



Neil Caswell, M.AIRAH, worked on the *Queen Mary 2*, and sailed on its maiden voyage.

## THE SHIPSHAPE SYDNEYSIDER SCOT

From HVAC on the high seas to directing an engineering firm, Neil Caswell, M.AIRAH, has seen it all. Caswell is also chair of the conference committee for AIRAH's coming Commissioning Workshop.

**Ecolibrium:** Neil, is it true that earlier in your career you worked on board an ocean liner?

**Neil Caswell, M.AIRAH:** Yes, it's true. I spent the best part of a year working with Alstom at St Nazaire in France, where they built the *Queen Mary 2* (QM2) ocean liner. I worked for the shipyard as a commissioning manager.

Initially I was responsible for the planning of HVAC commissioning, then subsequently for the commissioning of ventilation systems during the later stages of construction. This included the management of the installation and testing of all the motorised fire dampers across the ship – a critical component for system completion.

I also sailed with the ship on its maiden voyage – following the naming ceremony – from Southampton to the Caribbean,

staying on for the maiden Caribbean cruise. During the month on board, I carried out verification testing of all of the ventilation systems.

**Eco:** Did it teach you about working in teams and in challenging circumstances?

**NC:** The project certainly provided a number of challenges. Apart from the scale of the project itself, there were considerable time pressures due to the services contractor going bankrupt during construction. This meant we only had approximately six months to determine the construction phases and finalise the commissioning.

At one point we had four commissioning companies – one from the UK, two French and one German – all working on ventilation system commissioning. Additionally, I was managing a team

of French electricians who were checking fire-damper cabling, and compiling punch-lists to target systems for completion.

Every morning I'd meet with the construction teams to discuss that day's targets and to review progress.

Without close collaboration between all of the different trades there's no way we would have completed the project on schedule.

**Eco:** What are your responsibilities these days?

**NC:** These days I am the technical manager and director in charge of Engineering Commissioning Services. My day-to-day responsibilities include an overview of all our projects in liaison with my state managers, and the management of our company strategies and engineering operations.

**Eco:** What are you passionate about?

**NC:** I've been involved in building commissioning for more than 30 years now and I still enjoy the challenges . . . sadly! I'm passionate about getting the job "done right" and always delivering the best outcome possible.

**Eco:** What has been your finest professional hour?

**NC:** There are two events that spring to mind. The first was earlier in my

career when I was still working “on the tools”, so to speak. My team and I were commissioning a high-spec military installation for the Ministry of Defence in the UK, which involved very stringent air leakage and pressure cascades.

We worked many long hours to get the installation working properly under the many specified modes of operation. The facility was then handed over and inspected by Defence engineering to verify that the systems were working as intended. Subsequently, the company I was working for forwarded me a copy of a letter they received from Defence, both thanking us for the work we performed and stating that it was the only project they had passed first time without any modifications required. As a result of this, my team and I were requested to assist with a number of similar installations across the UK.

The second occasion relates to my time in France on the QM2.

The shipyard construction teams had a tradition of having a celebratory dinner when they completed and handed over to the customer. The construction team invited me along for this dinner, which turned into an all-afternoon event in a restaurant in St Nazaire, with copious quantities of wine being consumed!

When I arrived in the yard the next day, the engineering director of Alstom came to see me to congratulate me on the completion. He noted that my attendance at the dinner was the first time the construction team had taken out someone who was neither a shipyard employee, French, nor one of their team. He then thanked me for becoming part of the team and working so well with them.

#### Eco: What important lessons have you learned in your career?

NC: Listen and learn. Over my many varied roles, I learned to listen to those more experienced than myself and to understand their knowledge and skills. The more we can learn from each other, the more we can appreciate our respective responsibilities in the construction process.

#### Eco: Whom do you most admire?

NC: My wife, who has put up with me for more than 25 years. Much of my earlier career involved stints of onshore/offshore, working on oil rigs and spending up to a month away at



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a time while working on large construction projects. During this she managed to bring up three well-sorted kids. Even with our decision to move to Australia she was fully supportive and saw it as an adventure, despite the upheaval to our family.

#### Eco: Dream sabbatical?

NC: I still have many items on my bucket list, so maybe learn to ski or to learn to scuba dive. I'd also like to spend more time helping teach my daughter, who is home-schooled and enjoys my science and geography lessons!

#### Eco: Words of wisdom?

NC: “Treat others as you would be expected to be treated”, or maybe “Don't expect others to do what you wouldn't do yourself”. In essence, lead by example.

#### Eco: What has been your greatest personal achievement?

NC: I'm hopeful that a greatest achievement is still ahead of me, but I suppose in terms of my professional life that moving to a new country that I'd never visited and build a specialist company while managing to stay married must be up there somewhere!

#### Eco: Any favourite reads?

There's no standout favourite individual book, to be honest, though I do enjoy a good read. If I had to pick an author, I'd probably pick a fellow Scot,

Ian Rankin, for his Rebus crime novels. Not only are they well-crafted stories, but I know most of the locations where the books are set, and can easily identify with many of the characterisations.

#### Eco: Favourite film?

NC: I prefer to come away from watching a film feeling better than when it started. Therefore, most of my favourite films are comedies, usually older ones like the *Pink Panther* series (Peter Sellers – not Steve Martin), Monty Python, and Mel Brooks. But, if I had to choose one it would probably be the first *Pink Panther* movie, which, to this day, has me crying with laughter.

#### Eco: Favourite website?

NC: I probably spend more time on the BBC News website than any other specific website, usually each morning on my train journey to work. I find that the news in Australia can be quite insular and doesn't tell me what's happening around the world.

#### Eco: How would you describe yourself?

NC: I work hard and expect others to do the same. I'd like to think that those who know me appreciate that I hold honesty, integrity and accountability as my most important values.

#### Eco: What is success to you?

NC: Receiving recognition from both my peers and my own ECS team, for a job well done.

#### Eco: What led you to join AIRAH's NSW division committee?

NC: It's all Teresa's fault that you have me on the committee! Joking aside, I believe it's good to rotate committee membership to bring in new ideas and to encourage a collective “ownership” of AIRAH by its members. It's also rewarding to give some of my own time, as others have selflessly done before me.

#### Eco: What does AIRAH membership mean to you?

NC: AIRAH membership means being part of an established institution that represents the interests of its members and the industry as a whole across Australia. AIRAH communicates well across government and industry bodies to promote engineering services in construction. ■