

## GORDON HAWKINS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Gordon Hawkins, an outstanding member of Midlands Branch of the Lighthouse Club, has just died at the age of 85. His end was classic, one that most of us could wish for – he was attending a Royal Navy reunion where, surrounded by friends and fellow veterans, he had a fatal heart attack. Paramedics were on the scene in minutes, but our Gordon had gone. He had enjoyed an eventful and successful life.

Gordon was born near Bridport, went to local schools, and at 14 was taken on as an apprentice at a Bridport garage. The emergency of the time, (it was 1938-39) saw that business taken over by the army, whereupon Gordon found himself with a private heavy goods commercial vehicle company which operated with 'new fangled' diesel engines. They were well ahead of their time. Their base was 10 miles from where Gordon lived, which meant 20 miles of hard pedaling each day, after which, as a teenage member of our 'Home Guard' he was engaged in activities such as weapon training and patrolling Dorset's cliffs at 2am in the morning.

On his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he was called up to join the Royal Navy. Knowledge and experience of diesel engines was a rare skill which quickly earned him a posting to combined operations under Lord Mountbatten as a Petty Officer - High Power Diesel Motor Mechanic. (This, remember, is 'country lad' not yet 19!) Gordon's forte for the rest of the war was Landing Ship Tanks – LSTs – fondly(?) know as 'Large Stationary Targets', where he was responsible for the engine room and everything mechanical that moved on the ship, (pumps, generators, etc).

During his years in the Royal Navy, Gordon was continually at sea and experienced a lot of action. His baptism of fire was when his LST was shelled by a German U-boat in the Bay of Biscay. Next came the invasion of North Africa, an action which earned him the North African Star. Another warm welcome awaited Gordon when the ramp went down on the beach at Sicily. His Italian Star came for crossing the Straits of Messina and depositing 8<sup>th</sup> Army tanks on an Italian beach. The next, and final, Mediterranean operation was the relief of Malta and he received the Malta George Cross.

Back in the U.K came the training for D-Day and the landing on Juno Beach, (the central, Canadian, sector of the British assault). Gordon explained that tank landing craft were the first to hit the beach and invariably defensive positions were still manned with well emplaced defenders who held their fire until the ramps went down. Each landing, of course, is a story on its own, especially Juno, which was well defended. However when asked 'what was your most frightening experience during the war?', Gordon would reply that without doubt, it was when 22 craft, in a flotilla heading from Gibraltar to England, were hit by a Force 11 gale at the Bay of Biscay. Out of the 22 tank landing craft, only 7 survived to make it to Falmouth in Cornwall.

When the Americans dropped the bomb in Japan, Gordon had reached Alexandria on his way to invade the islands of Japan. As we know, the A bomb brought the end of W.W.2 and so, for Gordon, it was back to the U.K. and de-mob. After the war all the very badly bombed cities such as Coventry, Liverpool, London and Plymouth were allocated construction plant for demolition, repair, and to get the building of 'pre-fabs' housing under way. Therefore, our 21 year old Petty Officer Gordon became a Civil Servant, working for the Ministry of Works in charge of plant in the city of

Plymouth. Now, and for the next five years, he controlled 2,500 pieces of plant, 230 operators and 35 fitters.

With his stint at the MOW over, Gordon joined a small plant hire company, Bristol Plant Hire, which at the time employed 5 people. He was tasked with starting up, from scratch, depots in Plymouth and Exeter which he successfully did. Eventually, Bristol Plant expanded to 26 depots countrywide and was one of the largest plant hire companies in its day. In 1959 the company asked him to take over a newly purchased plant hire company in Birmingham. For the lad from Bridport, Dorset, the Midlands would now be home.

In '68 he was head hunted by London based Stanley Davis Plant Hire to establish a Midland's operation. Their specialties, mobile cranes, tower cranes and side boom equipment, broadened Gordon's experience even further, with the result that in 1970, Gordon decided to start his own company with John Willetts - Willetts and Hawkins Plant Hire Services. Wisely, (some plant men might think!) this was a non-operated plant and sales company which soon became a major player in the industry. After 13 years, and with a turnover in excess of £4.5 million, they decided to sell the company in 1983 to Matbrow Bray, the Tetbury plant manufacturers. As part of the deal, Gordon was contracted to be their M.D. and Chairman for 3 years; a role he filled for a decade. By 1993 Gordon was close to 70, time to retire, which he did. But not for long!

After 1 month of retirement, Gordon decided to start up his own company again, this time as a consultant on the purchasing and selling of plant hire companies within the industry, a subject of which he had a pretty much unrivalled knowledge. This he continued with for a couple of years until (likely enough) he was prevailed upon to finally and fully retire in 1995 at the age of 72.

Looking back over a long career, Gordon was justifiably proud of his successes in the world of plant, but more so of the fact that his three children, David, Mark and Jane all went to university and each achieved a Bachelor of Science degree.

Gordon was always young at heart. His commitment, as Chairman and Parent Governor of the Lickey High School for 5 years, Chairman and Governor of the Waseley High School for 5 years and 7 years on the Adventure Scouts Committee, was unfailing. In the plant world he was on the committee of the CMPE Midlands for 15 years and was Chairman in 1969/70. A very keen golfer, he was also recently President of the Engineering Industries Golf Association (Midlands Branch), and also a Member of the English Blind Golf Association.

Shortly after moving to the Midlands he became a member of the Lighthouse Club (Midlands Branch) and was a dedicated committee member for 35 years, including a long spell as a hard working and very effective Branch Chairman. During Gordon's time on committee the Midlands Branch was, (and remains), a great success, initiating and organising a series of events which not only provide socialising and networking opportunities for Midlands construction people but which have also raised many thousands of pounds for the club's Benevolent Fund.

Gordon believed that there were two satisfying things about his being an active member of the Lighthouse Club. One was the friendship he received personally over the years from so many people in the construction industry. The other was the fact

that he knew that the result of his effort and activity was a great deal of good for other construction people less fortunate than himself, those who had been hard hit by illness or accident.

A great, outgoing, character Gordon was a good friend to many, many people. He will be sadly missed by all those who were privileged to know him.

Sincere condolences from the Club to Pat, his wife for 44 years, and to his children and family.