

John Bevan BSc MSc PhD FSUT FAE 1943-2020

Peter Dick with thanks to Steve Weinman.

John, who passed away in early February this year, has been Chairman of the HDS since its founding thirty years ago. During that time he oversaw the growth of the Society, including the founding of its museum and archives. Those should now stand as testaments of his service to the Historical Diving Society and the study of diving history.

Born 19 December 1943 at Burry Port, Carmarthenshire, West Wales, John attended Llanelli Boys' Grammar Technical School. He had passed six GSE 'O' levels in 1961, followed by two GSE 'A' levels by 1964, the same year that he joined Llanelli Sub Aqua Club and moved to Portsmouth College of Technology. Here he joined Southsea branch of the BSAC (British Sub-Aqua Club) and expanded his diving activities to include in the in-water game Octopush. He also met up with the branch diving officer John Towse, who became a long time friend and later a key member of the HDS, and Alexander McKee of *Mary Rose* fame. Soon he established a BSAC branch at Portsmouth College and took part in two college diving expeditions, to Giglio (1965) and Malta (1966).

Before graduating from the college with a BSc in zoology and physiology in 1967, he spent a student vacationship at the RNPL (Royal Navy Physiological Laboratory), Alverstoke, before starting full-time employment with them in September that year. A year that also saw him take an RN Ship's Diver Officer Course at Portsmouth and get involved in an expedition to the site of the Kraken underwater habitat experiment at Oban, Scotland.

In 1968 John registered for an MSc, became Diving Officer of Southsea BSAC and passed an NAUI instructor examination (what was later a BSAC National Instructor), before heading off to Guadeloupe for a stint as an instructor with the Club Méditerranée. His next couple of years were filled with action, when among other things he became Regional Coach for the BS-AC and joined SUT (The Society for Underwater Technology).

In March 1970, came the highpoint of John's early career when, with Peter Sharphouse, he made the well known 10-day world record dry chamber dive at RNPL, to 457m/~500m. For that achievement, he received the Diver of the Year Award at the Brighton BS-AC conference.

In May 1970 came his MSc from the University of London and in January 1971 promotion to Scientific Officer in the RNSS (Royal Navy Scientific Service), when he was also made Head of Environmental Factors Section. Another honour followed in July when he was elected Licentiate of the Institute of Biology; not to mention making a tank dive at Farnborough in the JIM ADS (Atmospheric Diving Suit).

By January 1971 John's plans appear to have taken a slightly different course, as he applied for the post of Diving Inspector with the Department of Trade and Industry. That post went to Jackie Warner and it may have been a visit to RNPL by Henri Delauze, Patrice Chemin and Ric Wharton of Comex Diving in 1973 that led to him resign in July that year and move to Comex in Aberdeen as Technical Manager in the Training & Safety Department. At that time Comex was the world's foremost commercial deep-diving company, with headquarters near Marseille, France, where several record deep chamber dives had been made.



Ship's Officer Diving Course 1967



John Bevan (left) with Peter Sharphouse, after their world record 457m dive, 1970



John stayed with Comex until 1975 when he moved to London with CxJB (Comex-John Brown), a newly formed diving/civil engineering consultancy company to the oil and gas sector. Then, in October 1976, he again moved on to set up his own consultancy company Submex, that immediately began work as a sub-contractor to CxJB on a short contract with Shell. It was during this time, while attached to the FLAGS team at Shell, that he first met his future wife Ann, who he married at the end of 1979.

Submex began a direct contract with Shell in January 1977, which saw John make dives in the Pisces submersible during a Ninian (Field) Pipeline Inspection Project. From its base at Roland Way, London SW7, Submex then began a period of consultancy based work for oil and gas companies, while in the background John pursued a long time interest in sports cars and microlight flying. In 1981 son Thomas was born and, in 1982, his first venture as a publisher with the *Professional Diver's Handbook*.

1983 saw John elected a member of the Undersea Medical Society, join the British Microlight Aircraft Association and (in 1983/4) and become Diving Safety consultant to Operation Raleigh, which focuses on sustainable development in underdeveloped countries and since 1984 has seen some 40,000 young people from the UK take part in various expeditions. The next year his daughter, Clare was born.

John's interest in diving history, which had been in place for several years, surfaced when, in 1985, he acquired the *Earl of Zetland* (ex- *Celtic Surveyor*) to convert it to a diving museum that housed his collection of diving gear. Other work that year included participating in a 450 msw dive at NUTEC, Bergen, Norway and work for Stolt Nielsen. Ever into new projects, 1986 brought a venture into high angle photography using a camera on an extendable pole, while 1987 saw him elected a Fellow of the SUT.

1990 proved a momentous year, with John gaining a PhD with a thesis on the development of the diving helmet from the University of London. More than that, against a suggestion for setting up a diving history society, sent as a letter to Diver magazine by Nick Baker, there was an inaugural meeting in the September at the Siebe Gorman works in South Wales. Attended by around 30 interested parties, John gave a presentation on Augustus Siebe and, in line with a unanimous vote, the Historical Society came into being in 1991 with John Bevan as Chairman and Nick Baker as a magazine editor. Since the founding of the HDS has of course now spread worldwide, with its appeal slowly being taken up by a younger generation with a growing interest in the sea and its history.

Over the years John served as chairman both of the BSAC Jubilee Trust and the SUT's Diving and Manned Submersibles Committee. He also helped set up the SUT's Underwater Science Group (1993), the same year that he was elected a member of The Academy of Experts (1993). By now he began to branch out as an author in his own right with *The Infernal Diver* (1996), which expanded on his PhD thesis about the Deane brothers contribution to diving in from the late 1820s. For this work, he was to receive the Art Bachrach Literary Award (1997).



Equipment Testing



John with Hans and Lotte Hass, Whitstable, 1992



Equipment Testing



Work for Submex continued to come in apace, interrupted in 2000 by a Stolt Comex Seaway 1,000ft dive project at NUTEC, Bergen. It was also the year when he became the editor (and cartoonist) of *Underwater Contractor International* (UCI) magazine, a sister publication to *Diver*, which was circulated to members of the SUT and the Association of Diving Contractors (ADC).

His role as editor of UCI not only saw him write about but dive various items of diving gear which, in a way, again put him at another pinnacle in his career and undoubtedly helped lead to him receiving, in December 2002, the SUT Houlder Award. Apart from what appears to have been an increased professional interest in RCV's and other undersea vehicles, writing began to define his later life. In late 2005 came *The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Underwater Glossary*. In early 2006 the family moved from London down to Alverstoke, adjacent to where John had worked at the RNPL, the HDS Museum and Archives. The same year saw the publication of the second edition of *The Professional Diver's Handbook*. Then, in 2009, came *Another Whitstable Trade*.

July 2010 saw a coat of paint go on the floor of No.2 Battery, Stokes Bay, which became the new HDS Diving Museum. This offered an immediate home to John's personal collection of gear, that arrived after spending a brief spell in the diving museum at Charlestown, Cornwall.

As HDS chairman John was soon heavily committed to the day to day running of both the HDS, its museum and the HDS Archives by now located in a nearby ARP 'bunker' dating from 1937. This was an important role and, while much of the increasing work load for the museum and the associated achieves in particular was eventually passed over to other appointees, the general loading due to his chairmanship continued for the rest of his life. Even so, he still found time to both research and write.

In 2010 came *The First Treasure Divers* then, in late 2011, the third edition of *The Professional Diver's Handbook*. In 2013 there was TV filming for 'Who do you think you are' at the Whitstable diving museum and honorary membership of the Royal Navy Clearance Divers' Association.

2014 saw the publication of *Commander Crabb-What really happened?* Then, in 2017, *Operation Tadpole*, about the Royal Navy's diving operations at Gibraltar, 1940-45. May 2019 saw John's final book, *Crabbgate*, which will probably go down as the definitive work on the strange events that had attracted his interest, surrounding the death of Cdr. Crabb in April 1956. He also wrote small booklet based on the correspondence between John Deane and his future wife during the period of the Crimean War, which he donated to the Whitstable Museum. It will be published posthumously.

Perhaps John's final work for the HDS saw him spend much of his time on his own in the Archive 'bunker', helping collate and register its increased holdings on diving history: undoubtedly a time for reflecting on his own long and distinguished career in diving.

The Final Word

John Bevan's funeral, in a wicker coffin draped with the diver's 'A' flag and a Heinke 12-bolt in attendance, was held at Holy Trinity Church, Gosport, just over the water from Portsmouth. John Deane worshipped there in the 19th century and his wife Agnes is buried in the church yard, now with a memorial stone that John Bevan was instrumental in having installed. After Ann Bevan's own eulogy to her husband, HDS Vice Chairman Mike O'Meara rang the Royal Naval Clearance Diver's Association Travelling Memorial Bell. As he explained, "five-bells" (rings) was the signal when a diver found, started or completed his work and it had become a salute to a fallen diver.