ON STAGE
WITH THE HOUSE

JAMES BRENT: CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

UAEOcean OFFERS NEW LANDMARK FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

TECHNICAL MARVELS WITH A HEAD FOR HEIGHTS
The name of our University magazine is CONNECT, and right now, that has never felt more apt. Look through the stories in this edition and you’ll see what I mean.

A unique marine teaching and research facility that connects students with the environment; an exciting arts centre that does the same for performance and stage craft; a Research and Innovation team that brings together academic expertise with commercial need and opportunity; gifted people making technological connections to support our research endeavors.

The recognition we achieve owes much to this spirit of connection as well. Making connections between nursing and design students was behind one of the three Green Gowns we won this term; and connecting professional mariners, who might be working hundreds of miles from shore, with Plymouth University, as the Hydrographic Academy does, earned us a Times Higher Education Award.

At the heart of so many of our achievements is the way our people connect with the things that really matter: with our students, with our community partners, with some of the grand themes and challenges of our society. I never fail to be inspired by, and proud of this; for the way you transform lives in unique ways, embodying our enthusiasm, our expertise and values.

So may I thank all of you for continuing to achieve great things during the recent period and pass on my very best wishes for the festive season.

Professor David Coslett
Interim Chief Executive Officer
THE HOUSE TAKES CENTRE STAGE

Excited students; enthused academics; enthralled audiences; an engaged community. It’s not often that a university building earns such rave reviews, but then The House is not exactly your average campus development.

“Building on our already significant successes, we are creating a future where all our students – in every discipline – have the support and setting they need to fuel ambition and exceed their highest expectations.”

Professor David Coslett

Sitting proudly as part of a cultural triangle that includes the Roland Levinsky Building and the Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, The House has already proven itself to be an award winner. Designed by Burwell Deakins Architects and built by Midas Construction, it received the best new building and overall prize for demonstrating design excellence and innovation at Plymouth’s Abercrombie Awards 2014.

Everything within it has been designed to be versatile and fully accessible, with a 200-capacity sprung-floor theatre featuring a state-of-the-art tension wire grid that enables wheelchair users to engage in the technical aspects of theatre production. Its studio spaces and advanced technology are already inspiring students and academics alike, while it provides an exciting new performance venue, to equal any mid-scale university theatre in the UK.

Professor David Coslett, Interim Chief Executive of Plymouth University, said: “This exciting new performance venue, featuring first-class teaching and research spaces, takes our commitment to the performing arts to a whole new level. In recent years, we have consistently invested in our campus to provide students, staff and our partners and the community with access to some of the most advanced facilities in the UK. The House shows we are continuing to do this.

“Building on our already significant successes, we are creating a future where all our students – in every discipline – have the support and setting they need to fuel ambition and exceed their highest expectations.”

Since the start of the new academic year, a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes have been taught within the building, including BA (Hons) Theatre and Performance and BA (Hons) Dance Theatre. But this offering is already earmarked for expansion with, from September 2015, the introduction of masters-level programmes in Performance Training and Choreography and (subject to approval) a BA (Hons) Acting degree. Plans are also afoot for a BA (Hons) Technical Theatre course.

The House is now home to the Interdisciplinary Centre for Computer Music Research (ICCMR), led by Professor Eduardo Miranda, which is working to identify a range of innovative techniques that analyse the brain’s response to music and movement. That work, and the scientific understanding it has generated, has informed a number of cutting-edge performances, but it is also generating improved public understanding of conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease and locked-in syndrome.

The House had its formal opening in November, with director, actress and University honorary graduate Thelma Holt the special guest (pictured below right, with Professor David Coslett). Fellow doctorate Russell Maliphant was also a guest, and his company formed the showpiece of the opening ceremony with its contemporary dance performance. And it served as a preview of the type of act that The House might attract as part of the Peninsula Arts performance programme in 2015, with partnership events also in the pipeline involving the Barbican Theatre and the Theatre Royal Plymouth.

Professor Dafydd Moore, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, said: “The House is about our investment in our students, attracting and nurturing the next generation of performers by providing them with the facilities and surroundings that will inspire and enable them to fulfil their dreams.

“It also embodies the University’s commitment to its world-class research in theatre, dance and music and offers new opportunities for developing projects and initiatives with partners, both established and new, to further enrich the cultural and creative sector within our city.”
It’s a facility quite unlike any other in higher education today: a dedicated waterfront marine station for teaching and research, just a short walk from the main campus, where students can move between the classroom and coastal environment in seconds.

Nestled between the National Marine Aquarium and Queen Anne’s Battery, the Marine Station opened in November and is already providing students with unparalleled opportunities to undertake academic study in Plymouth Sound.

Replacing the outdated Diving and Marine Centre at Cawside, the two-storey facility, which brings together classical Plymouth limestone with a contemporary aluminium façade, offers a frankly jaw-dropping teaching location with views over the Sound and the Barbican. But it is the change of emphasis around the use of the building that has really underpinned the foundations of the £4.85 million project.

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“Why it really excites me is being able to teach in a facility where I can point out of the window to the marine environment,” says marine scientist Dr Alex Nimmo-Smith, academic lead for the project in the School of Marine Science and Engineering. “Our students can now experience a unique dual perspective; they can go from looking at a sample under a microscope to considering where it has come from, and its relationship with its environment, with just a turn of the head. It’s a shore-side base to support and enhance our work with students in the field.”

Using its 120 square metre ‘wet lab’, for example, up to 50 students at a time will be able to study samples collected from boats or the shore. Samples can also be stored in the aquarium facility, which is served by continuous fresh seawater extracted from a borehole.

Teaching will be undertaken in three first-floor classrooms, including a soft-partitioned space for 36 students. The view, particularly from the terrace, will ensure that the Marine Station is a hot ticket for the annual British Firework Championships.

“The key thing is to remove as many hurdles as possible for people to use it,” said Alex. “We want to welcome staff and students here – it will be an extension of the main campus. What’s also exciting are the opportunities it creates for students to conduct research; a PhD student could effectively choose to ‘camp out’ here if it is relevant to their work.”

“Operationally it boasts a boat house with slipway and crane, maintenance space, field equipment stores, a compressor room to fill diving air cylinders, drying rooms, briefing rooms, and a shower and ‘changing village’. These facilities, which were identified in advance following talks with the Students’ Union and other end-users, are central to the increased focus upon experiential learning across marine-related degree courses. The Marine Station also provides a base for our professional diver training.”

Bob Bray, Technical Manager for the school, has followed the construction closely, and worked with the contractors to ensure the facilities meet academic expectation.

“We want people to enjoy the environment we have created here,” he said. “It’s a flexible space, but it is also an inspiring one. You can see the Mayflower Steps from here, and that reminds you that we’ve changed this historic part of the city for the better, but in keeping with its maritime heritage.”

A public open day will be held early next year for people to come and explore the facility, but it is already operating on the timetable, with marine and environmental science and engineering students all set to be hosted there.

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Dr Alex Nimmo-Smith
It began with a conversation: a part-time PhD student, who happened to be a United Arab Emirates Navy officer, talking to his supervisor about his plans to extend his original interests from meteorology into oceanography.

Fast forward a little more than two and a half years, and the ink is drying on a UAEOcean deal. “People ask, ‘Why bother with commercialisation?’” says Paul Tiltman, Specialist adviser in Intellectual Property in Research and Innovation, and a key player in the UAEOcean deal. “People ask, ‘Why bother with commercialisation?’ But really that is just one aspect of the bigger picture. Whether it’s for commercial return – like UAEOcean – or some other purpose, the message is the same: getting our knowledge out into the public domain is good for society and good for us.”

It was Professor Georgy Shapiro, of the School of Marine Science and Engineering, who held that initial conversation with the student. Georgy’s oceanographic expertise has played a key role in a number of collaborative projects such as the European-funded MyOcean, and CENDRE (the Centre of Excellence in Naval Oceanographic Research and Education), and he tirelessly led negotiations with the Commander of the UAE Naval Forces and his staff for more than two and a half years. Following the signing of the deal, he has now taken the role of the UAEOcean Executive Lead.

“The UAE is a coastal country with centuries of history in fishing and sailing but little knowledge of what actually happens below the sea surface,” Georgy says. “And that lack of oceanographic expertise is felt in a number of areas: naval, business, leisure, etc. For example, they have equipment, such as sonar, but not the understanding of how best to use it, and how different water properties can impact upon its capabilities.”

The University, working with the Met Office, the National Oceanography Centre and the Flag Officer Sea Training Hydrography and Meteorology (FOST-HM) school won a global tender against companies from France and the US earlier this year. The reward is an opportunity over the next five and a half years to build an oceanographic centre in Abu Dhabi, and provide the software, the ocean models covering the neighbouring areas, and the training of UAE staff to run it. Much of the work will be done in a specially converted area of Fitzroy before being shipped out to the UAE.

“We have to deliver,” says Georgy. “It’s going to be hard work, but we have years of experience in this field and the reputational benefits could be considerable: a long-term partnership with the UAE. And I am proud that UAEOcean has the full support of the UK government.”

“We’re opening borders, and creating a catalyst for something in the future,” agrees Paul. “We’re now a trusted partner, and we’re already seeing the potential for where this relationship might go. And in an age when it is increasingly difficult to obtain research funding from traditional sources, it demonstrates the potential for academics to get their research funded commercially.”

The creation of income through the use of the University’s intellectual assets brings together two of the ambitions of the Plymouth 2020 Strategy: the focus upon world-class research, and the need to achieve financial resilience and sustainability. It’s an area that R&I is working hard to develop, alongside commercialisation partner Frontier IP, monitoring for opportunities to translate research into products, solutions and methodologies.

It is, says Paul, a ‘demand-side’ model that complements the University’s ‘supply-side’ strengths in curiosity-led research and teaching. And perhaps just as important is what it isn’t: a licence to register patents and launch spin-out companies at every opportunity.

“Patents and spin-outs are often just seen as tick-boxes for universities; a way of demonstrating how ‘entrepreneurial’ they are,” says Paul. “But there’s little point in having a spin-out company if it doesn’t have the scalability to thrive outside of the institution. Our approach is to build a business case, establish the proof of concept, and if it is strategically sound to do so, invest in it.”

In practice, this provides the University with a number of potential options when considering its IP. It might take an ‘embedded enterprise’ approach, where the activity is ring-fenced and traded through UoPEL, but remains within the protective environment of the University until such time as it is commercially viable to spinout. It might be a ‘licensing model’, where the University licenses the knowledge and IP to a third party for a more immediate return and one that might provide funds that can be reinvested in the concept. The early licensing of PoreXpert software to equipment giants Thermo Fisher Scientific, or the patient-recorded outcome questionnaires provided by Professor Jeremy Hobart (see overleaf), are classic examples. And in some cases, selling IP might be the best option, as was the case recently with the Hydrographic Academy, which had attracted interest from the maritime professional body IMarEST.

The element of timing is critical to each opportunity, as is the patience to assess the potential of an idea and evaluate the level of funding it needs to become a commercial success. It took time to bring UAEOcean to the table, and it is time that the University is investing in the work of Associate Professor Mohammed Zaki Ahmed (see overleaf), for example, which has significant commercial potential and a range of possible approaches to unlocking it.

Paul says: “Whether it is a case of investing heavily in something whose concept we’ve proven, or giving a little seed-corn money to a spark of an idea to give it a chance, we’re giving ourselves the space we need to make a call that is right for the IP and the University, and doesn’t result in a spinout that fails inside 12 months, or a patent that gathers dust in a drawer.”

“And with all things, there will be an element of serendipity,” he adds.

“But as UAEOcean shows, when you do recognise an opportunity, it’s important to run with it. And it begins with one person, and it begins with that conversation.”

“We’re opening borders, and creating a catalyst for something in the future.”

Paul Tiltman
SMARTER, GREENER ENERGY: Associate Professor Mohammed Zaki Ahmed

How do we address issues of sustainability when it comes to generating and consuming power and energy? It's a field of enquiry that has fascinated Associate Professor Mohammed Zaki Ahmed ever since he was a boy growing up in Nigeria. The memories of the almost routine power outages he and his family endured have remained with Zaki, of the School of Computing and Mathematics, and a renowned expert in digital signal processing, error correction coding, and communication theory. The principles from these areas have wider application, and can provide a fresh way of approaching and optimising energy systems.

"Man has become addicted to energy; we cannot get enough of it," he says. "We are surrounded by computers, televisions, telephones and other household appliances, and they're all inefficient in how they use the power they draw. I think we can do better than that."

Zaki is working on two different projects that cover both the supply and demand side of the issue. The first involves a Knowledge Transfer Partnership with local company Fairford Electronics that is close to making a significant breakthrough in how electrical items use power. "Currently, most appliances have a power factor of around 50%," says Zaki. "That is unbelievably inefficient."

While the precise details are bound in confidentiality, the system that Zaki and Fairford are close to finalising could reduce that wastage figure to around 10-20%, with the resulting technology providing a potential platform to create a joint venture between the University and Fairford.

Zaki is also working to improve the efficiency of standard solar panels, and has launched a spin-out company called PulsIV Solar Ltd, which is attracting interest from a range of investors. Again, the technology is under lock and key at the Plymouth Science Park, but early indications are that Zaki has been able to boost the energy conversion performance of solar panels by a significant degree, so much so that Frontier IP is now leading on negotiations for a first-round investment into the company. Future options include PulsIV taking the technology to market via a licence to an established intermediary for the manufacture of the technology.

In both cases, Zaki has created the "excellent support he's had from the technical staff that've built and realised these new and novel systems".

"Both of these projects are very exciting," Zaki said. "They not only have the potential to generate income for the University, but if successful, they could improve the way we generate power from the sun, and the efficiency with which electrical products consume power. That element of society benefitting from research is incredibly important to me."

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF DRUGS ON PATIENTS: Professor Jeremy Hobart

"This field of academia does not fit well with the standard academic funding model," says Professor Jeremy Hobart, reflecting on the work he has pioneered over a number of years into the impact and outcomes of drug treatment on those suffering from dementia, MS, and the effects of a stroke. "Funding bodies like to see people in labs looking down microscopes rather than analysing what you might term 'quality of life'. But from a patient's perspective, they would like to have their condition well measured so we can work out if their treatment is effective."

During early career research into neurological rehabilitation, Jeremy first began to question the methods of recording different functions that might be collectively – and perhaps unscientifically – termed 'quality of life'. Now based in the Centre for Clinical Trials and Health Research within the Institute of Institute of Translational and Stratified Medicine (ITSMED), Jeremy has created a range of targeted Patient Recorded Outcomes questionnaires (Scales) for patients with these debilitating diseases, going back more than seven years. This is something that's not only of interest to drug companies, who purchase licences to the scales for use in drug trials, but to global researchers pioneering new approaches to treatments. "If you are a pharmaceutical company studying a drug, then you are dealing with the current climate – not a five-year project from submission of grant to delivery of the report," says Jeremy. "It needs to be timely, and it needs to be focused upon specifics that are relevant to the context of its use. For us, that means delivering bespoke measuring instruments into a commercial setting."

To date, the University has benefited financially in excess of half a million pounds through access to these scales, money that is being used for the development of an embedded enterprise platform to offer more targeted and enhanced scales in tandem with a tactical Contract Research Organisation and FDA (Food and Drug Administration).

"It's not about making money, it's about underpinning and supporting these instruments to ensure they are evolving and updated," Jeremy adds. "And it's a sustainable model of self-funding at a time when traditional funding models are increasingly tight."

FACE IT ONLINE: Alyson Norman

"One of the things that I wanted from my career was to do something that would help people," says Alyson Norman, Lecturer in Psychology, and the founder of Face It Online. "And after ten years, it is a great feeling to know that we've taken Face It Online to a point where it is really doing just that."

First developed as a PhD project in conjunction with charity Changing Faces, while Alyson was at the University of the West of England, the idea was to provide a help tool for adults dealing with disfigurement. It consists of eight weeks' worth of programmes focusing upon social skills training and addressing body image issues. In particular, it seeks to explain how and why people react to disfigurement, and then proceeds to take users on a process of exposure therapy, increasing the difficulty over time.

Due to ethical issues, Face It was originally only accessible via a reference to a clinical psychologist, something that "defeated the purpose of the programme", in Alyson's view. She adds: "I developed a version for use in the home, and we could prove the concept because we had the patient data already to demonstrate how it had helped to reduce anxiety and stress."

By now based at Plymouth, Alyson received commercialisation support from R&I, and is about to launch a pilot study ahead of an intended roll out next summer. She has also engaged with an external company to build her website and create her branding.

RESEARCH & INNOVATION

It is the role of the Research & Innovation (R&I) directorate within the University to enable the strategic growth of the University's research and to stimulate and support the mission for growth and sustainability. It is incumbent on R&I to create a culture of creativity and innovation, while providing the structures and machinery for the University to engage in world-leading research and commercial development.

A significant driver will be the University's ability to create income from the exploitation of its intellectual assets and to focus on satisfying the market demand for new products, solutions and methodologies.

Increasingly, to ensure that the University's research funding is sustainable, it needs to demonstrate wider societal and commercial impact to create more diverse research income streams. This complements the more traditional sources of research funding. A more dynamic relationship with external partners, whether industry, commerce or wider society, is the key to unlocking this.

In preparation for this, in 2011, the University formally engaged commercialisation specialists Frontier IP Group plc to work strategically in partnership with the University for the commercialisation of its intellectual capital, to create commercially viable solutions for the market, mainly in the form of new products, solutions and methodologies based on evolving intellectual property.
BEACONS FOR TECHNOLOGY

Working alongside Peter, colleague Tony Tapp passes back and forth the tools needed for the delicate operation.

For two hours they mount and finely tweak the position of each camera, check the video feed on a monitor to ensure its field of vision is correct, and try to make themselves heard over the roaring Atlantic wind and crashing waves.

Safely harnessed at all times they may be, it’s nevertheless an insight into the remarkable lengths and heights technicians go to in supporting the academic endeavours of the University – in this case, a potentially illuminating research project being led by Dr Alison Raby, of the School of Marine Science and Engineering, on the impact of heavy seas upon our rock-built coastal lighthouses.

‘It was a unique experience,’ reflected Peter, ‘and certainly a variation on the day job! But I’m happy with heights, and we’ve undertaken tower work before, so it was great to go out there and be in that challenging environment.’

‘How many people have the chance to visit a lighthouse as historic and beautifully made as Longships, let alone work there?’”

Tony Tapp

Tony and Peter have more than 50 years’ combined experience at the University – not including their time as students here. Peter is a technical specialist in marine instrumentation and innovative data acquisition systems for coastal research, including video capture, that have aided a string of successful research projects in the school, most notably those involving coastal processes and marine physics. Tony is a civil engineer and is both a Technical Specialist and Lecturer in Construction Materials and Diving and Underwater Technology at the University. So they were both keen to work with Alison on the project funded by the General Lighthouse Authority and owners Trinity House.

They began in the summer of 2013, when they installed four cameras and a vibration sensor system on the Eddystone Lighthouse, 13 miles south west of Plymouth – systems they could monitor and control remotely after they were able to extend the University’s Wi-Fi network to the top of the Eddystone via a wireless bridge link, direct to the roof of the Davy Building. During subsequent trips they added further equipment, before being set the task of crafting a similar low-power system for Longships but with added robustness to cope with higher energy wave conditions.

After an initial reconnaissance visit with Alison, Peter and Tony were flown by helicopter to the rock in October and spent two days and two nights at the lighthouse, a mile off the coast of Land’s End.

Tony said: ‘We were in awe of the place – the craftsmanship is remarkable. Everything is engineered to a standard you just wouldn’t see today, with so much attention to detail.’

“We had to work with very low levels of power, so we needed something that could be switched on and off remotely,” said Peter, “and given that we wouldn’t be able to return very often, we had to make the system easy to use so that hard drives could easily be swapped in and out of the caddy system by visiting crew.”

The vibration sensor, installed halfway down the tower, can measure movement in three axes, and when combined with the visual data, will enable Alison and her team to correlate structural movement to certain types of wave. It is also programmed to switch on at intervals or when triggered by vibration above a certain threshold.

‘That’s the beauty of the system,’ adds Alison. ‘It’s perfectly designed to operate in that environment, with no more than 30 watts of power – and that is the testament to the skill of Peter and Tony.’

Peter Ganderton attaches the first of two HD video cameras to a strut on the helicopter pad.
James Brent became a governor at the University in July 2013, and was appointed Chairman of the Board in November. He is founder and Chairman of the Akkeron Group of companies, incorporating hotels, leisure/sport, retail (Saltrock) and regeneration businesses.

James is also non-executive Chairman of the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust, which employs 6,500 people and turns over £380 million, and Chairman of Plymouth Argyle Football Club.

During a 25-year career as one of the City’s leading investment bankers, James was one of the youngest ever directors of merchant bank J. Henry Schroder & Co. and was Citigroup’s Global Head and Chairman of Real Estate and Lodging Investment Bank.

James Brent with Professor Richard Stephenson at the launch of the partnership between the University and Plymouth Argyle.
Professor Patricia Livsey joined the University in May 2014, as Executive Dean for the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences. Starting her career in adult and children's nursing in Leeds, Patricia then worked as a Health Visitor in Cumbria before moving into academia more than 20 years ago.

She later moved to London as the Head of Department of Child Health and Associate Dean for Post-Registration and Postgraduate Studies with City University London. Her most recent position was as Academic Director of the Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University, where she was responsible for 5,000 students and an annual budget of £20 million. From the North West to the South West, it’s been quite a relocation: CONNECT went to meet her.

Q: How have you adjusted to the new role and to life in the region?

A: I absolutely love it here, I’ve settled in straightaway. What struck me very quickly were the similarities with Cumbria, in terms of the rural location, that geographic isolation, and the socioeconomic extremes. But I think the people in the South West are much more approachable and open to working in different ways.

Q: You’ve been here for six months now – what are your impressions of the University?

A: Well, it’s clear that I’ve come to a dynamic faculty with good people who are truly committed to bringing together and enhancing practice, education and research. It’s incredibly rare to find a post-1992 university with an extensive portfolio of health and social care professions that includes nursing, allied health professions, social work, clinical psychology, dentistry and medicine – so the fact that we have so many health professions here is wonderful. We are in a great position to be leaders in the inter-professional opportunities we can offer. What we need to be doing now is looking at how we work collectively across the faculty and with our external partners to grow and develop in different ways that meet the needs of the local health economy and the national agenda. I think we’re doing a lot of that already, but we are maybe not shouting about it enough. I think as a University we’re thriving: there’s lots of energy. It’s a very welcoming place to come for someone new, and there’s a strong sense of community.

Q: Have you had a chance to meet colleagues in other faculties?

A: Yes – I’m leading on the timetabling project, which has ensured I’ve got to meet people in other areas much quicker, including those in TIS and Estates. No-one would say that it is a straightforward project, but what is wonderful is the willingness and commitment of people to work together to create the best system we can for the University.

Q: What are some of the opportunities and challenges you can see on the horizon?

A: We are in a really unique position in terms of our portfolio, and what we want to do is make sure we make the most of that. And we have to be ahead of the game, delivering ‘future-proofed’ content, because the market is changing, and in the next couple of years we’ll see radical changes to the commissioning process, with the introduction of tenders. We will have to compete for our student numbers, and not just with local universities, but with national and private institutions as well. If other universities want to put in a tender for students in the South West, they will be able to do that, nurse education in Jersey, for example, is provided by the University of Chester. We have got to be thinking 5–10 years ahead, and making sure we have the structures and the systems in place to enable that.

One of the things that I’ve been keen to do is bring in high-profile external speakers so that we can make that link between what we do here more explicitly with the external environment.

Q: Are there any areas of the faculty that you’d be keen to develop further?

A: I think it’s important to stress that I’m going to be focusing on all areas, but within that there are some areas that can flourish and grow. One is optometry, where we’ve recently doubled our student numbers, there is a real opportunity to grow in vision care and become national leaders. Paramedic practice is another area we could develop as well and there are some exciting opportunities within psychology – but really, all of the areas have potential for growth and to be national leaders. As a faculty, our USP is that whole portfolio, multi-professional dimension including nursing and midwifery, allied health professions, social work and clinical psychology.

Q: What sort of things do you do in your spare time – and can you tell us something about yourself that your colleagues might not know?

A: I do a lot of walking and cycling, particularly in the fells, and I love to spend time with the grandchildren. And something people might not know? I’m a trained Clinical Hypnotherapist, and once had a practice on Harley Street!
“In the winter, the visibility is the clearest you’ll find anywhere in the world and the wildlife is incredible – we had some close encounters with leopard seals and orcas.”

From Bovisand to Queen’s Anne Battery via the Gulf of Mexico and Antarctica: the life aquatic of Matt Brown has travelled full-circle.

The University’s Academic Diving Manager, who joined the institution 12 months ago, had his first ever taste of diving as a 16-year-old in Plymouth Sound on a visit from his home in South Yorkshire. It was enough to set him on a career path that would include working for a number of offshore companies and most recently the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), where he supervised hundreds of dives under the polar ice.

Now, in the more hospitable surroundings of the Marine Station, he is responsible for the diving modules in the marine degrees offered by the University, as well as overseeing a raft of professional development and training programmes for external companies and organisations.

“It’s ironic that I grew up in Sheffield, about as far from the coast as you can get,” Matt says. “But even before I’d had my first dive, I’d helped with some pot-holing in the Peak District, carrying the gear for those divers who would explore the large subterranean caves.

“During the summer it was crazy,” Matt says. “You’d have 120 scientists all doing fieldwork and trying to gather the data for their PhDs in the space of two to three months. We’d be diving up to six times a day because you have to take advantage of the weather – when it fails, you’ve got no alternative but to sit and wait it out.”

“Even in the winter there’d be four or five scientists, and diving would become a truly exhausting experience. You’d have to dig through the snow just to reach the ice, then chainsaw a hole in it, before going back to fetch the gear – all before you get into the water, and all within maybe a two-hour window of daylight.”

In water ranging from 1˚C to -1.8˚C, it would only take 40 minutes for the hands and feet to become numb – but there were plenty of compensations.

“In the winter, the visibility is the clearest you’ll find anywhere in the world,” says Matt. “And the wildlife is incredible – we had some close encounters with leopard seals and orcas, and watching them flip icebergs to get at the seals while you’re standing in a small boat was... interesting.”

After ten years, in which Matt averaged six months per annum in Antarctica, and had risen through the ranks to become Base Commander, he applied for the role at the University. He said goodbye to the South Pole at the end of November, and one week later was reacquainting himself with Plymouth Sound.

At the Academic Diving Manager, he now has oversight of a team of five, which boasts diving experience from across the naval, scientific and commercial fields.

“The old Diving and Marine Centre has always been highly regarded for the way it has trained a number of good scientific divers – indeed the last six or seven marine biologists at BAS have been Plymouth graduates,” Matt says. “But now, we’ve an opportunity to provide students with relevant diving experience, by embedding it in their studies.”

Changes to the curriculum mean that undergraduates now undertake diver training in the summer at the end of their first year, and they can then take a module during their second year in underwater measurement. This in turn offers them the chance to do project work in their final year, with diving as a constituent part, and Matt says there are around a dozen students this year researching everything from seaweed to sediment, marine life to heavy metals. And with the improved facilities of the Marine Station, there’ll also be an increased amount of professional development work with the likes of BAS, the Marine Biological Association and the National Marine Aquarium all set to create a more diverse scientific community passing through the station.

Matt Brown

Diving Deep

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“In the winter, the visibility is the clearest you’ll find anywhere in the world,” says Matt. “And the wildlife is incredible – we had some close encounters with leopard seals and orcas, and watching them flip icebergs to get at the seals while you’re standing in a small boat was... interesting.”

After ten years, in which Matt averaged six months per annum in Antarctica, and had risen through the ranks to become Base Commander, he applied for the role at the University. He said goodbye to the South Pole at the end of November, and one week later was reacquainting himself with Plymouth Sound.

As the Academic Diving Manager, he now has oversight of a team of five, which boasts diving experience from across the naval, scientific and commercial fields.

“The old Diving and Marine Centre has always been highly regarded for the way it has trained a number of good scientific divers – indeed the last six or seven marine biologists at BAS have been Plymouth graduates,” Matt says. “But now, we’ve an opportunity to provide students with relevant diving experience, by embedding it in their studies.”

Changes to the curriculum mean that undergraduates now undertake diver training in the summer at the end of their first year, and they can then take a module during their second year in underwater measurement. This in turn offers them the chance to do project work in their final year, with diving as a constituent part, and Matt says there are around a dozen students this year researching everything from seaweed to sediment, marine life to heavy metals. And with the improved facilities of the Marine Station, there’ll also be an increased amount of professional development work with the likes of BAS, the Marine Biological Association and the National Marine Aquarium all set to create a more diverse scientific community passing through the station.

Matt Brown

Diving Deep

“During the summer it was crazy.”

Matt says, “You’d have 120 scientists all doing fieldwork and trying to gather the data for their PhDs in the space of two to three months. We’d be diving up to six times a day because you have to take advantage of the weather – when it fails, you’ve got no alternative but to sit and wait it out.”

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**Thom Hunt**

**A Hungry Boy With an Appetite for the Outdoors**

In a lay-by, deep in the Roseland Peninsula, we meet Thom Hunt. It’s an unlikely spot for a rendezvous with the Plymouth marine biology graduate, and one-third of the Three Hungry Boys – but then the project we’re here to talk to him about is anything but commonplace.

Thom guides us over a farmer’s gate, through two fields and down a woodland track until we arrive at the banks of the River Fal, a short distance away from the King Harry Ferry crossing. For it’s here, set in 14 acres of the Tregothnan Estate, that we find a restored cottage and Thom’s 7th Rise business that is beginning to make Cornwall sit up and take notice.

“What we’re doing here is offering people a chance to step away from their screens, from their lives in the city or wherever they are, and to come and experience the outdoors through fishing, foraging, hunting, wild swimming.”

Thom has built the business over the past two years, renovating the cottage after it had effectively lain derelict for 40 years. Turning down offers to apply for grants, he ploughed his own money into the project because he felt he needed to ‘wear the risk’ and put his very evident passion to the test.

Thom has the same one I had when I grew up on the grandparents’ farm in Lancashire, or when I was looking in rock pools while on holiday on the Isle of Wight.

“We’re working with a number of schools now, and we’re showing children that not everything in life comes through a screen. There are kids from Camborne who’ve never seen the sea before. That’s crazy – but we can take them on a journey, show them where shellfish come from, we can catch shrimp and within ten minutes we’re cooking them and showing them how to prepare food.”

So successful has 7th Rise become that Thom is looking to open further retreats in other areas of the country, starting with Wales. With a national media profile, including recent appearances on the likes of Countryfile, Thom is able to provide an education on catching, preparing and cooking wild food.

With so much to look forward to, you could forgive Thom if he found little time to pause for reflection. But he’s a man connected to the inspirational characters of his past – his grandparents who first fired up that fascination with nature, and his contemporaries on the Marine Biology degree at Plymouth.

“Plymouth’s reputation for marine was a huge part of my decision to come, but I also wanted to go to a place that would inspire me as a location,” he says.

“Devon and Cornwall really are blessed with incredible scenery,” he said. “At Plymouth I had some of the most amazing coastline, moorland, and forests right on my door. And now, with 7th Rise, I share my office with deer, grey seals, Fal oysters, an otter, and some tawny owls. This is a place to inspire people – and if we can do that with the young people of the South West, hopefully we can retain more young talent in the future.”

But Thom’s enthusiasm and commitment is not limited to his day job. As a Plymouth marine biology graduate, and one-third of the Three Hungry Boys, he has been honing his foraging and wild-food skills, and has applied for grants, he ploughed his own money into the project because he felt he needed to ‘wear the risk’ and put his very evident passion to the test.

And having travelled around the world, in particular working as a SCUBA instructor in Egypt, he’s got a clear eye on the relative merits of life here in the South West.

“Plymouth’s reputation for marine was a huge part of my decision to come, but I also wanted to go to a place that would inspire me as a location,” he said. “There was a group of 20 of us at University who would go down to the Hoe, and we’d fish for mackerel and cook them up on the barbecue. Those kinds of memories are so precious.”

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Gina Connelly, UPSU Chief Executive, said: “The continued support of the University and its recent investment in our building has reinforced our vision to meet the needs of our diverse membership. We want to be inclusive and welcoming to all – and that includes University staff who have also been included to sign up to the NUS benefits scheme.”

Professor Richard Stephenson, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience, and Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor, paid tribute to the work of UPSU, saying: “Under the leadership of Sarah and Gina, our Students’ Union is flourishing; it was ranked 19th of all institutions in the National Student Survey, and has won a host of awards including the Investors in People Gold Award, a Silver Award in Best Bar None, and the Outstanding Award for Green Impact Excellence.

And this is a prime example of our partnership working and our ambition to drive the development of the student experience with quality and speed.”

“With the development of our student-led forums and committees, we hope to utilise the space for their meetings, which will help to ensure that they are more accessible, interactive and social for our members.”

Structurally, the building has been changed to include a double-door entry area, with some internal walls removed to create a more open and flexible space with a brighter ambience. Private working booths and new power sockets for laptop use emphasise the cultural working booths and new power sockets for laptop use emphasise the cultural

There are three bars, a café (complete with baby highchairs), new sofas and a big screen lounge, along with pool tables and a games room.

A ‘SELF_IE’ FROM THE PLYMOUTH INTERNATIONAL BOOK FESTIVAL

Best-selling author Will Self was one of the star turns at the third annual Plymouth International Book Festival – and threatened to ‘reveal all’ to the audience in the Roland Levinsky Building. Prior to his talk about his latest novel, Shark, Will said he would “strip naked and strike some attitudes” if the audience demanded it.

As it transpired, he retained his clothes, and delivered an insightful talk, one of 40 events across the nine-day festival, which was organised by a partnership between the University, Literature Works and Plymouth City Council. Other authors to grace it were Joanna Trollope, Kate Adie and Sir Andrew Motion.

SUSTAINABLE EXCELLENCE FOR STEPHEN...

Professor Stephen Sterling, the University’s Head of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), received a National Teaching Fellowship at a prestigious ceremony held in Liverpool in October. Stephen, pictured accepting the award from Professor Rama Thirunamachandran, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Canterbury Christ Church University, has earned an un-matched reputation in the sector for his work in embedding sustainability in the curriculum and acting as an advisor and critical friend to universities through the HEA’s green network.

October also saw him invited as a rapporteur for the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Japan, which marked the end of the UN Decade of ESD (2005–2014). He said: “Higher education has a critical role to play, as identified in UNESCO’s ‘Global Action Plan’ for ESD, and calls for the sector to respond more fully and widely still can only increase as part of a growing international trend. Of course HE has plenty of concerns, but sustainability needs to be a central dimension of the forward agenda if we are to produce graduates with the skills and abilities to manage in conditions of complexity, multiple issues and rapid change. Plymouth already has an enviable reputation in this regard.

It was a hat-trick of Green Gown Awards for the University this term – an unprecedented haul in what is one of the sternest examinations of an institution’s green credentials. Representatives from the School of Nursing and Midwifery, the Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise, and the Catering team all picked up Green Gowns at the awards night at the University of Manchester – the first Plymouth has won since 2011 (and the Highly Commended last year). All three areas will now be showcased by EAUC over the course of the year as exemplars in their respective categories of Courses and Learning; Enterprise; and Food and Drink.

...AND GREEN GOWN GLORY FOR THE UNIVERSITY
Days before the magazine went to press, the University won its first Times Higher Education Award in recognition of the Hydrographic Academy – an initiative that offers a world-first distance learning programme for professional mariners in the off-shore sector. Dr Richard Thain, Director of the Academy, received the Outstanding Employer Engagement Initiative award from comedian Jack Dee, at the gala dinner at the Grosvenor House Hotel in London. Also on stage with him were Professor Julian Beer (centre), Pro Vice-Chancellor (Regional Enterprise), and Andy McNeil (second left), Global Talent Development Manager at Fugro, the multinational geosciences company that partnered with the University in launching the venture.