

In Memorium

As we reported last month, Nick Langhorne sadly died suddenly on March 3rd. This biography was written by Pat Fenn, and published in the August 2008 issue of Bosham Life.



THE RESEARCH SCIENTIST

Once upon a time there was no need to sit in a germ-filled surgery in order to see your doctor and the idea of a restrictive clock-watching ten minutes per patient was unthinkable, The local pre-war practitioner was anything but general; he was family friend and counsellor, the depository of the snippets of news, fears and triumphs of every one of the villagers, whom sometimes he would visit on horseback. Status was high. Likewise satisfaction.

Such a doctor was David Langhorne, whom some vintage-Boshamites will still remember. He was a familiar figure in the village, deeply involved not only in local concerns but in projects, discoveries and worldwide ideas. Full of energy and zest, he found time to enjoy all manner of hobbies, as diverse as ornithology, archaeology and painting. He was a member of the Sailing Club,

sailing his Bosham Trawler with the same enthusiasm and gusto he showed in every aspect of his busy life.

Home was the large Victorian house next to the Berkeley Arms. This was where Nick Langhorne was born, to be christened in Bosham Church and to start his life and a long term commitment to Bosham. He and his wife Joan (the esteemed Church archivist) now live in the stables behind his parent's house, which they converted and later modernised with the able assistance of their architect son, Alistair.

Come the war all was to change. With Dr Langhorne joining the Royal Army Medical Corps, going off to the war and eventually the Burma Front, it was deemed wise to evacuate the family from England; space was somehow found for the Langhornes on a banana boat en route for Jamaica. Nick was only two at the time, but for his mother it must have

been an unbelievably stressful time, saying farewell to a soldier husband she might never see again, and sailing across the ocean in charge of her three small sons, nanny and an Austin Seven car.

Peace came at last but banana boats did not. Every vessel available was being used for troop transport and the Langhorns had to wait another frustrating six months before they could be reunited with their impatient father. What a homecoming that must have been!

The boys were soon immersed in the standard grey-flannel prep and public school routine. Nick was not a serious scholar; tending to find sporting activities more stimulating. Perhaps his most vivid recollection of life at his Wiltshire public school was 'the bomb episode'. Trying to work out the depth of a disused well on a bombing range on Salisbury Plain, he unknowingly picked up a bomb and counted as he dropped it down the well, with dramatic consequences. On leaving the school sanatorium a week later, followed by an immediate caning by the headmaster, he was threatened with expulsion. Only considerable negotiation by his father saved the situation.

Life in Bosham was carefree and action-packed. Sailing was as natural as walking and every child/youth/family had a boat of some kind. On his way back to Bosham from East Head in the summer of 1950 Nick spotted a young girl in difficulty in a dinghy, literally up the creek without an oar. His rescue efforts were rewarded by grateful parents with two jars of fruit salad and, subsequently, their daughter's hand.

Nick married Joan, the girl in question, in Bosham Church sixteen years later.

Called up for National Service in the Navy, he was commissioned in 1956 and served in HMS Bulwark, by huge coincidence captained by Percy Gick of Bosham Hoe. Long periods of 'exercising' north of Iceland, as one did in those days, were interspersed for junior officers by more challenging experiences. Not least of which was setting off from Belfast in an open boat, furnished only with sails and oars, with instructions to rejoin the ship at Cherbourg.

During leave periods, Nick raced furiously against his mates and was no slouch in chatting up the pretty girls who competed just as enthusiastically as their suitors. Nick termed the splintering hulls and clashing spars of Firefly Week the rutting season of the sailing fraternity, during which the eager members sailed all day and danced all night.

Academic life started at Trinity College Dublin where Nick read Natural Sciences and became enchanted by the insouciant Irish way of life. Buses took on new importance during the long vacations. Trips included driving to Moscow and Leningrad in a second hand London double-decker during the period when few tourists were permitted to visit the USSR. In contrast in the following year, taking advantage of the deal on offer of 99 days of unlimited travel in a Greyhound Bus for \$99, he spent three months exploring America.

But the time came to start thinking about a career and start earning a living. For two years Nick struggled as a management trainee with the DeLa Rue

Company before deciding that commerce was not for him. Joining the Hydrographic Department of the Ministry of Defence was the 'turning point' when his future career began to evolve. Often working on the survey ships to collect data, he helped to introduce new concepts and equipment for hydrographic surveys of the ocean bed, which led to changes of the old methods of charting.

In 1969 he was a co-founder of the Unit of Coastal Sedimentation, under the Natural Environment Research Council, with the remit to conduct research on seabed stability. By now his was a senior and respected voice, and his publications in scientific journals are still referred to today. During this time he studied for a Master's Degree in Geophysics at the University of Bath. Transferring to the Admiralty Research Establishment, Portland, he continued to develop naval underwater detection systems, particularly for mine hunting. The aspects of this work have proved far-reaching. For example and bizarrely, they have been applied to mammography. He continues to be proud that his work on detecting mines, as blemishes on seabed texture, has been translated for the early detection of cancer, in which cancerous cells can be detected from normal breast tissue texture. In sharp contrast, the oil industry too is an obvious spin-off of his work and he continues to take a keen interest in the issues of future energy, particularly the potential of methane trapped beneath the seabed.

In 1994 he and Joan set off for Washington, where he had been appointed to the British Defence Staff

at the British Embassy. He worked on the UK/US collaboration on underwater technologies for three years, before returning to the UK to reverse the situation and work for the US Office of Naval Research in London. Whilst retaining his traditional interests, including future energy, much of his current activity is now directed towards combating terrorism, which includes port and ship security.

Nick has always been passionately interested in his work and the future of the world and its seabeds. He is an optimist and urges calm in our attitude to climatic change and future energy, and is deeply concerned that press generated emotion should not be allowed to over-ride pragmatism and scientific study. As one would imagine, he has strong views on the Hinge at East Head.

He counts himself fortunate that during his career he has been able to work with many very able scientists. Today he still continues to attend top level international conferences where there are opportunities to influence policies of far reaching importance, as well as providing the opportunity to explore the Atacama Desert, the volcanoes of Hawaii, the delights of Bangkok, the geology of New Zealand and the behaviour of bats in the Mexican jungle...

Retirement is planned as he is determined to spend more time with Joan and his two children, Emma and Alistair and his grandchildren. Nevertheless, the urge to be involved with what is going on in the environmental scientific world will, I suspect, be hard to resist.

Patricia Fenn