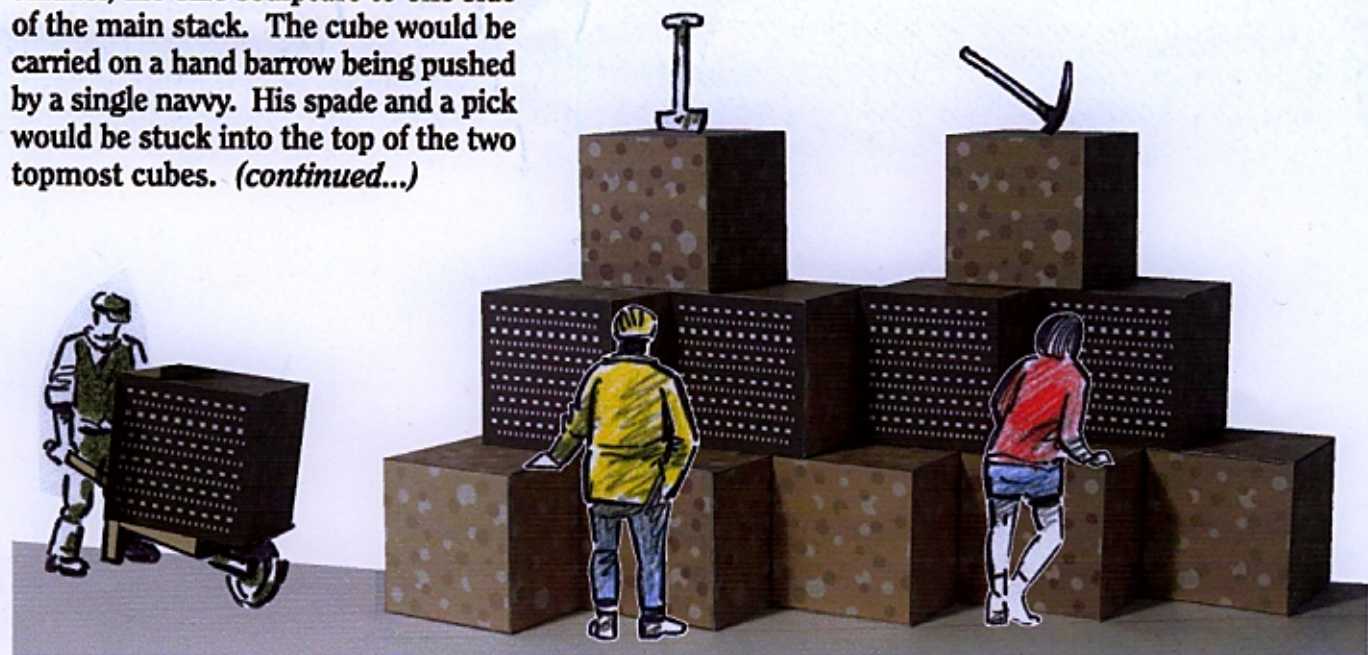
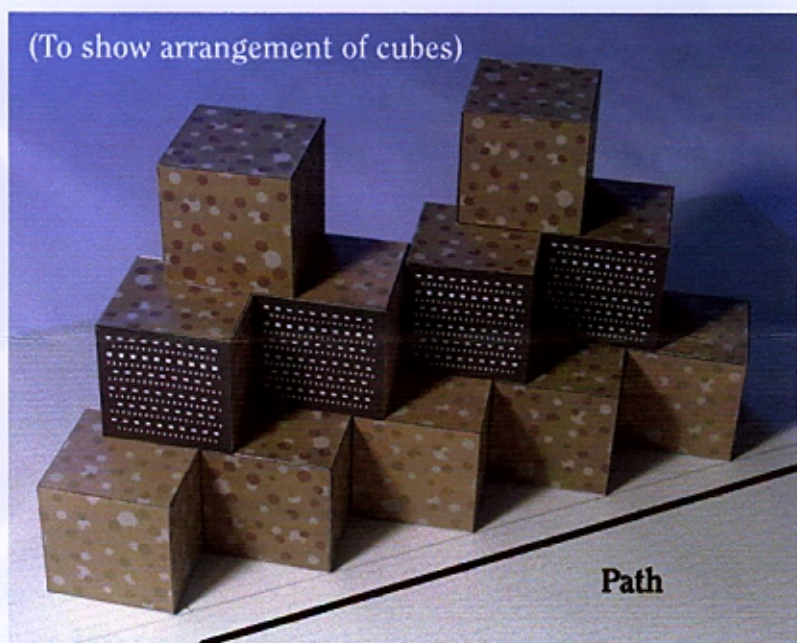
I've seen various figures quoted, but it seems to be generally accepted that a navvy would be expected to dig up (by pick and shovel) and move (by hand barrow) **TWELVE** cubic yards of soil **PER DAY**. This is a tremendous work rate, as anyone who has tried it will confirm!

My idea is to represent (and celebrate) this using 12 large cubes each 3'x 3'x 3' and made to look like dark-coloured soil and stones (without a container). Eleven of these would be assembled and fixed in a stacked arrangement as shown. (*As this would have been quite hard to describe and/or draw, I resolved it by making a crude cardboard model which I then photographed and added to by drawing.*)

Each of the four cubes in the middle layer would have an information panel on the 'front' facing the path and approximately at eye level.

The 12th cube would form part of a smaller, life-size sculpture to one side of the main stack. The cube would be carried on a hand barrow being pushed by a single navvy. His spade and a pick would be stuck into the top of the two topmost cubes. (*continued...*)

(To show arrangement of cubes)



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(continued)

Materials

I would like the cubes to have the appearance and texture of actual soil and stones – in other words a solid lump of soil with no container, as this would look more striking than if the soil was in some kind of box or crate. However, I confess I don't know enough about possible sculptural materials to suggest how this could be achieved. I've also assumed we're discounting the threat of vandalism for the purposes of this competition!

The five 'information panel' faces would be smooth and black, with the lettering indented and white. The size of the lettering would be such that it was easy to read from a distance of six feet or so, as there will inevitably be a huge crowd of spectators round this fascinating monument to human endeavour, and we want those at the back to be able to see.

Information panels

These would be kept very simple and therefore quick to read. There is huge scope for what the content might be, but here are a few suggestions:

Barrow cube: Giving the basic facts that most of the earth moving was done by human labour with very little machinery, and the principal statistic of 12 cubic yds per navy per day.

1. Canals – Navigations – origin of 'navvy' – progression to railway construction, etc
2. Basics of canal/railway alignment – gradients – cut & fill: how spoil from cuttings was balanced against need for embankments, etc
3. About all the other tradesmen needed, masons, bricklayers, smiths. Horse engines?
4. Something about the specific location/route on which the piece is sited.
5. Development of the railway network from small private enterprise lines, through amalgamations and groupings to British Rail.

Orientation

I have arranged the stack so that there's enough overlap between the cubes to give some structural rigidity, but at the same time leave as much of each cube visible as possible.

I include this photo because the site chosen might mean it was more appropriate for the 'info' faces of the cubes to be facing the opposite direction.

