



## Marine Biological Lab Case Study By Neil Duggan

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Nearly 400 people descended on Port Erin last summer to mark the closure of the Marine Biological Station after 114 years' research into marine science. The decision by Liverpool University to stop funding the laboratory was met with great regret by the scientific community, not least because it had conducted some world beating research. Particular sadness was felt by former students and scientists who have spent memorable times at the laboratory, where they had formed an attachment to Port Erin, the Island and each other.

Its closure could not go unmarked and a group associated with the laboratory decided to hold a weekend to celebrate '114 years of marine science.'

Former student Neil Duggan, who studied for his PhD at the laboratory, said the lab 'brought a lot of benefits to Port Erin. The Bay Hotel benefited tremendously, it was a loss to the local community, it was a loss to the Isle of Man. In terms of research into the fishing stock, it was a huge loss, especially in its investigation of scallops and local fisheries.'

While studying in Port Erin, he met and married a Manx girl and retrained as an accountant. His story is echoed by others such as Chris Gledhill, who followed his wife to the Isle of Man when she worked at the Lab. He then went on to become the managing director of PDMS and Eamonn Harkin, who also became an accountant.

Neil's responsibility in organising the weekend was to liaise with the Isle of Man Visitor and Convention Bureau that was established under the auspices of the Department of Tourism and Leisure. Since 2004 the bureau has been actively working to increase the number of conferences and meetings held on the Island. The organisation of the weekend was phenomenal, particularly for a group of scientists and associates with little or no experience in this field – they needed all the help they could get.

It is most definitely in the Island's interest to be as accommodating as possible to conference organisers because such events, through hotels, catering and other expenses, injects a significant amount into the Island's economy. In 1999, there were three conferences held on the Island using 220 bed spaces, that brought in a net economic benefit of £310,000. Since 2004 there have been 34 conferences with 9,155 delegates taking up 25,276 bed nights and injecting £3.6m into the Manx economy.

The bureau cleverly capitalises on many Island residents' involvement in national and international organisations and has established the Conference Ambassador programme, in which members of such organisations are encouraged to suggest the Island as a venue for conferences or meetings.

This may not have been the case with the Port Erin marine laboratory weekend – where else would they hold it? - but the hundreds who visited and reminded themselves of good times spent in the Island will act as ambassadors and spread word throughout the world.

The weekend, from June 30 to July 2, involved spreading word to the scientific community that had had contact with the laboratory and was now dispersed throughout the world, so planning had to start early and began a year in advance. The invite went out to all ex-students, staff, visiting scientists and their families.

The weekend began with a barbecue and disco, on Saturday there was sightseeing trips throughout the day and a buffet dinner in the evening with music by the Calor Gas ceilidh band and then a disco. Sunday closed the weekend of celebration with a jazz brunch and music by the Manx Jazz Kats.

A scientific conference was then held over two days to review the contributions to marine science of research carried out at Port Erin and ended with an open forum discussion on how future research in the north Irish sea could be conducted without the marine laboratory at Port Erin.

The various other aspects of organising this event included a wide range of considerations. There was management of the insurance, creation of a website, registration, liaison with a security firm, police, the RNLI, harbour master and local authority, organising port-a-loo hire, transport organisation, and informal activities such as a trip to the Calf.

Catering was on a massive scale and there had to be close liaison with all caterers, bands, Bushy's brewery and those supplying the tables.

The massive marquee, opposite the old laboratory building, was the venue for all events. That required a PA system, TV projector, lighting, signage, barriers, electricity and grass cutting.

By lending its expertise and advice to organisers, the bureau allows conferences to become more ambitious in their breadth and scope and perhaps even to let them relax a little! The help offered is from the more obvious – it helps to find suitable venues – to areas such as promotional support.

Promotion was hardly necessary for the Port Erin event. Participants were only too willing to re-visit the Island and reunite with former colleagues. The issue of accommodation was more complex and the bureau lent its help to this, and accommodation was found in Port Erin and Douglas. It also helped in the many other aspects, foreseen and unforeseen, of such a huge event.

Another plus for event organisers coming to the Isle of Man is they can look forward to a high level of co-operation and efficient channels of communication between official bodies.

For example organisers needed an Occasional Licence for this event. The Licence was issued by the Licensing Courts and required the co-operation of the Isle of Man Constabulary (Alcohol Unit) and the Department of Transport (Harbours and Highways Divisions) for the associated road closure orders.

Organisers said these bodies all communicated with each other and with them in an exemplary manner. There were short channels of communication to the decision makers and decisions were made quickly and pragmatically.

Organisers also reserved special praise for Port Erin Commissioners, the local authority in whose patch the event was staged. They met with organisers several times, responded to all written requests for advice and on the day lent barriers, road markers and signs and provided much needed extra rubbish bins for the site - which they emptied each day over the weekend.

It was a success! Scientists, former students and their families came from countries including Australia, South America, Denmark, Germany and Spain arrived. The weather even behaved itself. It offered the chance for people to remember old friends and places.

One participant, Dot Armstrong wrote a note of thanks to organisers and said it was 'a weekend full of atmosphere and shared memories. It was a fitting tribute to bring together participants from all over the world with the common factor of having been profoundly affected by their time spent at Port Erin marine laboratory.'