



PROFILE

TONY JOHNS

INSTITUTE OF ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY

If you studied the DNA of marine electronics guru and navigational pioneer, Tony Johns, you'd find an extra molecule; an energy-based one that propels him through life, immersing him in everything electrical and generating a passion for anything new.

Rather apt for the marine sector, if Tony was an animal he'd be a dolphin; these mammals don't rest their brains and when discussing his life in the industry, it's apparent 86 year-old Tony doesn't either.

"I've always been interested in electronics, inherited from my father. A timber importer by trade, but during the war he searched radio frequencies, interpreting Morse code and sending it onto Bletchley Park. I was surrounded by transmitting equipment at home and built radios from an early age."

OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT

When asked at kindergarten (aged seven) to draw something about home life, Tony drew the wiring diagram of a one valve radio.

His father was also chairman of the Mumbles RNLI house committee so when Tony started sailing wooden boats in 1946 around Swansea Bay, he was taught by the lifeboat coxswain. He went onto 'modest stuff' in the Bristol Channel and racing National 12s and Merlin Rockets on the Thames and in the Midlands.

With a degree in physics, maths and electronics at Nottingham University (also vice-captain of the rifle



team), Tony designed antennas for guided and free-flight missiles. This was during the 1950s but the Official Secrets Act prevents him from sharing any more information.

A stint at EMI Ltd was followed by a role in the naval division of Evershed & Vignoles designing electronic equipment. The firm's MD was also chairman of Birmingham's world-famous Walker Log company and in 1961 asked Tony to move to Thomas Walker & Son to design electronic probes to measure the speed and distance travelled by commercial shipping, upgrading the old mechanical towed logs which had been in use since around Nelson's time.

CONSTANT DEMAND

What started as a one-month trial as an assistant chief engineer extended to a 28-year career and technical director role, designing and testing anemometers and wind direction kits for yachts and commercial shipping and the electronics for pitot and electromagnetic logs.

■ Tony Johns used to go on trials with the Mumbles lifeboat

"Such logs are still in use today, despite GPS which shows speed over the ground rather than through water. Both are important for feeding into radars etc."

Known as 'Mr Fix-it', Tony's skills were in constant demand: his equipment was used on everything from very large crude carriers holding 250,000 tons of cargo to 25ft plus yachts crossing the Channel. "BP let me take the helm of a new 60,000 ton tanker in the English Channel and I was involved with the fitting of EM speedos to the then King of Spain's fast power boat and Virgin Atlantic Challenger.

When the business was sold and directors made redundant, Tony was a consultant for three years. He moved to Navstar in 1988, writing installation and operation manuals for the Decca system, the first SatNav, known as Transit, then proving GPS navigational software for prototype kit via sea trials, handled customers' technical

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enquiries and gave talks about the then new satellite navigation to sailing clubs.

In the early 1980s, Tony took part in several live BBC TV and radio interviews. "We were filming with the BBC, discussing the launch of this magical 'Transit' black box which displayed your position based on satellite information, and I came up with the name SatNav, saying it should be written as one word. Pity I didn't copyright it."

IMO SPECIFICATIONS

Tony left Navstar in 1991 following a buy-out. His electrical/electronic background and practical skills soon prompted a request for him to become honorary secretary to the British Marine Electronics Association (BMEA), a position he's been re-elected onto for more than 25 years. Between 1992 and 2002, Tony also wrote a monthly technical column for Practical Boat Owner.

"I'm always busy; upon retirement I took myself off to

college to learn word processing and how to use photoshop software. I've supported both ISO and Department of Trade working groups, helping to define IMO specifications for commercial ships' speed logs and manage updates for the BMEEA Code of Practice, covering the installation of electrical/electronic equipment on craft up to 24m.

"I've been a photographer all my life, at times semi-professionally and also play electronic and pipe organs for five churches in the Northamptonshire area despite not being religious. I helped rebuild and played a three-keyboard cinema pipe organ, write newsletters for the Northampton Offshore Cruising Association and organise the annual British Marine conference. My only regret is not spending more time on my 24ft Cornish Crabber."

In 2010, Tony was given a lifetime achievement award by the BMEA; in 2012 was chosen by British Marine to attend a royal garden party at Buckingham Palace and in 2013 received its Peter Millward Award for 'outstanding contributions to associations'.

A member of the Institute of Engineering & Technology and a chartered engineer, Tony's philosophy is 'do your best in everything you do'. Long may this continue.

■ An 1850s commercial ship Massey towed log



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