

Saturday, July 11, 2015

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World beneath the waves

Tales from the deep at the Diving Museum

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Dive into history

From early diving suits to hi-tech naval gear, The Diving Museum boasts a unique collection. ELLIE PILMOOR takes a look around.

Set in a Victorian battery near the shoreline is an Aladdin's cave of diving history and equipment. The Diving Museum, off Stokes Bay Road, in Gosport, is full of deep-sea suits, helmets, aqualungs and computers used by divers down the years.

With displays ranging from hi-tech gear used by the navy to the very first diving suits, the museum is one-of-a-kind.

And it isn't just the museum building that is full of diving history, as each of the guides have also got a story to tell too. The volunteers have different backgrounds, ranging from a university lecturer to former Royal Navy clearance divers who would clear mines.

Although the museum has only been open for five years, since taking over No 2 Battery its popularity has grown not only with divers but with the people of Gosport and further afield - including diving enthusiasts from as far away as Australia and America.

Museum officer Kevin Casey says: 'It is great to see how much we have grown since opening five years ago.'

'We get people visiting us from around the world and that isn't just keen divers.'

'Schools in the area like to see what we offer, as do the naval base and other groups.'

'We also get large groups of people visiting as part of a bus tour and that sort of thing.'

'It is fantastic to know that we aren't just here for divers but for the wider community.'

'We have got so many



(L-r) Jim Thomson, John Dadd, John Bevan and Kevin Casey at The Diving Museum, Gosport. Pictures by Allan Hutchings

different types of diving which helps draw in the visitors because they can see what the Royal Navy would use compared to commercial diving or people who do it for sport.'

He adds that having the Royal Navy display is important as other museums in the area do not have a lot on the navy divers.

'In this area alone we have a lot of museums on the Royal Navy and specific eras or roles,' he explains.

'We have the Submarine Museum, the D-Day Museum, the Royal Marines Museum but nothing which highlights the work of the divers.'

Despite having a small space, The Diving Museum has a lot of artefacts including diving equipment used by Roger Moore in the James Bond film For Your Eyes Only.

It also has a set of aqualungs used by famous explorer and researcher Jacques Cousteau.

A recent addition to the museum is a memorabilia cabinet dedicated to Sydney Knowles - the diving partner of Lionel 'Buster' Crabb, a Royal Navy frogman and M16

diver who vanished during a reconnaissance mission around a Russian cruiser berthed at Portsmouth Dockyard in 1956.

Kevin adds: 'In the future, we are hoping to get the medals of Buster Crabb in the cabinet alongside the medals of his diving partner Sydney Knowles.'

'The display is great for the history of Portsmouth and it draws a lot of interest.'

Another piece which visitors enjoy is a Newt Suit which resembles armour more than a normal diving suit.

The suit is a proud display of Kevin's, who says to build a Subsea 7 Newt Suit nowadays would cost around £1m.

'It is great that we are able to have the Newt Suit on permanent display here,' he adds.

'It was just sat on loan to the Greenwich Maritime Museum for seven years where no-one could see it.'

'Although it can't be used now, it was an actual suit and isn't just a replica so it's great to have it.'

'It really is an amazing piece of diving equip-

ment.'

The museum is run by the Historical Diving Society, which is in its 25th year. The organisation has big plans for the museum and wants to see it become the national diving museum.

Chairman John Bevan says: 'The museum is an outreach project for the society, but we do want to see it grow.'

'We want to become recognised as the national diving museum and we are in touch with the Heritage Lottery to get funding and we are working towards our accreditation too.'

Working with Kevin, John approached Gosport Borough Council in 2010 about turning the battery into the museum and the pair are doing the same with another building they want to use.

This time, they are asking Hampshire County Council to give them the freehold for an air raid bunker less than a mile from the museum.

The small bunker, which has no windows and only one door, is the perfect place for the museum's reference library.

Kevin says: 'It is great to think that already we are looking to expand the museum.'

'The bunker is great for research and is what we need as there is not enough room for the library at the museum.'

'It can be used for research and educational purposes, so we are hoping for the county council to come to a decision soon.'

■ To see video to go with this feature, go to portsmouth.co.uk/video



At a glance

The Diving Museum is open to the public on weekends and bank holidays from April to October. It is also available for private functions. For more information visit thehds.com/museum



One of the museum displays.



John Bevan and Kevin Casey with a 1970s diving suit.

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Some of the diving suits on display.



Diving equipment used by Jacques Cousteau.

The history of diving

Thanks to technology and inventions, diving has become more sophisticated than the early attempts of just holding your breath. With the invention of the diving bell in the 1700s, other diving techniques began to be invented, the first of which was barrel-diving. One of the first men to try this was John Lethbridge in Cornwall, who climbed into a barrel-like vessel fitted with a small glass window and two holes for his arms. But the air supply inside the barrel didn't provide for a dive longer than 20 minutes. The big revolution came when the diving helmet was invented by brothers Charles

and John Deane in 1829. In the mid-1800s the first diving regulators were invented, shortly before diving moved forward again when the first gas cylinders were used. In the 20th century, diving became more advanced with different suits created for different roles. This included specially-adapted suits for the Second World War and for researchers. As well as the suits advancing, the equipment changed too allowing deeper diving for longer periods of time. The turn of the 21st century saw the introduction of an atmospheric suit, allowing divers to go a new record depth of 609m.

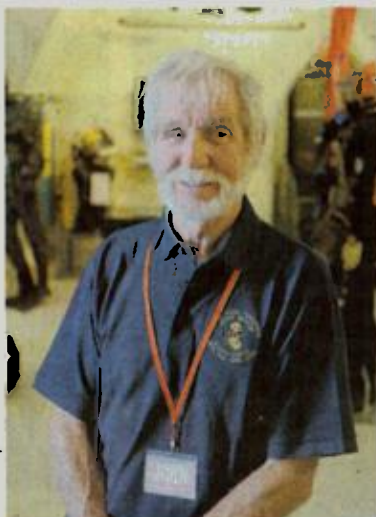


Diving equipment used in a James Bond film.

'The museum is such an asset'

Spending 28 years under the sea as a diver has given John Dadd a wealth of knowledge. John has been working as a guide at The Diving Museum since it opened five years ago and enjoys his job. All of his 28 years' diving experience was with the Royal Navy after he became a diver in 1962. He worked as a clearance diver who clear areas of bombs, mines or other debris. The 76-year-old says: 'I stayed in the Royal Navy as a diver for as long as I could. I was with them for 28

years and did a range of roles. 'The Diving Museum is such an asset to Gosport because it is an unusual museum. 'That is a good thing because it makes it stand out. 'Not only does it appeal to divers and former divers but other people too. 'The general public can come in here and enjoy the exhibitions and the history of diving. 'I don't think anyone has ever left the museum disappointed by what they saw or what they might have learned.'



John Dadd.

'I enjoy sharing my knowledge'

Veteran Jim Thomson has been with The Diving Museum since it opened in 2010. The former Royal Navy diver spent six years as a clearance diver before injury caused him to fail a medical. But that didn't keep Jim away from the sea and he signed up for a company which specialised in diving. He became a life support technician for saturation divers, who spend weeks under the water in vessels. A team of two live in the vessel for around 28 days and can spend up to six hours outside in the water gathering evidence for research. Jim became supervisor at the

firm Comex before retiring in 2003. The 73-year-old says: 'I was a founding member of the museum and it is great to see it doing so well. 'I think it is great for the people of Gosport to have the museum here and they seem to enjoy it. 'Although I was a navy diver myself, I know a lot about the other kinds and none of the guides here are too specialised on one subject. 'We all know a lot about diving in general and I enjoy sharing my knowledge. 'We have a lot of interesting stuff here and we are quite good at attracting new visitors and new groups.'



Jim Thomson.