INTO THE BLUE:
PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY TAKES OWNERSHIP OF THE BRIXHAM ENVIRONMENTAL LABORATORY

CLINICAL SCHOOLS EMBED UNIVERSITY AT THE HEART OF SOUTH WEST HEALTH
SCHOOL’S OUT FOR SUMMER AT UTC PLYMOUTH
UNIVERSITY WEBSITE ENTERS THE MOBILE AGE
As we break into the World’s Top 50 of universities under 50 years old, we find ourselves in an elite group – the new global elite. Our rise in the rankings along with the Young Universities Summit that we co-hosted with Times Higher Education has cemented our position in the global arena and these updates reflect our standing.

World-class applied research in the maritime and marine sectors alongside business engagement has spread to our new Brixham Environmental Hub following the transfer of the Brixham Laboratories to us from AstraZeneca. In Health, I am delighted to see the new clinical schools launched, putting three of our professors on the leadership teams of nursing in Devon and Cornwall’s NHS Trusts. It is also good to read of the new partnerships in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Working closely with our creative partners will further embed enterprise and social engagement into our student art studios.

One year on it is evident what impact the University Technical College is having on young people in the region, reflecting our mission to enhance knowledge and transform lives. And once again I am inspired by our spirited, pioneering people; each with a unique tale and who emulate our thinking and values.

Professor Wendy Purcell
Vice-Chancellor

Enjoy the issue and the summer.

Andrew Merrington
Editor
It is the £16 million waterfront laboratory that has provided a research base for chemical and pharmaceutical work for the past 60 years. It contains specialist equipment that’s helped scientists test and assess the environmental impact of products prior to their release on the market.

Now, the Brixham Environmental Laboratory has been gifted to Plymouth University by pharmaceutical giants AstraZeneca to become the latest asset in its growing network of marine enterprise facilities.

The facility will be home to a multidisciplinary community of Plymouth researchers, commercial tenants, and visiting scientists from higher education and commerce. It will also provide a learning centre for students, including those at nearby South Devon College, one of the University’s academic partners.

The transfer of ownership was marked by an official stakeholder engagement event in May, at which Professor Wendy Purcell, Vice-Chancellor, and Lisa Anson, AstraZeneca’s Country President for UK and Ireland, both addressed a gathering of research staff, regional business leaders and representatives from the health sector.

Professor Purcell said: “The Brixham Environmental Laboratory will provide an opportunity to make a world-class centre for collaboration and translational research with emphasis on the marine environment and coastal management issues.

“The lab’s uses will be many and varied: It will house University research, commercial contract research and testing, business incubation, regulatory compliance and enforcement.
organisations, offices and meeting spaces. Its location provides good access to a reliable source of uncontaminated seawater for marine environmental assessments and this, combined with the facilities, puts the site at the forefront of our marine environmental innovation.”

Ms Anson welcomed the handover, saying: “We are delighted that our colleagues at Plymouth University will be carrying on Brixham Environmental Laboratory’s legacy with plans for world-class research across marine, environmental science and biomedicine. This is the most important reason for donating the site to them.”

The facility was established in 1948 as a marine research station by ICI Paints, but has been developed through successive investments from ICI and then AstraZeneca to cover some 4,500m² and four storeys. In 2008, AstraZeneca invested £13.1 million in new equipment, and much of that is now in the University’s possession.

There are two main research areas, one at either end of the site, comprising 26 constant temperature labs (with a range of 10°C – 30°C), and more than 30 fume cupboards. State-of-the-art analytical instrumentation will allow researchers to understand the environmental behaviour, fate, effects and impact of realistic environmental concentrations of complex chemicals and active pharmaceutical ingredients – and the lab’s waterfront location provides perfect access to consistent seawater for aquaculture use.

Professor Julian Beer, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Regional Enterprise), played a leading role in negotiations for the transfer, securing the facility despite significant interest from other higher education and research organisations. He said the University, through the Marine Innovation Centre (MaRIC), was fielding enquiries from major international companies in its search for an ‘anchor tenant’.

He said: “Brixham fits perfectly with our marine focus and our work with City Deal to build a knowledge economy and support the development of high-growth marine businesses across a range of areas. We’ll work with tenants to ensure the full potential of the site is unlocked, and the hope is that will create jobs locally as well.

“Brixham will also provide a learning facility for our students and those at South Devon College, boosting employability skills by offering hands-on, practical experience of using accredited commercial research laboratories.”

A number of University researchers in the marine and ecotoxicology field have begun to transfer across to the site to take advantage of the facilities, and discussions are already underway with different community groups as to future opportunities at the site.

“We can assure AstraZeneca – and the region – that the Brixham Environmental Laboratory is in safe hands!”

Professor Wendy Purcell
A new project launched by the Centre for Health and Social Care Innovation and the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences has brought the University into the very heart of the research culture and staff development needs of nursing, midwifery and health professions in the South West.

Four new clinical schools have been set up inside the NHS Trusts of Plymouth, Taunton, Truro and Exeter to provide a direct link to the University and bring academic and clinical work closer together.

Developed over the past two years by Professor Ruth Endacott, with support from Professor Bridie Kent and Professor Jos Latour, the project has created a spoke and hub model, with the University at the hub, and each of the professors getting involved at a senior level within the NHS Trusts.

“It’s common in nursing for students to have ideas and not have the chance to take them forward,” said Ruth, who has taken up her position at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. “Through the clinical schools, we’ll be able to provide pathways into postgraduate research, and for those junior researchers, we’ll be able to help disseminate their findings or perhaps guide them into a PhD or a fellowship.”

The schools will provide a physical base for the academics, from where they’ll run drop-in sessions with staff several days per week.

“Instead of a model where students and clinicians have to seek out information and opportunities, we take the information to them through drop-in clinics at each centre and a virtual presence online.”

Professor Bridie Kent

The main area of focus will be to encourage staff to look at their practice, challenge current thinking, try out new ideas and work out ways to measure what they’re doing.

“Instead of a model where students and clinicians have to seek out information and opportunities, we take the information to them through drop-in clinics at each centre and a virtual presence online,” said Bridie, who is the University contact at both Truro and Plymouth. “Non-medical clinicians in particular are evidence hungry but time-poor, so this is about getting the most up-to-date information to them as quickly as possible.”

The three professors have experience of leading this type of development overseas – in Australia, the Netherlands and New Zealand – and have seen at first-hand the benefits. It’s a model of collaboration that has, thus far, not gained traction in the UK, but was backed by the Vice-Chancellor’s Executive and the faculty leadership, and when put to the directors of nursing across the peninsula, was greeted with enthusiasm and quickly approved.

“I don’t know of anywhere in the UK where there is such an active hub and spoke model as we have put in place,” said Jos, who is embedded at Taunton. “From a research point of view, it will be fantastic. We have access to so many areas where we can make very good practical changes across the peninsula. And colleagues in the trusts have been expressing that the missing link of an active hub is now in place.”
The main strands of the work will be to enhance access to local, national and international resources and expertise; support and develop clinical nursing research, evidence-based practice and quality improvement activity; and to support decision-making at leadership level.

“It’s also about building a critical mass of expertise to work with clinicians, students and patients, translating ideas into research projects, and findings into practice and patient care,” said Bridie. “Those people who say you don’t need to be academic to be a good nurse or midwife are wrong. You need to be a good clinician, but you also need a good level of knowledge behind you. It’s important that we start looking at the complexity of care needs and building on skill sets.”

The focus of the schools at this stage is nursing and midwifery, but the intention is to broaden across the health professions to areas such as physiotherapy, podiatry and dietetics. And the virtual element of the project – via the website – is important as the model could be used in future collaborations with other community providers.

“It’s a great opportunity to be part of the senior leadership for health in the region and to be really embedded within the trusts,” added Ruth. “And ultimately the benefit will be felt by patients thanks to new and better practices, and more motivated staff who will have a forum to develop their ideas.”
AGILE AND MOBILE: THE NEW PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY WEBSITE

Welcome to the new Plymouth University website, where the changes are rather more than skin deep.

It’s been designed for the mobile age and seamlessly scales up to any tablet or desktop: it’s cloud-powered, with a range of tools from a first-class search engine to a suite of analytics that can pinpoint the location of any unique visitor and tailor information accordingly; and its content has been completely rewritten and refreshed.

“It’s a massive project, and one that has enormous importance for the University, especially in terms of recruitment,” said Rebecca Lee, Digital Manager, External Relations. “The website is a window into our institution, into our student experience and research culture, and it’s a window that must now fit the size of a post-it note!”

‘Mobile-first’ is the term used for the website, which turns standard development on its head by optimising the design for a smartphone’s screen. No longer will users have to zoom in to enlarge microscopic text – the layout will be clear and accessible, with easy swipe commands to navigate around the site and consistent calls to action.

“It’s one of the first websites in higher education to be genuinely mobile-first,” said Joe Grant, Senior Technical Project Manager in Technology and Information Services (TIS). “Around 10-15 per cent of websites are built for mobiles, so this really does put us at the forefront in terms of accessibility and technology. It’s capable of ‘reading’ the device you’re using, and will scale up automatically to fit tablet, laptop and desktop formats.”
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Joe Grant, Senior Technical Project Manager, Technology Information Services

The website has been developed using what’s known as Agile methodology, with the 20-plus project team across TIS and External Relations working in dynamic two-week ‘sprints’ to build new features, iterate, and then release them for testing in a live environment.

“It’s a much more organic approach,” said Joe. “Traditionally you establish your requirements, design the site and it’s only six months down the line that you start to produce the software. You’re committed to releasing the site all at once, and by the time you do, 12 months have passed and your requirements are no longer the same.”

“The project team started building from day one,” added Rebecca. “As soon as a new feature is ready to go, we publish and let our users provide feedback on it. This then informs the future development of the site. And at every meeting we ask ourselves ‘Who are the people coming to our website? What do they need to know?’ There has to be a valid reason why something should appear on our website.”

Collaboration with academics, professional services and students has been key to the progress of the project, with user groups testing the new pages and providing feedback on the experience. Nowhere is this better exemplified than with the School of Psychology, where Dr Ed Symes has been working with students on usability testing.

“Companies spend a fortune on professional usability testing,” said Joe. “So to have that expertise here in-house, complete with eye-tracking analysis, is amazing.”

The new homepage launched on 19 June, and further segments of the site will come online on a rolling basis as they are completed. The courses section – representing 50 per cent of the total site – will be live by the time Confirmation and Clearing starts, and the entire site should be complete by mid-autumn.

John Wright, Chief Information Officer, and Vice-Chancellor’s Executive sponsor of the project, said: “The way we browse and use the internet has changed dramatically in recent years, and given the importance placed by prospective students, staff and commercial customers on the research they conduct online, the design, functionality and content of our website is absolutely crucial.

“That we’ve not only taken advantage of the latest technology but also engaged with many academics, professional staff and students in such a collaborative way as the project has progressed is a great testament to the team and shows in the result – a fantastic new website: www.plymouth.ac.uk”
When University Technical College Plymouth opened its doors in September 2013, it marked the launch of a new model of education for the city – and begged a leap of faith from its inaugural cohort of pupils.

Located in the heart of Devonport, close to many of the major companies who have helped to design its engineering and skills-focused curriculum, UTC Plymouth is quite unlike anything in the region when it comes to bridging that gap between school education and the world of work.

Mega-workshops for practical projects set by the likes of Babcock Marine, Princess Yachts and Kawasaki; business attire, iPads and longer working days for the pupils; and tailored pathways focusing on technical skills and academic development, are all integral to the UTC blueprint. That it has been delivered so successfully, with one academic year now under its belt, is testament to the hard work and dedication of its 30-strong team and the support of its sponsor, the University, and other partners in the city.

“It’s been one of the hardest jobs I’ve ever done, but certainly the most rewarding,” said Mary Cox, Principal of UTC Plymouth. “All of our staff have had to wear at least three hats this year to ensure we’re up and running. But I’m proud to work with people who understand the impact of a good education and who are totally committed to delivering it.

“And one year on, we can see that we’re making a difference to the children here. We have some pupils who have undoubtedly struggled in the past but we’re helping them to achieve success and to better themselves and you can see their confidence growing as a result.”

That element of ‘making a difference’ and raising aspirations is something Mary has experienced herself on the flip-side of the equation; one of just three pupils, out of 120, to have attended university from her own school in Middlesbrough, she had to overcome a chronic lack of ambition invested in pupils by staff at the school. Undeterred by the experience of being told to ‘forget medicine and aim for nursing’, Mary chose to study psychology at Plymouth University, and it proved to be a launch pad into a successful career that has encompassed social work, teaching and educational delivery at a local authority level.
Convinced of the validity of providing alternative, applied education for the 14–19 year-old set, she jumped at the chance to return to the city of her alma mater when in 2011 it was announced that Plymouth had been successful in its bid for a UTC. With an £8 million investment, it was built on the site of the former Parkside Community College, and welcomed 150 pupils through its doors for years 10 and 12 last September.

Helping those pupils make the transition to the longer hours demanded by the UTC curriculum has been one of the major tasks this year. “Those arguments have morphed into an understanding of what the working day is and what they are expected to do with it,” Mary said, who believes it may take 3–4 years to fully embed the culture.

Mary cites the backing from the University as a major factor in their success, from guidance on HR and finance issues, to IT support. But beyond the institutional involvement there has been a wealth of personal support, from both staff and students.

“We have a team of University student mentors who come in on a weekly basis to run group sessions and one-to-ones,” Mary said, as one example. “It makes a huge difference to the pupils; we have one lad who had low literacy levels and issues with aggression, and his mentor from the University has really helped him to understand the problem, to manage it, and to not let it define him. Without doubt, that lad will succeed in life, and I’m not sure we could have said that in September.”

University leaders are also embedded in the UTC’s governance structure, through its links to the University’s Institute of Education, as well as staff sitting on the Board of Governors. Professor Pauline Kneale, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, and Chair of the Board at UTC Plymouth, said the college had a huge role to play in addressing the skills’ need in STEM areas across the South West – and with students drawn from as far afield as Newton Abbot and Bodmin, and was a great facility for the region.

Pauline said: “We’ve been delighted with the backing UTC Plymouth has received from business, industrial and manufacturing partners. Their contribution is vital to the progression of these young people. Indeed, just as the University is working with business, enterprise, and local authorities on a mission to establish the South West as a centre of excellence for marine, so there is also a need to ensure we are developing the next generation of engineers and technicians who can develop their careers in this field in the longer term.”

So that leap of faith is being rewarded; UTC Plymouth is providing not just a safe landing, but a transformative experience for its students.

“The kids are my inspiration. It’s all about education changing people for the better. There’s nothing like seeing 100 children getting stuck into a project with the boundaries between them and the staff blurred by joint endeavour. They become a team and are working together with mutual respect. It’s a lovely thing to see.”

Mary Cox, Principal, University Technical College Plymouth
There has been much talk in Plymouth over recent years about the importance of increasing the city’s cultural profile. And while a vibrant and dynamic arts scene has the power to transform lives, generating that sense of excitement is not something that can be achieved by one organisation alone.

Plymouth University is at the forefront of efforts to make the city a regional hub of culture and creativity, with its existing partnerships – including those with the City Council, the Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery and Theatre Royal Plymouth – already being responsible for bringing major national exhibitions and events to the peninsula.

Meanwhile, partnerships with Literature Works, with whom the University stages the annual Plymouth International Book Festival, and the River Tamar Project, currently creating a month-long film festival called ‘It’s All About the River’ for September 2014, have led to both organisations taking up a permanent presence on campus.

There are also collaborations between the University and city-based arts organisations, which allow both parties to benefit from each other’s expertise to create opportunities for people of all ages across the University and the community.

Professor Alan Schechner, Head of the School of Art and Media, and Associate Dean of Creative Industries at the University, said: “There are obvious benefits to us, but the groups also use the partnerships to support grant applications, which has provided them with opportunities to expand their own work and provide new employment opportunities within the community. The overall benefit of all of this is that we are expanding the cultural offering of Plymouth, which could lead to new commercial investment, as companies always look for a broad cultural offering when they are looking at whether to invest in a new location.”

In May 2014, the University launched formal agreements with four Creative Partners that will see them working in tandem to create arts-related opportunities across the campus and in the community. The organisations involved are:

- **Effervescent**, which recently moved into Radiant House at Derry’s Cross, works with children, young people and vulnerable adults to create art works that build confidence, boost emotional resilience, spark imaginations and trigger the formation of new networks and relationships.
- **Karst**, a non-profit contemporary art venue in Stonehouse, dedicated to showcasing current and experimental visual art through an international exhibition programme.
- **Fotonow**, a Devonport community interest community (CIC) which creates new opportunities in photography and facilitates socially motivated projects exploring visual culture across the South West.
- **Media Innovation Network**, an online resource for companies and individuals working in digital media and the creative industries.

Dr Sarah Bennett, Associate Professor of Fine Art, said: “These organisations and our students are vital to the future prosperity of our city. They are a breath of fresh air to Plymouth, and to the University, and by working in partnership we can develop activities and share knowledge in ways that will benefit both the student and the wider community. There is genuine recognition that the partnership is mutually beneficial, with an appreciation that we all have areas of expertise and influence that can assist each other.”

As an official Creative Partner, the organisations receive financial and institutional support from the University. They also offer students and graduates the chance to work on projects, to be inspired and to establish networks as they prepare to enter the professional art and design sector.

“We are expanding the cultural offering of Plymouth, which could lead to new commercial investment.”

Professor Alan Schechner, Head of the School of Art and Media and Associate Dean of Creative Industries
to support emerging artists and help them find ways to start their careers in Plymouth”, said Eloise Malone, Director of Effervescent. “The ongoing relationship has created the right conditions for us to create two new full-time paid jobs and to begin the adventure of opening a brand new cultural space on Derry’s Cross in summer 2014. Because of the University’s support we have been able to increase the level of our funding tenfold, while our new Creative Partner status has catalysed new and very challenging cultural work opportunities, which are currently in the pipeline, and entirely unique in the South West.”

Donna Howard, Co-Director of KARST, added: “We see the partnership as a long-term development plan, with core consideration around student retention and external and professional development.”

On top of these official partners, the University also enjoys a relationship with Take A Part, a socially-engaged contemporary art organisation that works with communities across Efford, Whitleigh and North Prospect, with aims to expand further across the city. And it is a key player in Ocean Studios, a project looking to provide 130–140 studio spaces at Royal William Yard – a large percentage of which will be set aside for graduates so they can work alongside professional artists – as well as a gallery and retail space.

Professor Schechner, who is Chairman of the Board of Ocean Studios and a trustee of Karst, adds: “One of the biggest challenges we have in Plymouth is that there are more than 1,000 arts graduates produced every year but not enough of them stay. If we can provide the outstanding opportunities that encourage them to study here – and then stay here – there are potential benefits to everyone, and not just in the arts sector.”
“Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin,” said President Eisenhower. But how do you maintain peace when access to justice isn’t available for all of the people? That is the question facing Sierra Leone, whose legal system was torn apart by civil war from 1991–2001 and is still in the process of rebuilding. And it is a question that an academic from Plymouth has set out to try to answer.

Hugo de Rijke, barrister and Associate Professor in Law, has been leading a project to help raise the standard of law teaching at universities in the West African country. Representing the Association of Law Teachers (ALT), Hugo has visited schools, universities, legal practices and agencies across the country to see what challenges they face.

“Sierra Leone is very much a two-tier society,” he said. “It has a fast-growing economy, thanks to its natural resources of diamonds, gold and other precious metals. But the majority of people are living in abject poverty in city slums and rural areas, with little or no education, in contrast to those with wealth and privilege. This results in unequal access to justice and other problems within the court system.”

Sierra Leone’s legal system is actually based on the British one. However, in many areas its laws are unchanged since 1961 (the year of its independence from British rule) and its practising lawyers are almost exclusively based in the capital Freetown. Concern over the quality of law students progressing through the system prompted the Sierra Leone Bar Association to request assistance from the UK Bar Council, who in turn asked the ALT for support. Hugo offered to lead the project, and travelled with a colleague from Manchester in March, after obtaining funding from the ALT and the government’s Department for International Development (DFID).

“The reconnaissance mission was a chance to look at the situation, roots and all,” said Hugo. “The feeling
was that many students were not progressing enough to become really competent practitioners or potential judges, with the knock-on effect upon justice and the rule of law.

“We also wanted to look at the school system, so we visited a primary school where there were 120 pupils in four classes all squeezed into a space equivalent to the Reservoir Café. It was incredible how the pupils managed – and they were the lucky ones who were able to go to school.”

Hugo visited all three institutions in the country that teach law at undergraduate and postgraduate level – Fourah Bay College and Sierra Leone Law School in the capital Freetown, and Makeni University in the north of the country – where he sat in on lectures, spoke to teachers and students, and toured the facilities.

At Makeni University, Hugo also advised on a new law clinic, which will be similar to the Plymouth model, which enables many of the law students to assist with cases, rather than only a select few, as at other universities.

Hugo said: “Despite being a booming mining region with a million people and many cases to handle, Makeni has only one legally qualified public prosecutor; the others are police prosecutors without a law degree or legal expertise. On the other side, there are no public defence lawyers or civil lawyers practising there or elsewhere outside Freetown. This means it is often difficult for people to obtain justice and there are many abuses of the system. Most sex offences, for example, are not reported and police corruption is common. We heard of one man who was accused of stealing a loaf of bread in 2009 and has been held in prison ever since, without even having entered a plea or stood trial.

“By creating the law clinic at Makeni, students can now advise members of the public about their legal rights and also research and prepare cases, whilst a group of qualified lawyers are ready to present any cases that go to court.”

Hugo produced a report upon his return to the UK and is due to go back to Sierra Leone at the end of the year in order to run workshops and lectures in both Makeni and Freetown, with colleagues including the Dean of Law and Business from Plymouth’s partner college Greenwich School of Management. This will provide him with an opportunity to promote the University overseas, and to carry out pro bono work in a country that has a genuine need.

“We take for granted our access to justice – we pick up the phone, we report offences, we talk to our lawyers, and the process begins,” Hugo said. “In many parts of Sierra Leone that is a rarity, so it is great to be able to contribute to positive change in their society.”

One of the slums in Kroo Bay, Sierra Leone
“Don’t get me wrong, appearing in Corrie was fantastic – a dream come true. But art has become my real passion and I couldn’t wait to get back to it.”

When your agent calls and says you have been offered a part in Coronation Street, you might imagine it would be a career-defining moment. But after six months of filming for the nation’s longest running soap, Connor McIntyre had one thing on his mind – his atmospheric studio in a quiet corner of Royal William Yard.

“I was getting withdrawal symptoms – I was missing my painting,” says Connor, known to audiences nationally as manipulative builder Pat Phelan, but now back working towards an MA in Contemporary Art Practice at Plymouth University. “Don’t get me wrong, appearing in Corrie was fantastic – a dream come true. But art has become my real passion and I couldn’t wait to get back to it.”

Connor describes his road to the University as “a series of happy accidents”. Having grown up in Liverpool, he was selling American cars in Germany when a trip to see a friend in the UK led to him coming to Plymouth. He watched a performance at the Barbican Theatre and loved it so much he decided to pursue acting as a career.

Without any formal training, over the next two decades he appeared in some of the nation’s TV institutions. Stints on The Bill and Casualty went side-by-side with generation-defining shows such as Buried and Drop Dead Gorgeous. In fact, it was in preparation for an acting role that Connor returned to the South West, with another chance event igniting his passion for art and painting.

“I went to an art class with Louise Courtnell in Cawsand, and her teaching was so inspirational that I decided to enrol for a foundation course at Cornwall College in Saltash,” Connor says. “I completed that and was accepted to study for a BA (Hons) in Fine Art at Plymouth University. That is one of the best decisions I have ever made.

“Studying here has given me the opportunity to work with top-drawer academics, the majority of whom are practising artists, and inspirational
“One of the great things about the programmes at Plymouth University – as well as the calibre of academics and students – is that you are not just being taught. It is a two-way communication designed to help you develop your own creative identity.”

The rest, as they say, is history – or maybe in Connor’s case art history – as another chance encounter (when he sat in on a lecture purely out of interest) encouraged him to explore the practice in greater depth. He began to take modules in Art History, heightening his understanding and appreciation of different techniques and movements. He successfully graduated in the summer of 2012, and was later accepted onto the masters programme.

“One of the great things about the programmes at Plymouth University – as well as the calibre of academics and students – is that you are not just being taught,” he says. “It is a two-way communication designed to help you develop your own creative identity. When I look at the works I produced when I first arrived, and what I am doing now, the progression is almost unrecognisable.”

Despite spending most of his time in Plymouth – with his studio annexed to the Our Bakery in Royal William Yard and his works adorning its walls and those of buildings across the main University campus – Connor has continued acting. And last year, he received an offer to appear in Coronation Street for a six-month stint playing Pat Phelan, which ultimately led to him being nominated for Villain of the Year at the 2014 British Soap Awards.

“It was great to get the opportunity to work with such an amazing group of actors, some of whom I knew from way back,” Connor says. “To be shortlisted for the award was really nice as well, a real testament to the writers and creators of the show. I do now believe that my art helps my acting – and vice versa – as both are about taking a selection of materials and using them to create something which people can hopefully relate to.”

With Phelan having left the Street, at least for now, Connor’s mind is fully focused on his artwork and on producing the large and eye-catching pieces for which he is developing a growing reputation at Royal William Yard. And with his studio abutting one of its most popular eateries, he enjoys discussing his work – and the merits or otherwise of his latest small screen character – with its regulars when he has the time.

Karen Roulstone, the MA Contemporary Art Practice programme leader at the University, adds: “We have such a rich and diverse range of students on the programme, many of whom bring knowledge and life skills from past careers. Connor’s commitment to his art practice and disciplined approach have allowed him to recently balance part-time study with his professional career as an actor with great success. It is immensely rewarding for our team when our students develop and flourish in such a way.”
“To think I would be invited to travel all over the world – and speak at places such as NASA – wouldn’t have even crossed my mind.”

Ten years ago, Sue Austin was an aspiring artist pursuing her passion as a form of therapy after contracting a life-changing virus. Today, her work has been seen by an estimated global television audience of more than 100 million, and she continues to inspire thousands more through talks and presentations across the globe.

“When I first decided I wanted to use my wheelchair for a performance underwater, I had no idea it would capture the imagination as it has,” says Sue, whose rise to prominence has coincided with her studies at Plymouth University. “To think I would be invited to travel all over the world – and speak at places such as NASA – wouldn’t have even crossed my mind.”

That is now the reality for Sue, who first developed an interest in the therapeutic power of art while completing a psychology degree and then working in a specialist long-term mental health team at Leicestershire Social Services. But in 1994, she was forced to put it into practice for herself after contracting a virus which left her bedridden.

Initially, she admits the only thing she could concentrate on was where her next breath was coming from, but slowly, as the virus loosened its grip, she began to use her artistic skills as a means of recovery. In the first instance, that was through creating painted glassworks, but as her strength returned, she decided she wanted to pursue art as a career and enrolled on a course at North Devon College.

Completing that, she began her studies with Plymouth University in 2003, and six years later achieved a First in her BA (Hons) Fine Art. She is now on the verge of finishing her masters, and it was during this programme that her achievements achieved worldwide recognition.

When Sue retrained as a disabled diver in 2005, she decided she wanted to use her wheelchair to create an eye-catching underwater performance – ‘Creating the Spectacle!’. She successfully applied for an Unlimited Commission and, working with a range...
“Art is a gift that has completely transformed my life, and it has been a real privilege to work with such stimulating people at Plymouth University.”

of partners including the University and Arts Council England, created a powered underwater wheelchair for an event as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad.

“The public response to the wheelchair was so positive mostly, I believe, because it created such a startling image that people had no point of reference for,” Sue says. “Before the performance, there were a number of concerns from people who could not see that I was trying to use the wheelchair to convey a positive message – but when they saw it, those doubts disappeared.”

The performance sparked a flurry of interest in her work – and her inspirational outlook on life – which has seen Sue interviewed by media from the USA to Australia, and right across the UK and Western Europe.

It has also prompted invitations to speak at high profile events all over the world, including TEDx and TEDMED conferences in Washington DC and a conference for NASA scientists in Houston, Texas, with plans now being developed for further collaborations that would take Sue’s work to a whole new audience.

“Art is a gift that has completely transformed my life, and it has been a real privilege to work with such stimulating people at the University,” Sue adds. “They challenge me on a daily basis and push my ambitions and imagination to new levels. We now hope to use the energy that has been built up to instigate real social change, making art accessible to all.”
Justin Floyd had always harboured dreams of running his own business and giving something back to his local community. But it wasn’t until he came to Plymouth University that a way of achieving both goals became a reality.

Having worked as the in-house designer for a Devon sailing company for nine years, Justin felt he needed a fresh challenge and signed up to study the MA Design: Sustainable Futures programme in Plymouth. And it was during his studies that he developed the concept which he has since transformed into a burgeoning business – Solidwool, based in Buckfastleigh, Devon.

“The MA helped me to reinvigorate my work and encouraged me to develop my philosophy on how I wanted to use design,” he says. “But I also wanted to create something with a genuine connection to my local area, which had the potential to create jobs within Buckfastleigh and bring industry back.”

Living in such close proximity to Dartmoor, and with his community being home to several former mills, Justin challenged himself to create a business that celebrated wool and set about finding a new way of working with it. The result was the development of an innovative composite material – produced using wool and a bio-resin made largely of natural materials – which can be moulded into any type of furniture.

The first Solidwool product – the prototype of a chair – was shown at Justin’s MA showcase at the University in October 2012, while its external premiere took place in March 2013 at an event organised by the Campaign for Wool in Somerset House, London.

“The chair was incredibly well received, and it was the encouragement I needed to convince myself that I had found my niche,” Justin says. “I had always thought it had potential, but now I knew I wanted to turn Solidwool into a successful enterprise.”

After a few more months of refining the technique at his Buckfastleigh
“We had stockists coming up and wanting to talk to us about selling the chairs – and they weren’t even fully in production yet.”

workshop, Justin took another prototype to Best of Britannia, an event designed to showcase the best of UK manufactured products, and he was bowled over by the response.

“We had stockists coming up and wanting to talk to us about selling the chairs – and they weren’t even fully in production yet,” says Justin. “To be honest, at the time I wasn’t fully happy with the product and while we could have been selling by now, the finished composite wouldn’t have been of the precise quality I’m hoping for.”

That process is, however, nearing completion, and following a further public outing at the Designersblock event in Milan, Justin has signed a deal with a major London supplier to exclusively launch his new range of products in the autumn. And while he and wife Hannah currently run the business, he does hope it will take off to such an extent that it could bring a source of manufacturing employment back to Buckfastleigh.

“It is incredibly exciting, and also quite daunting, but I hope that with this contract – and other individual commissions – I could start to fulfil my original aims of offering employment to local people,” adds Justin. “I have always believed that without design nothing would ever get made, but it took my two years at Plymouth University to help me find the inspiration I needed to create the product I am so proud of today.”
A specialist on aquatic life has been recognised for his contribution to science after being awarded a prestigious honour by the Zoological Society of London. Dr David Bilton, Reader in Aquatic Biology at Plymouth University, has received the Marsh Award for Marine and Freshwater Conservation, an accolade presented on an annual basis for contributions to fundamental science and its application to the conservation of marine and/or freshwater ecosystems.

David has been studying water beetles for over 30 years and conducts research across the world, in particular in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. He’s had no less than six animals named after him, including the beetles Deronectes biltoni and Hydraena biltoni, and has named many other new ones himself.

The focus of much of his recent research has been upon understanding why certain species of aquatic beetle are very successful and can be found across a wide geographical area, while most of their close relatives are confined to small areas. Such a pattern of a handful of common species nested within a group of rare ones is found in most kinds of animals and plants – but why this is the case remains poorly understood.

“Water beetles are fascinating organisms. They also offer a great deal of insight into more general ecological and evolutionary questions, as well as being excellent indicators of habitat quality and wetland health.”

Dr David Bilton

The Marine Building has hosted many VIPs, including HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, his son HRH The Duke of York, Prince Albert II of Monaco and Ernesto Bertarelli. But in June, it received a visit of a very different kind: 88-year-old Jack Reakes, a retired Royal Marine and resident of the Lelant Nursing Home in Mannnamead, took a tour of the centre as part of the ‘What Plymouth Means to Me’ project.

The project sees Lelant residents writing accounts of their life history and their connection to Plymouth, and participating in an activity of their choice to celebrate their city. Jack requested to visit the Marine Building and had a tour of the COAST lab, where he was able to see students working on the effects of offshore winds. He then took control of the ship simulator for a virtual sailing around his favourite port of Dover, and finished off with a panoramic view of Plymouth from the top floor of the Rolle Building.

Dr Emily Beaumont, of the School of Marine Science and Engineering, was contacted by the care home for her help, and provided the tour of the building. She said: “Plymouth is my hometown and I’m very proud to work for its University, especially on days like today when I can showcase the amazing facilities and students we have here to someone special like Jack, who equally holds Plymouth close to his heart.”

“Technical Services hosted a national course at Mast House during April – the first time it had been held here at the University. The Extron Scaler Course involved technicians and AV installers being taught to configure electronic control systems that are used in higher education to create contemporary teaching spaces. Two Extron trainers and two trainees from the University of the West of England joined Plymouth staff on the course.

“Our hope is that this will encourage people across the University to arrange access to specialist training by using the campus as a host site. In that way we can become a beacon site for the South West, serving the training needs of a wide range of organisations.”

Paul Dent, Team Leader in Technical Services

“Water beetles are fascinating organisms. They also offer a great deal of insight into more general ecological and evolutionary questions, as well as being excellent indicators of habitat quality and wetland health.”

Dr David Bilton
Those newly-restored gardens were among the stand-out features of the annual Community Open House and Lord Mayor’s Day celebrations, which this year commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Amalgamation of the Three Towns – Devonport, Stonehouse and Plymouth. Its lawns staged a number of activities including face painting, Segway rides, balance testing, and the chance to shoot a few hoops with Plymouth University Raiders Basketball Team.

There was African drumming to set the carnival atmosphere, while the new colonnade contained exhibits and information from a variety of groups including Growing Futures and Dartmoor Search and Rescue Team Plymouth.

The campus was also the launchpad for the colourful walking parade. Elaine Budd, Community Engagement Co-ordinator, said: “This is an important part of Plymouth’s heritage and the University is proud to work with many partners, and to be able to show off a piece of history right here in the heart of the city. We want people to take advantage of what is here on their doorstep.”
Plymouth staff and students were in Drake Circus shopping centre in June to showcase their research expertise as part of Universities Week 2014. Led by our robot footballers, the team included dental experts and scientists with a range of hands-on props for visitors.

The centrepiece of Universities Week was a huge showcase of research at London’s Natural History Museum. Plymouth was the only university in the South West to be selected and had three projects chosen by Universities UK for the showcase. Representatives from the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences and the Faculty of Science and Environment spent the week at the NHM supported by the University’s Events Team.