Memories of John Wilson

24 July 1938 – 8 October 2017

By Colin Pelton

Picture the scene – it's the 1960s and an impressionable young man seated in a cinema is watching that iconic scene from Doctor No in which Ursula Andress walks out of the sea with a nice pair of conch shells. A lone voice in the stalls rings out - "Look at those Strombus gigas[1]!" I suspect the only time that phrase has ever been uttered during a Bond movie - perhaps any movie. John's passion for anything connected to marine carbonates was overriding.

News of John's funeral prompted many to respond with wonderful stories about him - all fondly remembered. My earliest recollections of John were in the early 1970s when during long passages of appalling weather on unsuitable research vessels off the north-west coast of Scotland he regaled us with, often self-deprecating, tales of his life.

John's early work on the Solway Firth featured in his funeral tributes: what wasn't mentioned was that one of his field trips involved digging a deep cross-section across the tidal flats. He stood in the bottom of the trench pointing to one of the lower layers and explaining this was probably deposited in the last Ice Age whereupon, to the delight of his students, a glass model of the Eiffel Tower fell out of the sediment. This model had pride of place on the shelf in John's office. Along, of course, with his troublesome kneecap which had been removed and pickled in a jar of formalin.

My favourite recollection of John at Wormley, was his laboratory re-creation of a submersible dive in Vickers Pisces III in 1973. In searching for a lost IMER[2] undulator the submersible had taken video records of the seabed and, lacking accurate vehicle navigation, John wanted to assess the speed of the submersible moving over the seabed using the video footage as reference. The answer was simple: turn the top corridor into a dive simulator. The seafloor (linoleum tiles) was decorated with accurately sized cardboard starfish; the stores' trolley became the submersible and the viewing porthole was a cardboard box with a hole cut in it. The principal scientist, i.e. John, put the box over his head, lay on the trolley while I pushed him along the corridor at varying speeds (floor tiles per second). This enabled John to examine the video record and establish the submersible speed over the ground: casual observers of this experiment still talk of little else.

John's infectious enthusiasm during sampling expeditions not only transmitted itself to his scientific support but also to the ship's crew. Many hands came on deck to help unload the samples from his beloved Smith McIntyre sediment grab or bottom sampling dredge. On one cruise somebody (investigations still ongoing) planted a rogue specimen into the dredge as it was being recovered. The sight and sound of John leaping forward shouting "good heavens, what's that!?" as he pulled a well-cooked pork sausage from the dredge sample was a delight. After careful examination John insisted it was bottled and labelled, and as far as I know it is still somewhere in our collections. In

[1] Strombus Gigas, the Queen or pink Conch

[2] NERC Institute for Marine Environmental Research (*IMER*)

following years, discoveries of extensive cold water corals and iceberg ploughmarks were to define John's scientific career. Thanks to John I can still spot a piece of Lophelia prolifera at a hundred paces and it was entirely fitting that a specimen accompanied him on his way.

We may have seen a great deal of the UK's more inhospitable waters on his cruises, but en route John always took time to show us the wonders of the Scottish Isles – from St Kilda to the Hebrides, Orkneys and Shetlands, and out to Rockall and beyond – we visited some extraordinary places. John will be sadly missed by all who were lucky enough to work and sail with him. I've gathered a small selection of photos I took of John at work, rest and play – I'm sure there are many others ...

November 2017

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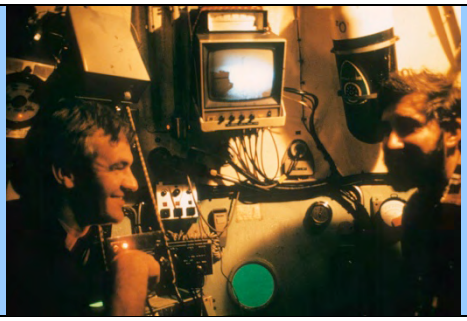
<tr><td>John holding sample jar with the Chief Engineer on RV Surveyor - March/April 1971</td><td>John (with Bob Spencer) testing the beach sediments on Lewis in the Outer Hebrides - March 1971</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>John adding lead weights to the Smith McIntyre grab with Bob Spencer and crew on RV Surveyor March 1971</td><td>John and Pilot in Vickers Pisces II diving in the English Channel - Aug 1971 © N Flemming</td></tr>
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<tr><td>John on the deck of RRS Challenger Sept 1974</td><td>John with Jill Caston (now Putman) and Ron Stubbs at the Ring of Brodgar on the Orkneys - Aug 1979</td></tr>
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