

## Abstract:

Thomas Love Peacock's first novel, *Headlong Hall* (1815), investigates the effect of infrastructure at a moment when the concept was first being crystallized. Peacock asks what it means when the "headlong" momentum of large technological systems starts to invade more traditional and immovable structures, such as the manorial hall of Squire Headlong. Peacock's novels are often regarded as inconclusive; *Headlong Hall* starts with a debate between the passengers on the Irish mail about progress, and ends with the statu-quo-ite Mr Jenkison stating he cannot tell if humanity is advancing or regressing. This doubtful progress is mirrored by Peacock's description of the improvements wrought by the mail-coach, with the road to Ireland, in the process of being improved by Thomas Telford, also the subject of a contemporary debate about where the nation was heading. Peacock's novel is, however, unambiguous in the way it describes what Brian Larkin has called the "politics and poetics" of infrastructure, and the way it has a symbolism and an effect that goes far beyond the purely technical. While many of his contemporaries were celebrating the "March of Mind", Peacock points out the changes to cognition as infrastructure alters ideas of temporality, agency, and space. At the centre of the novel, Mr Cranium is turned into a projectile and fired off the top of a tower, with Peacock suggesting that even the casing of the brain can no longer provide protection against the seemingly unstoppable trajectory of progress. The novel, however, counters this by suggesting the autonomy of infrastructure is illusory. It shows how different systems interact and interpenetrate, and that local structures are not as powerless as infrastructure often makes them seem.

**Keywords:** Progress, infrastructure, communications, temporalities, circulation, improvement, autonomy

# **Unstoppable force meets immovable object: Peacock's *Headlong Hall* and the autonomy of infrastructure**

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## **Introduction: The Irish mail and the arrival of infrastructure**

My grandfather William Sharp, born in the Victorian era and a lover of puns and paradoxes, used to perplex me when I was a child by asking “what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?” Reading Thomas Love Peacock has often left me with a similar problem. Peacock’s novels tend to deal in incompatible viewpoints, and critics have for many years been puzzled by the “apparently inconclusive” (Mulvihill 2000, 91) arguments that punctuate texts such as *Headlong Hall* (published 1815, dated 1816). J. B. Priestley is just one of many to complain that “In *Headlong Hall* it is difficult to detect the author’s own point of view” (1966, 35-36), which is perhaps not surprising as the novel asks a similar question to my grandfather: what happens when an unstoppable, “headlong” society comes into collision with that most immovable of structures, the “hall” of the rural squire? Peacock gives no obvious answer, with Mr Jenkison, described as a statu-quo-ite, unable to judge whether progress is beneficial, stating with the novel’s last lines that “the scales of my philosophical balance remain eternally equiponderant” (87). It would be wrong, however, to take this as the final word. What I would like to suggest is that Peacock’s first novel is a much more subtle interrogation into what Brian Larkin has termed the politics and poetics of infrastructure (2013), which is all the more remarkable as it is

one of the first texts to take the impact of large-scale technological systems as its central theme.

*Headlong Hall* is probably the most neglected of Peacock's seven novels (which makes it very neglected indeed). Peacock has attracted little critical attention in recent decades, but *Headlong Hall*, probably the most famous of his works in his own lifetime (Keymer 2018), deserves attention because it engages with infrastructure in ways that go beyond former or contemporary novelists. Paul Edwards argues that "To be modern is to live within and by means of infrastructures" (2003, 186), suggesting the importance of a text that considers this aspect of modernity long before its usual 20<sup>th</sup> century home. Larkin defines infrastructures as "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space" (2013, 319), and it is the speed-up in this exchange that concerns *Headlong Hall*. Infrastructure gets its earliest *OED* citation in 1927, but if we accept Larkin's definition, it had been a central feature of British society for a century before Peacock wrote, with the ethos of circulation prompting a transport revolution from the 1720s onwards, its importance canonized in Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Peacock uses the development of the Holyhead Road, which was to become the crowning work of Thomas Telford and a landmark in the development of an "infrastructure state" according to Jo Guldi (2012), to consider how built networks were transforming the experience of time, space and agency in Regency Britain, and to question what kind of modernity they were encouraging.

The novel begins with a scene on the Irish mail, where the rapid improvements in transport infrastructure prompt a debate between three philosophers on the direction of progress. Mr Foster "took occasion to panegyrize the vehicle in which they were then travelling", observing "what remarkable improvements had been made in the means of

facilitating intercourse between distant parts of the kingdom: he held forth with great energy on the subject of roads and railways, canals and tunnels, manufactures and machinery” (3). Described as a “perfectibilian”, Mr Foster believes in the progress of mankind as advance follows advance, buying into what Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox call the “enchantments” of infrastructure, where roads bring “the promises of speed, integration and connectivity” (2012, 521). His view is rejected by the “deteriorationist” Mr Escot, who sees every step forward as a step away from natural perfection, arguing “what is the advantage of locomotion? The wild man is happy in one spot, and there he remains: the civilized man is wretched in every place he happens to be in, and then congratulates himself on being accommodated with a machine, that will whirl him to another, where he will be just as miserable as ever” (9). The philosophers, like so many to follow, couch the debate in binary terms; the sort of division made by Jürgen Habermas in his painstaking attempt to distinguish between a human “lifeworld” and an artificial “system”.<sup>1</sup> For Mr Foster, technology empowers humans; for Mr Escot, it puts them “at the mercy of external circumstances” (4). In both cases, system is regarded as exterior to people and their lifeworld. Peacock, by contrast, takes a more constructivist approach, suggesting that “culture is a humanoid-technoid hybrid” (Siegert 2015, 193), where “humans and machines are fundamentally interdependent” (Drury 2017, 111). This enables a different view of infrastructure, which foregrounds how it acts as metaphor, what it signifies in terms of politics, and how humans and systems are enmeshed. It is similar to Larkins’s argument that we need to look at the poetics of infrastructure, which is far from neutral with a “purely technical functioning”, but has power in representational and kinaesthetic terms, and as such “becomes the grounds around which forms of citizenship are contested” (2013, 329; 331).

*Headlong Hall* interrogates the way infrastructure, far from being set apart from humans, is deeply embodied; not only is there a “head” in the title, but it is full of skulls, and features a Lord Littlebrain and a Mr Cranium, suggesting that change is operating in terms of cognition. To think of infrastructure in these terms, as Larkin argues, “is to rearrange the hierarchy of functions so that the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant” (2013, 336). If the philosophers externalise infrastructure, the situatedness of the novel considers the way systems and machines are internalized, affecting the texture of everyday life at Headlong Hall, and connecting with the human at the deepest of levels.

### **The unstoppable momentum of infrastructure**

Peacock’s novel foregrounds the interface between a “headlong” speed-up in communications and a much older structure, the ancestral hall, setting up a collision between the fastest thing on four wheels, a mail-coach plying the newly opened route to Holyhead, with one of the strongholds of a slower, more traditional world, a country estate tucked away in the mountains of north Wales. In Regency Britain developments in transport, with new mail-coaches, improved turnpike roads, and a network of canals, were probably a more important marker of infrastructural change than the manufactories and engines of the Industrial Revolution. Tracks and pathways are the start of infrastructure and, as Dimitris Dalakoglou argues, roads hold a privileged place as the drivers of “inland mobility and flows, both material and immaterial ones, which in turn constitute the dynamic challenge of material fixities in places they pass through” (2010, 146). Just as infrastructure often mediates between what is inside and what is outside, Peacock very neatly places his debate on the threshold between domestic fixities and the flows of a communication network. Large technological systems place

the home within a wider grid, with Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand and Akhil Gupta stating that “infrastructures often quite literally connect and constitute boundaries between public and private [...] governance, it turns out, does not take place at a distance but through the intimacy and proximity of toilets, pipes, and potholed roads” (2018, 28). Though there are no sewers and pipes in *Headlong Hall*, there is no shortage of potholed roads being turned into smooth turnpikes, enabling a freight of goods, ideas and people to descend on Squire Headlong’s estate.

Peacock was not the first writer to envisage the manorial home penetrated by outside forces. Typically the centre of a district or parish, the hall was a potent symbol of the past, usually associated with land and lineage, patriarchy, and conservative politics. It stood as a site of power, often the dominant house in a neighbourhood, but it was becoming increasingly isolated from the 1750s onwards. Henry Fielding’s Paradise Hall is far from an Eden in *Tom Jones* (1749), while Harlowe Place is stalked, and almost paralyzed, by the cavalier throwback Lovelace in *Clarissa* (1748). Laurence Sterne’s Shandy Hall, sequestered in a retired corner of the kingdom, has its bowling green turned into a war zone by the traumatised soldier Uncle Toby as the European conflicts of the 1700s hit home. Sarah Scott’s society of females in *Millenium Hall* (1762) challenged patriarchal conceptions of how ‘home’ should be ordered, while Charlotte Smith’s *The Old Manor House* (1794), like so many venerable structures from the 1780s onwards, is fissured by gothic fears. Mansfield Park is nearly turned inside out by the incursions of the metropolitan Crawfords, while Castle Rackrent becomes increasingly dilapidated as Maria Edgeworth’s novel charts the gradual decline of landed power in the face of the cash nexus.

Within this dodgy property portfolio *Headlong Hall* warrants a special place, not just as an early example of the work of one of the more prolific house-builders of the

period, who went on to bring *Melincourt* (1817), *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), *Crotchet Castle* (1831), and *Gryll Grange* (1861) to the market, but because it suggests another reason for the weakening of the old sites of power – the growing importance of infrastructure. It has become a commonplace to observe that, in the eighteenth century, novels tended to move from individual names (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Clarissa*, *Evelina*) to places (*The Old Manor House*, *Mansfield Park*, *Millenium Hall*). The shift suggests an increasing recognition that selfhood was not distinct from the effects of built structures. The novel as a form had always theorized the relationship between the individual and their environment, but *Headlong Hall* introduces a much clearer concept of infrastructure, which brings very different parameters into play. Infrastructure is not necessarily invisible (roads were *the* marker of progress in the period) but it does tend to elide the fact it is inherently political. To some extent, it is technological change's ability to appear natural and inevitable that makes it so dangerous. By siting his novel on the frontier between progress and tradition, the new infrastructures and the old structures, Peacock unveils this often hidden agency, showing how it transforms the lived experience of speed, time, and space, penetrating to the heart of the domestic.

The novel is set in the borderland between a traditional, regional Britain, and the future vision of a society joined by relatively frictionless space. The first chapter is set on the newly opened Irish mail route, with the passengers having speeded through seventy miles overnight before they start to talk to each other. The wistful coaching prints looking back from the railway era at a mythical Olde England has obscured the fact that there was nothing nostalgic about the mail-coaches – they were marvels of technology and organisation. Contemporary prints contrasted the hurry of the mail-coach with what now seemed the much slower stage-coach, emphasising its non-stop, elite, destination-first ethos [Figure 1]. Ruth Livesey has persuasively argued that the

“scarlet-clad Post Office Guards, blowing their horns to ensure turnpike gates were thrown open before their arrival, became a potent symbol of a communicative body politic of the nation in the late Romantic period” (2016, 155-156), and Peacock investigates what happens when this new realm of efficiency, speed, timetables, and imperial connections meets the marginal spaces of the kingdom.

North Wales, a mountainous and poor rural region, had lagged behind the rest of the nation when it came to constructing turnpikes, as Cath D’Alton’s illustration shows [Figure 2]. Like Joseph Conrad’s Marlow, Peacock had been drawn to this blank space on the map, spending long periods in Gwynedd between 1810-13, and he would have witnessed the rapid infrastructural change in the area. Roads were first improved by Richard Pennant, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Penrhyn of Penrhyn, in a series of capitalist-paternalist improvements, followed by the introduction of a mail route in 1808. While Peacock was writing *Headlong Hall*, the area was earmarked for one of the first great acts of civil engineering in Britain, Telford’s Holyhead Road, which has been described by Guldi as a watershed in the creation of an infrastructure state in Britain.<sup>2</sup> The area had become a focal point for debates about roads after the Act of Union in 1801, when Irish MPs complained about the difficulties of communicating with Parliament. The Irish mail was at first notorious for its inability to keep to its timetable, with six major accidents occurring between April and December 1809 (Quartermaine, Trinder and Turner 2003, 13). As a result, Telford and his supporters argued roads needed to be put under national, not local, supervision. The first government-sponsored roads were for military purposes, to place the Highlands under a grid of control after the Jacobite risings, but there was a growing recognition that the supra-local turnpikes also needed help with funding and planning. In 1810 A Parliamentary Select Committee was set up



to investigate ways of improving the route, and Telford sent his surveyors with their theodolites into the hills, his plans approved and ready to be implemented by 1811.

*Headlong Hall* thus starts with a debate about the trajectory of society on the exact stretch of road where the government was experimenting with a new idea of state planning. Infrastructure is always involved in movement, here infusing mobility and speed into what had once been a pocket of slowness. There has been a growing appreciation that the coaching network introduced a new sense of speed into society, and the mail-coach, as Livesey and Jonathan Grossman (2012) have argued, was regarded as the *ne plus ultra* of rapid travel. Peacock is quick to show the disruption this brings to Squire Headlong's estate as he gathers guests for a Christmas party. The arrival of the mail route, much like the latter-day arrival of the railroad, meant an injection of speed and reliable communications, in this case connecting north Wales and the agrarian produce of Ireland more closely to the commercial heartlands of Britain. It was meant to run like clockwork; guards had to fill out time-checks for each stage, and the post took precedence over passengers, with Dr Gaster not given "one minute" to finish his morning meal during a stop at an inn (9).

The speed-up in society appears to have been transmitted to Squire Headlong, who in all his "thoughts, words, and actions" exhibited "a remarkable alacrity of progression, which almost annihilated the interval between conception and execution" (47). Speed is everywhere in *Headlong Hall*. One of the Christmas party guests, Mr Chromatic, is famed for playing the fiddle quickly, because "rapidity of execution, not delicacy of expression, constitutes the scientific perfection of modern music" (33). The series of marriages that close the action are arranged "in little more than five minutes" (79). We first see Squire Headlong inundated by all the deliveries he has ordered for the festivities, converting some newly unpacked article "into a missile" to throw at any

servant not moving in a “ratio of velocity” corresponding to his desires (7). The servants work “in furious haste”, where “All was bustle, uproar, and confusion” (6). Mr Milestone, a house guest loosely based on the great improver Humphry Repton, suggests the way a sense of hurry is transferred to the country estate. His proposal to rearrange the geography of a venerable tower in the grounds is no sooner thought of than done, with a train of gunpowder quickly laid, and just as quickly “the rapidly communicated ignition ran hissing along the surface of the soil” (48). Everything is done so precipitously no one has noticed Mr Cranium is enjoying the view from the battlements, and as a result of the explosion he is propelled from the top. Peacock’s point is that the cranium, one of the most internal of all spaces – the casing that protects the brain – is losing its old sense of security and fixity as speed starts to disturb cognition.

This is far from the idea of the hall as a place of stability, its solidity based on a highly mythologised power structure of ties and obligations. Instead of a structured space, Peacock depicts a house that is divided and atomised. While the four inside passengers of the coach, later described by Thomas De Quincey as the “illustrious quaternion” ([1849] 1923, 3), had “ensconced themselves in the four corners of the Holyhead mail”, the scene switches to show the Squire “quadripartite in his locality; that is to say, he was superintending the operations in four scenes of action – namely, the cellar, the library, the picture-gallery, and the dining-room” (3; 5). Kevin Lynch has observed that as “men free themselves from submission to the external cycles of nature, relying more often on self-created and variable social cycles, they increasingly risk internal disruption” (1971, 119). Trying to be in four places at once is only conceivable thanks to the distance-eroding nature of infrastructure.

Road improvements also increase the reach of commerce and markets, and this brings further disruption. The huge number of goods Squire Headlong has ordered turn his home into a post office sorting room, with Peacock using one of his favourite devices, the list *ad absurdum*, to tell us:

Multitudes of packages had arrived, by land and water, from London, and Liverpool, and Chester, and Manchester, and Birmingham, and various parts of the mountains: books, wine, cheese, globes, mathematical instruments, turkeys, telescopes, hams, tongues, microscopes, quadrants, sextants, fiddles, flutes, tea, sugar, electrical machines, figs, spices, air-pumps, soda-water (6)

The lack of consecutive order in the list mirrors the domestic confusion. The products, “arriving with infinite rapidity, and in inexhaustible succession, had been deposited at random”, and as a result there are “sofas in the cellar, chandeliers in the kitchen, hampers of ale in the drawing-room, and fiddles and fish-sauce in the library” (6). Even Squire Headlong’s “antediluvian” name Ap-Rhiader, the root of his traditional authority, has to change because “when commercial bagsmen began to scour the country, the ambiguity of the sound induced his descendants to drop the suspicious denomination of *Riders*” (67; 2).

The family distances itself from any association with travelling salesmen, but the *dilettanti* who make up most of the Christmas party are complicit in “a species of shop” (21). The Regency development of marketing, and the ability to sell at a distance promoted by mail links, helps shape those who supposedly lead the cultural life of Britain. James Mulvihill insightfully observes that the *dilettanti* build and protect their own ‘brand’ names. “The systems Peacock’s characters promote are not obsessions” argues Mulvihill, “or intellectual humors, but specialized techniques employed to gain an end, whether status or money. Constructed and conveyed as opinion they gain their value from currency” (2000, 93). They have all gained an invitation to the Squire’s

table because they have promoted themselves, advertising their own specialism in book-shops, on the lecture circuit, or in publications. Dr Gaster carves out a name for himself by publishing a dissertation on stuffing turkeys, and they have all put their names and ideas in circulation, fiercely ring-fencing their area of expertise. Howard Mills felt *Headlong Hall* was a “rickety prototype” of what was to come from Peacock, but perhaps inadvertently hit on one of the clever aspects of its form, that “It is a bag of samples from Peacock’s various ‘lines’” (1964, 84; 86). The *dilettanti* such as Mr Cranium, Mr Panscope and Mr Chromatic, branded by their tag-names, also take care to differentiate themselves as products, joining the other modish elements of knowledge, such as air-pumps and electrical machines, which the Squire has collected. They are commodified, incapable of separating their leisure time from their work time, just as the mail-coach is described as depositing “its valuable cargo” of passengers at Capel Curig. In a very real sense, it is a mail-order party.

The fact that the passengers, journeying to Wales, are described as travelling on the *Holyhead* mail also suggests the way infrastructure transforms ideas of space, with the once-remote region now joined to London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. Work on Telford’s road began in the autumn of 1815, having been put on hold for four years while the war with France continued. The Holyhead Road was to some extent part of the victory celebrations, and a symbol of Britain’s imperial ambitions. It aimed to connect the nation, while at the same time indicating its desire for an extended reach beyond the British isles. At the moment Peacock was writing *Headlong Hall*, the aptly named Waterloo Bridge at Betws-y-Coed (replete with shamrock, leek, rose and thistle decorations) was being cast by an iron foundry, and was in situ by 1816. This element of internal colonialism indicates that infrastructure is rarely democratic, despite its promise of a homogenized ordering of space, where extension and coverage lead to an

equality of access. Mail-coaches were synchronized to leave London at 7pm every evening, and the passengers manage to travel 70 miles before first light (a century earlier, 30 miles in a whole day was regarded as good going), creating a sense of “empty” space long before the railways. It became a truism that improved roads smoothed out regional differences, disseminating luxury and London manners, and the guests at first turn the hall into a remarkably metropolitan gathering. The character promising the greatest integration is the aptly named Mr Milestone. If roads tend to turn space into an abstract entity – a specific quantity of miles on a signpost – then Mr Milestone’s view of landscape gardening is equally blind to the qualities of a locale as he envisages turning Snowdonia into a Surrey parkland.<sup>3</sup> He advocates “polishing and trimming the rocks of Llanberris”, a technique that would also remove that “ancient familiarity” which is everywhere under threat (11). Rather than a natural scene, Mr Milestone imagines an imposed, Identikit landscape. He canvases for business by showing Squire Headlong the sort of ‘before’ and ‘after’ sketch that Repton presented to his clients, and speed and movement is at the heart of the proposed transformation:

‘Here is a rugged mountainous road, leading through impervious shades: the ass and the four goats characterize a wild uncultured scene. Here, as you perceive, it is totally changed into a beautiful gravel-road, gracefully curving through a belt of limes: and there is Lord Littlebrain driving four-in-hand.’ (37)

In each of Mr Milestone’s visions for Lord Littlebrain’s estate, the sense of place is dissolved by a desire for movement, to be somewhere else. Lord Littlebrain is pictured driving a carriage, rowing a boat, or looking through a telescope. He is never imagined as connected to his new landscape, just as the grounds are to be disconnected from their own rugged past and turned into something that is “beautiful”. Improvement, unlike infrastructure, is usually regarded as the product of individual agency, but Mr

Milestone's schemes have much in common with Telford's plans for the flattening of the Holyhead Road to ensure gradients were no worse than 1:30 (Quartermaine, Trinder and Turner 2003, 12), or the way the mail-coach enabled people to move at night.<sup>4</sup> Edwards points to the sense of power evoked by infrastructure, observing that it promises "*systemic, societywide control* over the variability inherent in the natural environment", allowing us "to control time and space: to work, play, and sleep on schedules we design, to communicate instantaneously with others almost regardless of their physical location, and to go wherever we want at speeds far beyond the human body's walking pace." Edwards adds that "these capacities permit us, and perhaps compel us, to approach nature as a consumable good, something to be experienced (or not), as and when we wish" (2003, 188-189).

Peacock also questions this consumption of the landscape from an ecological perspective as the three philosophers walk to the model community on the coast at Tremadoc (also known as Trè Madoc and Tremadog), which had briefly provided a refuge for Percy Shelley in 1813.<sup>5</sup> The town was the pet project of William Madocks, who bought a great swathe of marshy land on the Glaslyn estuary in 1798 and, half projector, half utopian philanthropist, aimed to build a prosperous community. The town was constructed to plan, arranged around a Regency-style square and a series of geometric roads, with one of the first (if not the first) manufactories in north Wales. Madocks hoped to lure the Irish mail through Tremadoc by building an embankment to cut across Traeth Mawr, a long inlet of the sea. The embankment avoided the need to negotiate the sands or waters of Traeth Mawr, reduced journey times, and reclaimed a large amount of land once it had been drained.<sup>6</sup> Tremadoc, like so many of the impositions of the metropolitan *dilettanti*, was a project directed from *outside* the locale. Madocks was MP for Boston in Lincolnshire and historian Elizabeth Beazley

observes that “like the new town, much of Madocks’ great embankment was designed by post” (1985, 13). Two of the main thoroughfares at Tremadoc were optimistically named Dublin Street and London Street (like the Holyhead mail, suggesting the way space is continually stretched by long-range networks). Similarly, the strangely out-of-place manufactory turns the once-rural populace into “little human machines” (43-44), while most of the London guests at Headlong Hall are out of place. Mr Cranium does not realise his treatise on phrenology is making little effect on the skulls of his Welsh listeners, just as Mr Milestone does not see the absurdity of trying to polish the rocks of Llanberris. To use one of Peacock’s delicately chosen words from *Nightmare Abbey*, the guests are for the most part “antiperistatistical” ([1818] 2007, 92), which can be defined as “heightened by contrast” or, in this context, “antagonistic to their surroundings”. That infrastructure, for all its supposed neutrality, is also antiperistatistical is only too clear. Larkin observes that technical systems originate in one locale, and when they are extended they have to “move to other places with differing conditions” (2013, 330). This requires a degree of translation, but Telford’s plans, like Mr Milestone’s improvements, or Madock’s embankment, are remarkably unresponsive to locale. The philosophers bemoan the loss of the natural “liquid mirror” caused by the embankment, while admitting the usefulness of “connecting” two counties (41). That self-reflection and a ‘mirror’ will disappear in the blur of faster movement again helps to unveil the effects of infrastructure.

Thomas P. Hughes argues that “Inventors, organizers, and managers of technological systems mostly prefer hierarchy” (2012, 49), and infrastructure is usually felt as a top-down form of power. Henri Lefebvre, who uses motorways as his prime example, calls this “dominated” or “dominant” space, which “is invariably the realization of a master’s project” (Lefebvre 1991, 164-165). Infrastructure creates a

dominion of 'elsewhere', and at the same time denudes the past and the 'now'. It is always future-facing, encouraging ideas of progress. Large-scale technological systems, often built at great cost in the present, are a benefit intended to last for periods long beyond the human lifecycle. Telford's Holyhead Road was inordinately expensive, culminating in the bridge over the Menai Straits, but still acts as the spine of the A5 today. Larkin states that "it is very difficult to disentangle infrastructures from evolutionary ways of thinking" because they are "intimately caught up with the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future" (2013, 332).

*Headlong Hall* also suggests the way infrastructure creates an accelerated sense of time; not only is there a speed-up in communications, there is a speed-up in the perception of history. Thomas Pennant observed that before Lord Pennant started to develop transport in the area, the roads were "not better than very bad horsepaths" (1810, 86). Ian Quartermaine, Barrie Trinder, and Rick Turner observe that the section of the Holyhead Road between Bangor and Capel Curig "formed part of one of the most celebrated 'improved' landscapes in Britain" (2003, 104). That the creation of a "noble coach road" (Pennant 1810, 86) was so quickly superseded by a mail-coach route, which was then to be perfected by Telford's new breed of civil engineers, gives a sense of progress in overdrive. Peacock, in a preface added to the 1837 edition in *Bentley's Standard Novels*, draws attention to this "march of mechanics", while a later preface to a new edition of *Melincourt*, written in 1856, points out that locomotives, largely unthought of when he wrote his first novels, had transformed mobility still further. Grossman identifies a similar acceleration in his brilliant analysis of the speeding coach in *The Pickwick Papers*, just as Ina Ferris notes that Walter Scott, in his postscript to *Waverley*, "identifies as the catalyst for his novelistic project the rapid pace of recent change" (2012; Ferris 2008, 485).



This leads to a sense of a society moving at a “headlong” pace. Hughes shows that the patterns of technological change, where invention, development, and innovation often lead to transfer and growth, help explain “the tendency of systems to expand” (2012, 50). This makes them appear unstoppable, possessing their own autonomy, though Hughes points out that this is really an illusion of *momentum*. Large technological systems “possess direction, or goals; and they display a rate of growth suggesting velocity” (2012, 70). Roads are high-momentum systems *par excellence*; improved roads tend to lead to greater traffic, lighter and faster vehicles, and the need for even more improved roads. The Malthusian calculations of Mr Escot, of a society where 50 wants will be multiplied by 50, imagine a geometrical ratio that will grow thanks to its own inner dynamic. Like the waterfall from which the Headlongs derive their name, the movement of history is seemingly a powerful, irresistible force, gathering speed as it hurtles forward. In case anyone had missed the significance of the title of his first novel, in *Melincourt* Peacock has another Malthusian calculator of happiness, Mr Fax, warn of a “headlong progress to perdition” ([1817] 1927, 60).

The acceleration inscribed in the DNA of infrastructure, and the fact that all large-scale technological systems are products of massive collective action, tend to call human agency into question. While the philosophers talk (in *Crotchet Castle* they are described as “discussing every thing and settling nothing” [1982, 207]), the built environment is undergoing seemingly unstoppable change. Mr Escot worries that people are becoming “mere automata, component parts of the enormous machines” (44), and in the later preface to *Melincourt*, Peacock bemoans the fact that his predictions have come true:

Now everybody goes everywhere: going for the sake of going, and rejoicing in the rapidity with which they accomplish nothing. *On va, mais on ne voyage pas*. Strenuous idleness drives us on the wings of steam in boats and trains, seeking the art of enjoying

life, which, after all, is in the regulation of the mind, and not in the whisking about of the body. ([1817] 1927, 2)

Bodies are continually “whisked about” by technological forces in *Headlong Hall*, seemingly acquiescing to what Lynn Festa has described as “the will of systems” (2015, 344).

At the exact centre of the novel, Mr Cranium is shot from the top of the tower as the explosion spooks him. Instead of jumping straight upwards, Mr Cranium’s “ascent being unluckily a little out of the perpendicular, he descended with a proportionate curve from the apex of his projection” (50). He describes the parabola of a rocket, just as Squire Headlong turns packages into missiles to chivvy along his servants. In a novel full of trajectories, history appears to be moving headlong, racing forward without thinking (to rush headlong is to leave the head behind), just as Squire Headlong “had little idea of gradation; he saw no interval between the first step and the last, but pounced upon his object with the impetus of a mountain cataract” (47). In any barrier to his plans, just like Madocks’ embankment at Tremadoc or the Telford road-making to come, the Squire “seldom failed to succeed in either knocking it down or cutting his way through it” (47). Infrastructure tends to reify a teleological frame; it encourages a certain vision based on connectivity, speed and homogeneity, and at the same time encourages a sense of what Lauren Berlant describes as the perception of “nonsovereignty in social life” (2016, 394). At the mid-point of the novel, infrastructure appears to possess a trajectory of its own, while humans are seemingly reduced to packages, missiles, or brands to be deposited as the market dictates.

### **The hall and the immovable ‘local’**

If this was all, *Headlong Hall* would stand as a prescient, cautionary tale about the fluid,

and largely coercive, relationship between infrastructure, society and culture, leaving “a powerful sense that power is deracinated, organized elsewhere” (Berlant 2005, 69). Peacock, however, sets the effects of infrastructure against a very different environment, a country estate in the Welsh periphery, with its very different conceptions of speed, time, space and power. Edwards argues that “in some sense, every house is an individually configured infrastructure” (2003, 197), and the meeting of these two forms of systems says much about questions of autonomy and human agency.

It is easy to see the hall as representing the past, and the new world of mobility as the future, but more interesting is the way the different temporalities interpenetrate. Infrastructure projects, as Appel, Anand and Gupta argue, embody “different visions of the future” (2018, 19), rather than one inevitable direction. Peacock’s typically serio-comic opening to “The Four Ages of Poetry”, that “Poetry, like the world, may be said to have four ages, but in a different order” suggests his deep suspicion of teleological narratives ([1820] 1929, 3). Modernity tends to be showy, to pride itself on its newness, just as the *dilettanti* are always out to make an impact, and Mr Foster, the spokesman of progress, enthuses about infrastructural change with “great energy”. The hall’s influence works more gradually, but by the end has started to modify the effects of infrastructural change, with all the guests toasting “the hall of the Headlong” (77). This could also help explain why Peacock sets his novel at a moment of transition. Once infrastructure is part of the naturalized background, it is much harder to think of it as the product of a series of choices and negotiations. Peacock shows a process, rather than a *fait accompli*, with Appel, Anand and Gupta proposing that “As opposed to the ‘finished’ product of a planner’s map, if we think of infrastructures unfolding over many different moments with uneven temporalities we get a picture in which the social

and political are as important as the technical and logistical” (2018, 17). The philosophers are only able to balance the beauty of the Traeth Mawr inlet with the utilitarian landscape it will become because they visit while the embankment was still being built. There was a delay in completing the final 100-yard central section, which dates the action in December 1810. Writing in 1815, Peacock could just be synchronizing the text with his first arrival in the area, but setting his novel in the recent past also foregrounds a moment when the bridge between past and future is still incomplete.

In *Headlong Hall*, once the passengers get off the mail-coach, their progress is slowed, as if they have encountered a boundary between different temporalities. Finding there is only one dilapidated post-chaise available for hire at the inn at Capel Curig, the three philosophers choose to walk to the hall instead, while the arrival of the Squire’s sister, Caprioletta, allows a restoration of “natural pace” to the household (10). The novel starts with the timetables and time discipline of the mail-coach, with Dr Gaster left “half-breakfasted” (9) by the coachman, but the house puts people first, with an “old custom” ensuring breakfast is served from 8am to 2pm so “guests might rise at their own hour” (39). The chapter titles – “The Breakfast”, “The Arrivals”, “The Grounds”, “The Dinner”, “The Evening”, “The Walk”, “The Tower” – promise a fairly typical country house weekend. The timetable insists on quantitative “clock” time, but the hall measures time in qualitative ways. For the local populace, the Christmas ball served as “the main pillar of memory, round which all the events of the year were suspended and entwined” (59). The chapter titles lead to surreal events, but they also impose a degree of order and ritual, both in terms of each day, which ends with a dinner, and the annual traditions. While Christmas does not appear to be an overly Christian feast at Headlong Hall, there is still a division between sacred and profane conceptions

of time. Just as Mr Pickwick heads off the coach roads to hunker down at Dingley Dell, holidays insist on a different form of temporality. Eviatar Zerubavel argues that “whereas profane time is *historical* and is best represented in a *linear* fashion, sacred time is essentially *ahistorical* and is best represented in a *cyclical* manner” (1985, 112). The ball has been held “from time immemorial”, linking past events with the future in a cycle of return. The event has the strange effect of attracting all the local traffic, ensuring “every chariot, coach, barouche, and barouchette, landau and landalet, chaise, curricle, buggy, whisky, and tilbury, of the three counties, was in motion” (60). Having gathered this world of mobility into its orbit, the hall then maroons the coaches, with the rigours of the Squire’s entertainment ensuring almost all of the coachmen are left incapable of driving. The novel starts with the speed of the mail-coach, and ends with all the vehicles in the vicinity abandoned or left to limp home.

Despite Mr Milestone’s attempt to reorder the Tower, and his boast that, given a year to shave and polish the scenery, “no one would be able to know it again” (11), the grounds also prove resistant to losing their identity. Marilyn Butler points out that the Squire’s marriage to the nature-loving Miss Tenerosa indicates that Mr Milestone will have had a wasted journey (1979, 55), and it is notable that in the discussion of landscape improvements, while Mr Milestone envisions an “after” that creates a mobile locale, full of four-in-hand coaches, rowboats and telescopes, Miss Tenerosa prefers the “before”, enthusing about each scene as a “delightful spot” to read or to listen to the sounds of nature, which involves a much more static and holistic sense of place. The marriages at the end, organised at breakneck pace by Squire Headlong, are a joke at the expense of novel conventions, and a sign of speed entering the home, but they also join people, rather than the continual images of dispersal and atomisation, creating “the spiritual metamorphosis of eight into four” (84).

To some extent, the house brings people together (with a favoured few invited to return in the summer). The Squire's hospitality proves surprisingly capable of keeping peace among the diametrically opposed parties, with Mr Cranium reconciled to Mr Escot. The deteriorationist had claimed a modern philosopher would consider someone who fell into water "in the light of a projectile" (18) and watch them sink but, having perfected the art of swimming, he disproves this by saving his prospective father-in-law from drowning after his descent from the tower. The effect of the novel's good humour should also not be underestimated. Satire is usually thought of as divisive, and Peacock certainly has his targets, but in *Headlong Hall* the jibes are gentler than in the later novels. This helps create a community of readers who smile along with the narrator, again counteracting any feeling of alienation.

The unlikely hero proves to be Squire Headlong. He is caught between the two worlds, a traditional country landowner who "had actually suffered certain phenomena, called books, to find their way into his house" (2). For most of the novel he is a comical figure, presiding over ceremonies with alcohol-fuelled bonhomie, but by the end his energy is infectious. He is happy for his sister to marry Mr Foster, despite his lack of lineage, and engineers a companionate marriage for Miss Cephalis. This is far from revolutionary, but it is better than the advice to marry money, doled out by the novels of another guest, Miss Philomela Poppyseed. When Mr Cranium argues humans are "creatures of necessity" who "must act as they do from the nature of their organization", just as a tuft of hemlock or a field of potatoes "are equally incapacitated, by their original internal organization, and the combinations and modifications of external circumstances, from being any thing but what they are" (81-82), the Squire rejects such a fatalistic view. He offers instead a rural example of good husbandry, advocating a form of system-making which also counters the indiscriminate, abstract view of space

encouraged by the roads, arguing: “Yet you destroy the hemlock [...] and cultivate the potatoe: that is my way, at least” (82). Unlike the blanket change of infrastructure, the husbandry trope suggests the need to think in terms of particular, specific interventions, and the fundamental interconnectedness between humans and systems.

This raises the question of whether Headlong Hall rather simply pits local against national, rural against metropole. Thomas Misa observes that theorists of modernity tend to posit technology as “an abstract, unitary, and totalizing entity, and typically counterpoise it against traditional formulations” (2003, 8-9). Guldi certainly suggests the post-Telford legacy of infrastructure can be read as local resistance against a wider autonomy, arguing that a libertarian backlash “dismantled the infrastructure state only some forty years after it was first imagined” (2012, 199). She cites the fact that no new roads were built at parliamentary expense between 1836 and 1880 as evidence, though this has less to do with *laissez-faire* economics, and more to do with the fact that the railways made long-distance coaching networks redundant. Peacock’s comments in later prefaces also suggest that to argue “Britain’s public infrastructure was crumbling by 1848” (Guldi 2012, 24) is perverse; it may be a historical cliché, but few would disagree that the Victorians “built” Britain. In a period where a local landowner (such as Squire Headlong) would often sit at Westminster, it might be more accurate to see the state encouraging infrastructure in absentia, just as it did by passing turnpike bill after turnpike bill in the 1700s. The state does not need to intervene when infrastructure is proceeding without any recourse to the public purse. Keller Easterling has investigated a modern-day shift to multiple, overlapping forms of sovereignty, where “infrastructure *space* becomes a medium of what might be called *extrastatecraft* – a portmanteau describing the often undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometime even in partnership with statecraft” (Easterling 2006, 15). To some extent,

even as early as the eighteenth century, the infrastructure state paradoxically exists independently of the state, and is close to Easterling's concept of extrastatecraft.

It is also easy to regard the "local" or the "past" as doomed, but in *Headlong Hall* we get instead a negotiation between two types of system. Infrastructure appears dominant but, as Edwards suggests, this is illusory since our views of infrastructure's autonomy "are strongly conditioned by choices of analytical scale" (2003, 186). Infrastructure seems to have more power because of its distant sweep, while the local feels isolated. Yet the near-at-hand is multiple too; *Headlong Hall* is just one of many novels to foreground local networks rather than national infrastructures, joining Robert Bage's *Hermesprong* (1796), Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and Scott's *Waverley* (1814) as the first wave of regional novels. It suggests a negotiation with infrastructure along all parts of its configuration, at moments when it intersects with the local. Bruno Latour makes the important point that the most global of networks are also local at every point. They are also "connected lines, not surfaces", and "are by no means comprehensive" (Latour 1993, 118). Looking at the macroscale Traeth Mawr embankment from a distance produces a sense of awed acquiescence, but the new communications nexus looks very different when transferred to the microscale of *Headlong Hall* and its grounds.

Peacock has often been accused of "an inability to take sides" (Butler 1979, 2), with Michael Baron arguing that in *Headlong Hall* "None of the issues the novel raises is intellectually resolved" (1987, xi). It is certainly true that the Mr Escot, Mr Foster and Mr Jenkison triad provides a singularly un-Hegelian pattern of thesis and antithesis without any real synthesis. Butler, however, argues that "there is a single, coherent ideal of human behaviour in Peacock's mind", believing that the texts are underpinned by "a genuine substratum of intellectual conflict" (1979, 97; 149). I would go further by



claiming that *Headlong Hall* provides a major intervention in debates about infrastructure at a key moment of social transition, particularly in the way it collapses binary oppositions.<sup>7</sup> The first line describes “the ambiguous light of a December morning” (1), but that is not the only thing that is placed in an ambiguous light. What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object? The answer, as anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of science could have told me years ago, is that it is logically impossible for immovable and unstoppable objects to exist at the same time. In terms of physics, energies are transferred: the hall and the highway start to merge and interpenetrate. Instead of a sense that infrastructure is autonomous, Peacock’s novel is closer to Michel Foucault’s insight that “power is everywhere; not that it engulfs everything but that it comes from everywhere” (1990; 93). Infrastructure has its poetics, but just as important is how other systems interact. Peacock’s interrogation of the telos of progress, and the seeming autonomy of infrastructural change, is just as valid today as it was in 1815, and a useful reminder that our own contemporary acceleration in communications is far from neutral, unstoppable, or beyond control.

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## Notes

I would like to express my thanks to the peer reviewers for their helpful and insightful comments on how to improve this article.

[1] See Andrew Feenberg on ‘Modernity Theory and Technology Studies: Reflections on Bridging the Gap’ for a critique of Habermas.

[2] Peacock visited North Wales for the first time in January 1810, and his journey mirrors that of the four insides, taking the mail as far as Capel Curig, and walking on to Tremadoc, where he met William Madocks. He stayed for more than a year, returning in the summer of 1813.

[3] The name Mr Milestone also perhaps alludes to the remarkable distances Repton travelled in his career as he became a rather high-class ‘rider’ for work.

[4] They would probably have reached Enstone, Chipping Norton or Moreton-in-the-Marsh for the breakfast stop, eating at either the Lichfield Arms, the Talbot, the White Hart or the Unicorn. See *John Cary’s New Itinerary*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed (London: 1817).

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[5] Shelley, who first met Peacock in October/November 1812, left Tremadoc after he believed he was shot at through a window.

[6] Tremadoc was to prove something of a dead-end as Telford rejected Porthdinllaen in favour of Holyhead, though the embankment is still used for the coast road today.

[7] There is a much more radical critique of halls and coaches in *Melincourt*, where the chief protagonist Mr Forester declares that ‘Splendid equipages and sumptuous dwellings are far from being symbols of general prosperity. The palace of luxurious indolence is much rather the symbol of a thousand hovels’ (297).

### Disclosure statement

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**Figure 1** *A London Mail and Stage Coach*. Robert Havell jnr. c. 1815. Author's own collection. The speed of the mail-coach is emphasized compared to the now 'slow' Dover stage-coach. The horses have all of their legs in the air at once (the definition of a gallop), hurried on by the whip of the coachman. The coach is not stopping: turnpike keepers were reported if they did not have the gates open ahead of the mail's arrival, and the guard's horn was used to warn traffic that a faster vehicle was coming through. Luggage was strictly limited on the mail-coach (unlike the stage-coach, which is in the process of being weighed down by trunks and passengers).

**Figure 2** The turnpike network 1770. © Cath D'Alton, redrawn from Eric Pawson's original map in *Transport and Economy: The Turnpike Roads of Eighteenth Century Britain* (London: Academic Press, 1977), by kind permission of the author.