

TALKING HEADS
COURT ASSISTANT, PROFESSOR JOHN SOLBÉ MBE DSc RETIRED
ECOTOXICOLOGIST



Liverymen and guests joined us for the fourth in the most enjoyable 'Talking Heads' series. The Senior Warden introduced the evening's conversationalists, Professor John Solbé and Noel Hulmston. John is the secretary of the WLCOW North Wales Committee.

He is a retired ecotoxicologist and a distinguished author in his field. He is a member and former chair of the North Wales branch of the Royal Society of Biology. John is the Head Steward of the North Wales International Music Festival and he is also a steward at St Asaph Cathedral, John was in conversation with Liveryman Noel Hulmston who has had three very successful careers. He worked in the Magistrates Courts Service and was the Principal Administrator to The West Cheshire Courts. Subsequently he became a well-respected lymphoedema practitioner and in recent years his love of the environment has seen him lead exciting expeditions to a wide range of locations Noel was a very successful chair if the Welsh Association of Churchill Fellows

Noel took us back to the beginning and asked John about his early life. John was born in Tetbury in 1941. Their House in Birmingham was damaged by a landmine and so the move to the Cotswolds for his birth was made. A further move was then made to South Devon and John fondly remembered the rock pools and "Nature Parliaments" on Children's hour as early influences. A sea mine blow up against the cliff below their house (which was undamaged) and a third mine floated onto the beach! In 1952 the family moved Somerset – to the Quantocks. John's first school was in Chard and he attended Dr Morgan's Grammar School in Bridgwater followed by Cardiff University for an Honours Zoology Degree. This was where he met Rosie - at his first lecture!

Noel asked, "*so after University – what came next?*" John had looked at a career in forensic science but there were no vacancies in 1963. Therefore, John accepted a post studying "*population dynamics of earthworms in sewage percolating filters*" at DSIR Water Pollution Research Lab from 1963 to 69. John explained his findings about the fine balance in sewage percolating beds ecosystems. (He later mentioned that the half-life of organics in such systems was only 11 minutes.) Noel noted that by 1970 John was studying fish in polluted rivers and he asked how ecotoxicology came into this, John outlined how ecotoxicology is the study of "*the fate effects and pathways of chemicals – their biodegradation, partitioning, bioaccumulation and*

toxicity” John was working in less heavily damaged systems and he derived an index of water quality to “guarantee” safety for fish. He helped Ron Edwards (later UWIST) and Morlais Owens (later WNWDA) working on the oxygen balance in rivers. Fisheries Research was always central to John’s work. *“Fish will always tell you what is going on!”* Whilst at the Atlantic Salmon Trust he wrote their ‘Blue Book’ “Water Quality for Salmon and Trout” that had widespread press coverage, including a BBC interview with Alex Kirby. John commented that Salmon are not perfect at homing and their wanderlust allows flexibility and survival if their home is destroyed.

In terms of ‘next steps’ Noel asked how Unilever came into the story. John described how they identified his potential to run their Environmental Group (part of the Safety and Environmental Advisory Centre). John was obviously a top scientist, but he also had the required management skills having transferred all the WPRL and WRC staff to Water Industry Terms and Conditions of Service. He stayed with Unilever until retirement at 60 in 2001, gaining a DSc and MBE during those years

John described how he then became a consultant, visiting 34 countries, teaching ecotoxicology and environmental protection. Noel noted that John had a knack of being in interesting places at interesting times. John agreed and told us about chairing a meeting in the Reichstag and watching the Berlin Wall coming down and his amusement at the instant acquisition of capitalist ways as use was made of multiple prams and children for the available handouts. John was also in Pretoria on the day that the Truth and Reconciliation Committee published its report – bumping him from a TV interview.

Answering Noel’s question about the interesting people he had met John detailed his work on the House of Lord’s conservation Committee with Lord Crichton, Lord Nugent and Baroness White. He met Prince Charles on half a dozen occasions, most recently when he came with Camilla to celebrate the city status in St Asaph Cathedral in 2012 and in November that year when the Prince visited again after the devastating floods. The most fun time was when the Prince brought Queen Margrethe of Denmark and Prince Henrik to Unilever for an explanation about sewage treatment and ecotoxicology. John also met the Princess Royal (DSc) the Queen (MBE) and King Baudouin of Belgium - and his chic lady bodyguards.

Noel probed further about John’s role in St Asaph Cathedral and John detailed his 13 years as head steward. Working with Rosie, he still organises the Cathedral Volunteers. They both also volunteer at RSPB Conwy, initiating prize winning environmental improvements. Noel concluded their dialogue by asking *“If you could wave a magic wand to improve water quality – what would you do”* John felt that in Urban areas storm sewage was a great problem and providing large scale storage to moderate flow would be very beneficial - if possible. In Rural areas a solution would be to create buffer zones – rich in biodiversity – to reduce contamination from the economically required monoculture for food production.

The fascinating evening ended with a vote of thanks from the Master who noted the depth of talent among liverymen. We then raised our glasses in a toast to “Liverymen wherever they may be”