UNIVERSITY YACHTING TEAM SAILS INTO UNCHARTED WATERS

CHAMPIONING HEALTH IN THE COMMUNITY

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP SUMMER SCHOOL

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF THE SOUTH WEST MARINE POLLUTION CRISIS
There is a strong community focus to this final edition of CONNECT for the academic year 2012/13. In a term that has seen thousands of visitors pass through the campus for Open House, Open Day and the Arts Degree Show, as well as various business events and visits by professional bodies and external examiners, the University has genuinely lived up to its promise of working WITH people to transform lives.

The roots this University puts down into the community are healthy ones – and health is the topic of our lead story, with a look at how projects such as the Centre for Eyecare Excellence and the Cumberland Surgery are directly contributing to patient care and wellness, seeking to address the health inequalities of our region in a very practical way.

CONNECT also shines a light on the work of several academics whose research is impacting upon communities, whether through history, marine science, or optometry. And we meet the postgraduate student whose PhD has placed him at the centre of a national debate over the Duchy of Cornwall.

Enjoy the issue and the remainder of the summer.

Andrew Merrington
Editor
CHAMPIONING HEALTH IN THE COMMUNITY

The Centre for Eyecare Excellence brings added focus to University healthcare in the community
It’s been described as ‘loft living meets IKEA’: how fitting that a facility devoted to optometry should look so good. But as CONNECT found out when it went to the launch of the Centre for Eyecare Excellence (CEE), its true beauty is in the way it complements the University’s community healthcare work.

Run by qualified eyecare professionals, the CEE brings together teaching, research and patient care under one roof. In just a few short months more than 400 patients have walked through its doors for a range of appointments, from the fitting of glasses (more than 100 pairs dispensed!) to comprehensive eye examinations and specialist treatment such as 3D retinal scanning.

Professor Graham Sewell, Head of the School of Health Professions, said: “The Centre for Eyecare Excellence is an exciting development for the University and the city. It not only provides a centre of excellence for teaching and research, but a valuable community resource with patient care provided by both qualified professionals and optometry students.”

CEE’s primary aim will be to act as a training hub for the University’s final year optometry students, who will provide supervised patient examinations from September.

But it also offers a range of services to off-the-street customers, including comprehensive eye examinations, contact lens and review consultations, prescription services and a repair clinic for spectacles. Thanks to its state-of-the-art equipment, it can offer a number of specialist treatments such as Ocular Coherence Tomography (a technique which produces 3D images).

“We have a small, dedicated and passionate team here and we want to inspire a generation of optometrists.”

Professor Christine Purslow
Head of Optometry
“This is just the type of partnership needed to tackle the kind of health inequalities faced by the south side of Plymouth.”

Dr Richard Ayres
Lead for Population Health at PUPSMD
contributes to the dental health and wellbeing of the South West, which is a key mission for the University.

“To have reached the milestone that we did in March, bringing NHS dental treatment to more than 10,000 people in Devon and Cornwall is a tremendous achievement – and we’re now in excess of 13,000 people. It is a tribute to the continuing hard work and commitment to patient care demonstrated by both our colleagues and students.”

Building on that legacy, and the award of the world’s first Social Enterprise Mark for a university, PDS has created another first by incorporating a clinical entity into a social enterprise. The Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise launched in April and brings together the Dental Education Facilities with the school’s community activity.

The Community Development Team is at the vanguard of that outreach and engagement work, ensuring that groups in the community who may not have had access to NHS dental care before, receive it. The team works with a range of organisations, from schools to nursing homes, prisons to rehabilitation units, and groups that represent people with particular medical conditions, arranging visits to the Dental Education Facilities, oral health awareness activities in the field and ensuring that the barriers stopping certain people getting NHS dental care are removed. The team also organises special study units, which see dental students carrying out projects with community groups to mutual benefit – a vital and innovative part of student training.

Dr Rob Witton, Director of Social Engagement and Community Based Dentistry, said: “The Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise enables us to build still further on our successful track record, both in the community and in improving oral health throughout the region. It is a measure of our commitment to outstanding clinical education, strong social and community engagement and world class research. We have led the way with our innovative approach to training the dentists of the future – we lead again with the formation of Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise.”

Like the CEE, the Cumberland Surgery is also looking to emulate that academic/health partnership model, embedding a ‘seat of learning and research’ within a local health provider – in this case the Cumberland Centre in Devonport. Working in partnership with Plymouth Community Healthcare, Cumberland launched in February, and seeks to provide Devonport residents with greater access to health services. It represents the culmination of more than three years’ development, led by Professor Richard Stephenson, and stands as a truly collaborative, cross-faculty venture surrounding broader health initiatives.

Dr Richard Ayres, Lead for Population Health at PUPSMD, is on the frontline of that commitment, treating local residents every day, with more than 450 patients now registered at the centre.

He said: “This is just the type of partnership needed to tackle the kind of health inequalities faced by the south side of Plymouth. And the University has been brilliant – it’s not rhetoric with Plymouth; it’s a university genuinely prepared to roll up its sleeves and help people.”

Richard is now working with PUPSMD to ensure that students on special study units come to Cumberland from September, and is in discussion with the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences over expanding those opportunities to nursing and other health professions. Joint projects are also planned with the Dental Education Facility next door.

With Under Secretary for Health Dr Daniel Poulter MP due to officially open the centre in September and hundreds of new houses being built to continue the process of regeneration, Cumberland’s profile and potential looks set to grow.

“We already work closely with the neighbouring dental centre, referring patients between each other,” said Richard. “But I could see us working with law students, business school students, psychologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, mental health – the possibilities are endless.”

Taken together it has been a milestone few months for the University’s commitment to community health. And as the University prepares for the official launch of the new medical and dental schools, and bringing biomedical sciences into the Faculty, opportunities to work in the community will continue to unfold. Professor Ray Playford, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, said: “When we say we’re a University that is changing lives and changing communities, we mean it. We’re not only teaching, developing and inspiring a new generation of clinical and health professional, we’re using our expertise to deliver world-class patient care and treatment. And that is something of which we should all feel very proud.”
NEWS

PBS LAUNCHES GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP SUMMER SCHOOL

Passport to global citizenship as students sign up for summer school
Japanese origami, Iraqi drumming, and some international team-working were all part of an eclectic line up of activities for an innovative summer school launched this term.

More than 20 students enrolled on the intensive week-long programme, organised by the Plymouth Business School, to study for the Plymouth Global Challenge. The programme was underpinned by a strong theme of sustainability, with contributions from both University academics in the field and friends of the institution, including graduate Rob Drake-Knight, founder of the renowned ethical clothing company, Rapanui.

“Programmes of this nature have been popular in the US, post 9/11, where they are part of a movement to champion a more open and less insular society,” said Ricky Lowes, Lecturer in English Language within PBS’s International Office, and the organiser of the summer school. “But they’re not so common in the UK, and we wanted to introduce something that students could focus upon after their exams had finished.”

Backed by the PBS Gateway, Ricky held student and staff focus groups and ran questionnaires to gather research for the content of the programme. Adverts were placed across the campus prompting significant interest, with 22 being selected for places on the summer school in June.

Ricky said: “The range of people who took part was remarkable. We had first-year students, mature students, and postgraduates. There were people from International Relations, Computing, Finance, as well as a range of nationalities including German, Chinese, Nepalese, Nigerian, and exchange students from Italy and France as well.”

Each day carried a different theme – such as intercultural communication, international business, and social equity – and was split into a packed 9-5pm timetable consisting of workshops, group work, and fieldwork.

A number of guest speakers took part, including representatives from the National Marine Aquarium, Kwinessential, a leading cultural awareness training company and Minority Rights Group. There was also a videoconference with a representative from Oxfam, and a teleconference with Rob Drake-Knight, who was commissioned for some commemorative t-shirts for the students.

The group visited Modbury in Devon to examine the legacy of University honorary doctor Rebecca Hosking’s campaign to remove plastic bags from local shops. There were evening events as well, such as social networking with members of the visiting Singapore Summer School, and they also hosted Iraqi postgraduate students for afternoon tea as part of their experience of bridging cultures.

“We challenged the students to reassess their place in society, and to each make a contribution,” Ricky said. “So, for example, one student built a Facebook page, another volunteered to chair discussions, another took photos, and others ensured the room was tidied at the end of every day. All the students worked in teams to provide lunch for the entire group and several guests, each day.” That challenge was taken up by Ricky as well, who, with some of the students, baked cakes and raised £65 for the Bhopal Medical Appeal.

Overall, it proved to be a recipe that was appreciated by those who took part. Daniel Freeth, a second-year Law student, said: “Given the fact that the award was new, I was not really sure what to expect, but I attended with an ‘open mind’. I was really looking forward to seeing what I could learn about social justice, and the other subjects that were discussed, such as sustainability, intercultural communication and international business.

“What I really gained from it was inspiration; the inspiration to go and experience different cultures and also to help people who are less fortunate than you and I. Currently I am looking to do this with a ‘legal twist’, such as helping out on a human rights project in a Third World country.”

The Business School is now looking at the project with several options on the table, including hosting the event again next year or introducing co-curricular elements during term time.

“The idea of the summer school was to bring together a very diverse group of students, who might otherwise not have met, and give them the opportunity to develop the awareness, knowledge and skills required for flourishing in and contributing to an increasingly interconnected world,” added Ricky. “I think we succeeded.”
“They’ve risen to the challenge and they are the very definition of unsung heroes.”

James Goulbourn
Team leader and Associate Lecturer in International Relations

They are the Vice-Chancellor’s Enterprise Award-winning team who have helped transform the service offered by the Charles Seale-Hayne Library. Through the night they work, 365 days per year, helping students with their enquiries – and meeting their deadlines!

The team has been in place since April 2011 when the University began trialling the 24-hour opening of the library. From April 2012 the arrangement has been formalised and sees two information assistants working from 8pm until midnight, and then a single assistant from midnight until 8am, supported by Security.

“It means we can offer a full service every minute of every day of the year,” said Julia Paget-Woods, Library & IT Gateway Manager. “And that is crucial to the student experience. University staff and external visitors also benefit from our extended hours, especially during the vacation as we are now open at weekends.

“Even with the proliferation of WiFi and internet connectivity across the campus, many still prefer to work in the library, where they have access to books, journals and online learning resources. So it’s important that we have someone on duty that can really help with an enquiry – no matter what time it is.”

Last year, the library saw more than 1.2 million people pass through its doors, with anything up to 8,500 visits per day. Around 16 per cent of that total was recorded during the extended hours period, and the service has seen a 19 per cent increase in usage since those hours were introduced.

The team responsible for looking after the students through the night are a mixture of staff and students themselves. Lucy Full, Damien Melhem Quesada,
Dave Maunder-Leworthy, Alan Goff, Natasha-Ann Deeprose, Ben Willis, Chris Carne, Sara Erskine and Kate Lancaster make up the roster.

Chris, who is one of four to have been with the team since the pilot phase, said: “The students do really appreciate the fact we’re open through the night, and it’s nice that they take the time to tell us so. Those of us that do regular shifts really get to know some of the night owls – they’ll even come and ask if we want anything fetching from the local supermarket when they nip out for a break.”

Alan has seen the demand from both sides of the fence as he’s currently studying for a degree in Physical Geography and Geology. He said: “The library can be really busy at 4am, especially if there is a deadline the next day. You’ll get an influx around 10pm when Babbage closes – there are nights when the place is completely chock-full.”

As their award nomination makes clear, the team has taken an enterprising approach to their work, enthusiastically developing new skills so that out-of-hours IT Service Desk calls could be re-routed through to them since May, meaning enquiries can be met more quickly, and any major issues reported. They’ve also been called on to deal with floods, system failures, the odd sleeping student, and a stray dog, cat and seagull or two! They’ve even laid on food for students at Christmas and Easter.

James Goulbourn, who is also an Associate Lecturer in International Relations in the Business School, supervises the team. He told CONNECT: “Considering they largely work on their own, they are a really cohesive unit, who work exceptionally well together. They provide a great deal of support and have proven themselves to be really flexible when it comes to covering each other. These are unsociable hours and we have staff here who have families – so it isn’t easy finding childcare at short notice.

“And it is really appreciated by students. The library offers them a range of resources and an environment where they can take ownership of their learning. It brings people together, and that is an important part of the student experience.”

With some 300,000 items being checked out each year, business is booming at the Charles Seale-Hayne Library – and the out-of-hours team are at the heart of that success.

“There are not many universities who do this during term time and vacations,” added Julia. “So we see this as a pretty important differentiator when it comes to recruitment, not to mention demonstrating how we listen to feedback and act upon it.

“In all that time we have stayed open every single day. They are such a dedicated team – they have covered for each other at short notice, even when someone has gone down sick on a Sunday night. They’ve risen to the challenge and they are the very definition of unsung heroes.”

With a Vice-Chancellor’s Enterprise Award under their collective belts, they are unsung no more.
FEATURE

UNIVERSITY YACHTING TEAM NAVIGATES ITS WAY TO INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

It is regarded as one of the most prestigious new yachting events in the calendar; an 800-mile race from Bahrain to Muscat in Oman, with a host of inshore stages packed into a gruelling 16 days.

“We went from training in sub-zero temperatures off the coast of the Isle of Wight to shorts and t-shirt weather in the Middle East – it was an unbelievable contrast.”

Matt Haslam

Attracting professional crews from across the Middle East and Europe, the Sailing Arabia Tour requires its competitors to navigate some of the busiest shipping waterways in the world and a veritable minefield of oil platforms. Oh, and one more thing... it costs £15,000 just to get onto the start line.

So it puts into perspective the achievements of six members of the University’s student Yachting Team, who earlier this year not only funded their entry into the event, but gave the competition a serious run for its money.

“At the outset we were huge underdogs,” said skipper Marcel Herrera. “No one knew who we were – we were a team with no history – and yet we still managed to perform well. After the first leg, when we finished third, we earned the respect of a lot of people and we just kicked on from there.”

That the team – Marcel, Matt Haslam, Jack Kilburn, Sandy MacPherson, Dominic Silman, and Sam Holliday – were even there in the first place, owed a great deal to the vision and determination of their captain. Joining the University Yacht Club during the first year of his Navigation and Marine Science degree, Marcel, a UAE-born 20-year-old, set his heart and his sights on entering an international competition.

He told CONNECT: “It was in May 2012 that we seriously began to think about pushing ourselves into an international arena. The Sailing Arabia Tour is a relatively new event, but has quickly become one of the most prestigious in the world. It also represented just about the most high profile race we could enter while still being competitive against professional crews.”

Initially the team set out to ‘divide and conquer’ the fundraising, before Marcel followed up a contact in his home state of Dubai and met with representatives from German exhibition company Messe Frankfurt. They were so impressed they asked to be sole sponsors, and agreed to cover flights, fees and boat charter.

With their vessel also secured – a 30-foot sports yacht known as a Farr 30 – the team devoted as much time as possible to training together in a bid to prepare for the rigours of the event, when they’d have to become accustomed to shifts of four-hours sailing, and four-hours sleeping.
Matt said: “We went from training in sub-zero temperatures off the coast of the Isle of Wight to shorts and t-shirt weather in the Middle East – it was an unbelievable contrast.”

With a whiff of tear gas on the streets of Bahrain when they arrived, Team Messe Frankfurt set off for Qatar over three stages, before favourable conditions enabled them to sail for nine hours straight, passing through “oil rig city” on the way to Abu Dhabi from Doha. After performing well in the Dubai ‘inport’ races – home territory for Marcel, who narrowly missed out on selection for the UAE sailing team at the 2008 Olympics – they passed through the Straits of Hormuz. Sandy said: “It’s the busiest shipping lane in the Middle East, so it was fantastically scary. We had to remain extremely alert at all times, which was not easy as the event was so physically demanding by that point.”

Sam added: “The tiredness can mess with your head a little – you’re trying to sleep on the side of the boat, but you’re getting splashed by the water and you start to lose your bearings – but then we got to stay in some five star hotels as well, so it had its compensations!”

Over the course of the 12 stages, the team secured six podium places and finished in fifth place out of the ten crews. The sponsors were so delighted they’ve already entered the team into the 2014 race. The team has also thanked the University for its support and presented one of their commemorative trophies to Dr Maureen Powers, Dean of Students.

Marcel said: “We’re still in awe of the experience, and we can’t wait to go back next year. Even though the entry field is growing to 15, we’re targeting a podium finish – with a year’s added experience, we’re confident we can do even better next time.”
Professor Christine Purslow joined the University in September 2012 to establish and lead its new BSc (Hons) Optometry degree. Christine is a member of the College of Optometrists (UK) and a recipient of the Irving Fatt Memorial Award for her work in anterior eye research. CONNECT asked for her 20:20 assessment of how things have gone.

Q What brought you to Plymouth, and how do you assess the progress so far?

I came to Plymouth to take on the leadership for the team, delivering this new course; to work with a small, enthusiastic bunch of great staff who possess more drive than a Formula One racing car when it comes to delivering top class teaching and research – they are the amongst some of the best in optometry that I have worked with. The progress so far has been fast-paced and empowering for all those concerned: the current students are on the journey with us and indeed bear witness to the trials and tribulations of a team with high standards! As we go forward, those same high standards will drive us on to create ever better experiences for the students and their training.

Q What are your impressions of the University?

Plymouth University appears to be firmly on the evolutionary path towards becoming one of the top universities in the UK. Some things that I took for granted in my last role are not yet the norm here, whilst in other areas, the University is way ahead, particularly with regards to encouraging innovation and engagement with the community. I understand that I have actually joined at a time of great flux and it will be good to see things stabilise over the next 12 months.

Q What difference do you see the Centre for Eyecare Excellence (CEE) making to both the local community and to teaching at the University?

Teaching in a modern, fresh environment always energises students and staff – knowing you are among the first to be in the clinic is quite something, and important to our students especially. For the local community we provide a haven, slightly away from the commercial world of the High Street, where patients and customers can browse frames at their leisure, have all their questions answered by students keen to impart...
What sort of reaction have you had since the centre opened?

Honestly, the feedback we’ve had from patients visiting the clinic for eyecare services has been fantastic. We offer 30-45 minute appointments for comprehensive eye examinations, and the most frequent comment is about the thoroughness of our approach. We are fortunate to have the latest high-tech equipment available to us – imaging the eye to detect signs of disease early is key in preventative healthcare.

The University has done a wonderful job in converting the space into something that really looks the part – visitors to the CEE comment on the bright, airy surroundings – ‘loft living meets Ikea’ is one way to describe it! The local professional community has been extremely supportive. We look towards our fellow eyecare practitioners to host our students on placement, and in fact, to employ them in the future, so it is very important to us that they feel partners in our development, rather than our competitors. They recognise the importance of good-quality training with real patients – the primary aim of the CEE. During our opening events we have welcomed the useful feedback we get from our professional colleagues about the facilities and ideas for future events for their own education and training (a mandatory requirement for registered opticians and optometrists).

Have any new opportunities arisen since the opening?

We are exploring ways to work with the community. For example, we’re going into schools to deliver talks about looking after your eyes, as well as vision screening. We’re also working with disadvantaged groups like those recovering from addiction, to ensure eyecare is accessible and approachable.

And finally, can you tell us something about yourself that your colleagues don’t know.

I came to academia relatively late: my first career was with John Lewis on their management training scheme, where I learnt a lot of things that are still useful to me today. Then I decided to train as an optometrist followed by a decade working in community and hospital practice. It was only then that I decided I wanted to be a lecturer – someone told me ‘well, you need a PhD to do that’, and thereby followed the discovery of a love of research and teaching – something I never expected when I left school.
When hundreds of seabirds began washing up on beaches across the South Coast covered in a mysterious sticky substance, earlier this year, a major rescue and treatment programme was launched by the RSPCA, RSPB and other agencies. But what was the substance and where was it coming from? Professor Steve Rowland, of the Centre for Chemical Sciences, saw an opportunity to help.

Q Steve, take us back to the beginning. What was the first you heard about this incident and how did you become involved?

I heard about the spill on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme one Friday morning in February, when our radio alarm went off. My wife nudged me and said “isn’t that something you could help with?” and on reaching the office I quickly emailed the authorities to remind them of our expertise (they had supported our research in the past) and then went off to teach from 9 ’til 1. At lunchtime the BBC phoned me and asked if they could bring an oiled bird from the RSPCA for us to analyse. I said yes and a reporter arrived with a guillemot carcass, a camera and a microphone about mid-afternoon.

Q Can you explain to us what sort of tests you were able to conduct?

The reason I thought we could help with this problem was that the early media reports suggested the substance might be a palm oil. Senior Research Officer Dr Paul Sutton and I had published a paper describing a new analytical method we had developed in 2012 and we had analysed some palm oil, so I knew what it was. Our method has a long scientific name, but HTGC-MS is a useful abbreviation. We also used more routine methods such as infrared spectroscopy (or IR for short) for confirmation.

Q What were your findings?

Initially we struggled to get enough substance from the bird: it was so sticky it would come away from the feathers easily, and while we were analysing and filming, the Environment Agency rang the BBC reporter to say that they had discovered that the substance wasn’t palm oil but was a degraded mineral oil. We were sceptical about the latter so Paul worked in the laboratory on Saturday
to isolate enough for analysis. On Monday we ran IR confirmatory tests and all the results suggested the substance was actually a polyisobutene or PIB. Subsequently we found that there had been several other spills of PIBs over the years: so the mystery was solved. Then, unfortunately, many more birds were contaminated a few months later, again with PIB, so we got busy again!

Q Reacting so quickly to a developing event, and using research to help environmental agencies in this way - that must have been satisfying, even an exciting thing to be a part of?

Indeed: we always try to conduct research that has ‘impact’, though it was traumatic as well! With all the publicity and increased awareness of our expertise, a number of people began bringing us samples of all kinds of things from beaches! I am lucky to have people like Dr Sutton and Dr Tom Brown and others, who dropped everything to help. Tom even counted and recorded details of a pile of hundreds of smelly dead birds after the second spill – as a reward he did get to appear on BBC Countryfile though!

Q Do you have any other research projects in the pipeline?

Lots – and some literally in the pipeline! As oil becomes harder to find, oil companies are trying to produce much stickier oils and these often block their pipelines. We have used our analytical chemistry skills to discover what the sticky chemicals are and oil companies worldwide now sponsor our research to try to remediate the effects. We also use the same sorts of methods to study the environmental fate of similar chemicals and I was lucky enough to get a €2 million Advanced Investigators award from the European Research Council to study these. Life is busy!

Q And finally, can you tell us something about yourself that your colleagues might not know?

My chemistry teacher at Okehampton Grammar School – a dour Yorkshireman – predicting my chemistry exam results, said “Rowland, th’l’ll never pass owt but water!” I think that spurred me on to study chemistry at university!
For Dr Harry Bennett, being a historian is something akin to a Lewis Carroll novel, a constant quest to see how deep the rabbit hole goes. One day it might lead to a dusty file in The National Archives, the next to a confrontation with members of the Azerbaijani mafia. But it is all part of the intriguing challenge to be faced as he tries to construct a picture of something that has perhaps been hidden for 70 or more years.

An Associate Professor in History, Harry is now one of the nation’s most respected experts on the Second World War and regularly puts Plymouth University in the global spotlight through his media and public speaking engagements. But his interest in the conflict was first sparked by his father’s career as a merchant seaman, and the increasingly fervent media coverage of the wartime years as he was growing up.

“In the 1970s, there was a growing revival of interest in matters 1939–45,” Harry says. “Britain’s economic decline was such that on the cultural level the nation was striving to remind itself of former glories, or maybe questioning whether the Britain they now inhabited justified the sacrifice of the war years.”

Couple this with the fact history was, in his words, the “only thing he was good at” and you have the foundations for what has blossomed into an award-winning career, with Harry recently named among the winners in the 2013 Vice-Chancellor’s Enterprise Awards.

Over the past two decades, he has written definitive tomes on the Holocaust and Hitler’s generals, penned works on the American influence in the war and researched unique projects on previously hidden aspects of wartime life. And his research has taken him down some very unexpected avenues.

“I was working on a piece of history in Eastern Europe, and came up against the Russian mafia, the Azerbaijani mafia, local law enforcement and a well-known intelligence agency that took an interest in what we were doing,” he said. “Then another time, I got a telephone call from a BBC reporter to go to a field near Launceston for a story about a local farmer who had imported a breed of cow originally bred by the Nazis.”

Recently, Harry has been instrumental in the Dark Seas series, published by University of Plymouth Press using
the archives of the Britannia Royal Naval College, where he is a trustee of the museum.

He has also played a key role in cracking the codes of MI9, for which the University’s historians, mathematicians and geographers are continuing to work together on a project he believes has the potential to redefine global understanding of the PoWs’ influence in the war years.

“It is hugely exciting to think we as a University may actually be involved in rewriting history,” he says. “We tell stories about ourselves as a nation or as communities and sometimes those stories are not always true. I also never fail to be amazed by how much we have to learn from each other – interdisciplinarity really works!”

And as his father passed on his experiences to the young Harry, so he feels it is imperative the events of the wartime years and before are communicated to his students and the wider community.

“It is an old phrase, but a true one, that ‘if we don’t learn the mistakes of the past we are condemned to make them again’. I think this is true on a personal, institutional, national and international level,” Harry says.

All that aside, it is still simply the thrill of the chase which maintains Harry’s excitement with history, and inspires him to delve deeper into that fascinating rabbit hole of information.

“History isn’t always about dry documents and, in addition to the physical side of things, there is a chance to hear some of the stories of the past from those who took part in events that you are interested in. The great thing about history is that they make more of it every day, and everywhere you look the past lies beneath and around us. It is very sustainable – the supplies are almost limitless – and you never know what is going to turn up,” he says.
It is not every PhD that changes the law. It is not every PhD student that takes on the government and the establishment and wins. But then not every story is quite like that of John Kirkhope.

A self-confessed “legal geek”, John embarked upon his doctorate titled The Duchy of Cornwall: A Feudal Remnant in 2008 out of sheer curiosity. He could not have predicted that it would take him to the First Tier Tribunal (Information Rights) in London pitched against Treasury Counsel, to advising police and local authorities on ancient charters and beached whales, and to the pages and interview rooms of the international media.

“It has been a remarkable experience,” John told CONNECT over a cup of coffee. “What started as a piece of legal ‘geekery’, pure and simple, has taken off in a way I could never have expected. And as I’ve discovered, when you take on the establishment, the response can come as quite a shock.”

Born in the North Prospect area of Plymouth, John had already served in the Royal Navy and had had a successful career in finance – where he wrote “a number of books which were crushing dull!” – when he decided to retrain as a lawyer. He took a law degree and went on to qualify as a solicitor in 2001 and a public notary in 2004. But it was not until 2007 that the idea of a PhD first surfaced.

John recalls: “I was driving back from a visit to Cornwall, and I noticed that the English Heritage signs had been over painted with the flag of St Piran. I realised at that point that I really didn’t know anything about the history of the county of my mother’s birth, so I did some research, and later contacted a renowned Cornish historian and author. I asked him if he could recommend a book on Cornish law, but when he said there wasn’t any, I thought I’d write one myself.”

Several universities were interested in the PhD proposal, but the circularity of undertaking it in the city of his birth appealed to John, and so began his five-year project under the supervision of Dr Andrew Clark and Ann Lyon in the Plymouth Law School.

The focus of John’s PhD has been upon the Duchy of Cornwall, one of two Royal Duchies in the country, and one inherited by the eldest living son of the sovereign being heir to the throne. Established in 1337, the Duchy...
SPOTLIGHT: INNOVATIVE, ENTERPRISING PEOPLE

manages a portfolio of land spread across Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Herefordshire and Wales, and has an estimated worth of £730 million and an annual income of £18 million. But it is its ability to exercise legal rights and privileges in Cornwall that has been the particular focus for John’s research.

“The Duchy of Cornwall has a right to be consulted on all legislation that affects its ‘hereditary revenue, personal property and other interest’,” he said. “It also has Crown immunity, which means that an act only applies to the Duchy if it is expressed directly within the legislation.”

Obtaining answers to his research questions has required frequent recourse to the Freedom of Information Act and four court cases, such as when he was stonewalled by all of the government ministries when he asked for the number of times the Duchy had been consulted about bills.

He then fought a two-year legal battle with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel within the Cabinet Office to access the details of the criteria used to decide if the Duchy needs to be consulted and what guidance they offered on Crown immunity. The Office refused, and appealed against the Information Commissioner’s decision. When they lost that, they were forced to make the guidance publicly available.

“No you have to be persistent and determined,” John said. “It is not so much like throwing yourself at a brick wall as a sponge. The Duchy exercises real power and it is opaque; there is a culture of secrecy surrounding it. It is perfectly entitled to influence legislation, and yet fulfils no legal definition. Prince Charles pays income tax on a voluntary basis while the Duchy does not pay tax at all and yet it commands a huge annual income from the people of Cornwall and elsewhere – who surely have a right to know a little more about its operations.”

It is a view not entirely shared by the Duchy’s legal team. John recalls one court appearance in February this year when he attempted to open a file in the National Archives on the Duchy’s ‘liability to tax’. He said: “There was myself and two legal representatives, and facing us was an extraordinary battery of lawyers, including Treasury and Queen’s Counsel, and legal representatives from the top tier of government.”

John’s research has attracted global media attention, and one or two calls from local authorities in need of his expert advice on constitutional matters. For example, Devon and Cornwall Police sought his counsel on the case of a man who was caught removing sand from a North Cornwall beach, and who claimed he was entitled to under a charter dating back to 1231. As John was able to point out, had the man been using the sand for agricultural purposes, rather than for his horses, he would have had a defence. Then there was the time when Cornwall Council asked him who was responsible for the disposal of a whale carcass that had washed up on Porthtowan Beach. And he’s been approached by politicians, such as St Ives MP Andrew George, to help draft parliamentary questions.

John was awarded his doctorate in April, and his research is set to be submitted to the Research Excellence Framework as part of the Plymouth Law School submission.

“It’s been exciting, interesting, fascinating.” John added. “I’ve changed the constitution and that is something of which I’m proud. I’m not on an anti-monarchy crusade; I’ve just helped bring a little public scrutiny to the Duchy – probably more in the last five years than there’s been in the previous 200!”

Porthtowan Beach, Cornwall
YOUR STORIES

OPEN HOUSE

Plymouth’s maritime heritage was the main focus of this year’s Community Open House, which saw around 2,000 people come onto campus as part of the Lord Mayor’s Day Parade.

A range of marine related interactive activities was provided for visitors, alongside historical maritime artefacts, a showcase of the work being conducted by the COAST research group, and an exhibition of the Sea Portraits – a series of interviews and photographs with people who have a deep connection to the ocean.

In addition to the usual focus of activity in the Roland Levinsky Building, this year the Marine Building also hosted members of the community, with demonstrations of the new ship simulator.

With May also being Plymouth History Month, there were displays of antique navigational charts, which are normally housed in Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

The Open House event has been held annually since 2007, with themes chosen to complement the city’s Lord Mayor’s Day Parade. This year’s event also marked the start of the University’s Adult Learners’ Week.

BOSTON BEACON LIGHTS THE WAY FOR FACULTY OF ARTS CELEBRATIONS

May and June saw the Faculty of Arts take centre stage at venues across Plymouth, with the annual Arts Degree Showcase for students in Architecture, Digital Art, Fine Art, Illustration, Photography and 3D Design, and the School of Humanities and Performing Arts Showcase.

Among the many pieces of work on display was a baton created by 3D Product Design student Jon Parlby, which was used by the organisers of the One Run event in the US to commemorate the Boston Marathon bombings.

It also featured the work of three students, who this term were winners at the RSA Student Design Awards 2013. MA Design students Nicole Shadbolt and Meredith Thompson beat more than 75 submissions to win the Change Makers category, with their project, The Hive, a co-design framework aimed to improve food safety and create bee-friendly local communities. And BA (Hons) Graphic Communication with Typography student Rob Watts beat almost 50 competitors to win the Speaking for the Spiritual category for his Headspace Walking Guides, which help people find serenity close to their home and highlight city walking as being especially beneficial for spiritual health.

Professor Dafydd Moore, Executive Dean of the University’s Faculty of Arts, said the showcases were “truly inspirational”, and paid special tribute to the art and design courses, which recorded an eight-place rise in the Guardian University Guide subject rankings – lifting them above competitors in the South West. He said: “We pride ourselves on nurturing students who are capable of designing and developing innovative solutions which transform lives. These accolades further demonstrate the creativity our students possess, and the impact their work can have for a wide range of audiences.”
RESEARCH GRANTS, AWARDS, AND DEVELOPMENTS AROUND THE CAMPUS

MARIC SETS SAIL FOR ENTERPRISING WATERS

The official launch of the new £2 million Marine Innovation Centre (MARIC) attracted a sea of industrialists and sector leaders to the campus in April.

The event provided stakeholders with an opportunity to tour the Marine Building and meet the academics and staff at the University who are engaged across the spectrum of marine and enterprise.

Backed by the European Regional Development Fund, and money from the University, MARIC will look to bring together University research and expertise with business – both large and small – to create economic growth and development.

Ian McFadzen, Head of MARIC; Professor Martin Attrill, Director of the Marine Institute; and Dr Stuart Stripling, Hydrodynamic Facility Scientific Manager, all provided informative presentations to the audience in the Rolle Building before the tours began of the £19 million Marine Building.

Ian told the audience that the centre would aim to “connect, innovate, and collaborate” with a huge range of partners.

He said: “Our vision for MARIC is to directly support the industrial uptake and commercialisation of research and emerging technologies, improving the performance of small firms by supporting and stimulating innovation and the successful exploitation of new ideas. We’ll act as the lens through which we can focus the collective resources, knowledge and expertise of the University and other project stakeholders, helping SMEs overcome the common barriers and constraints which inhibit their ability to successfully scope, acquire, adopt and exploit new technologies.”

Any University staff or students interested in exploring new or existing links with the marine sector are encouraged to contact MARIC on maric@plymouth.ac.uk.

CHERNOBYL CHILDREN’S LIFELINE

The University’s support of the Chernobyl Children’s Lifeline charity saw a special visitor travel to Plymouth to provide a remarkable insight into the events surrounding the Ukrainian nuclear power plant accident of 1986.

Petr Makarenko was one of the firefighters who helped tackle the aftermath of the meltdown, and speaking through a translator, provided a first-hand account of the scene to an audience at the Roland Levinsky Building.

The charity brings a number of children to Plymouth each year in the hope that it provides a transformative experience for them. Many in the past have gone on to apply for higher education despite often suffering serious health problems. Around 10 children made the trip in July.

ROLLE BUILDING HOSTS HISTORIC VIP VISIT

Lord Clinton, the member of the Rolle family who gave his blessing for the University to name one of its flagship buildings in honour of its Exmouth heritage back in 2008, paid a special visit to the University in June. Hosted by Professor David Coslett, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Lord Clinton, his wife Lady Clinton, and his Head of Estates were introduced to some of the people who have helped Plymouth become renowned for its engagement with and excellence in sustainability. They were also taken on a tour of the Rolle Building and the Marine Building.
Bob and Stilts, two Harris Hawks, and Snowy, a Peregrine/Gyr-Saker, were among a cast of raptors who enrolled at the University during the spring. The birds were flown by owners NBC Bird and Pest Solutions to try to encourage some of the seagulls on campus to make their nests elsewhere. As the picture of Bob, outside the School of Law building on Portland Villas, shows, they provided a persuasive case.