

# One Small Step

**Professor David Wilson MBE** became CIWM's 102<sup>nd</sup> president after his inauguration last month, and with it he claims to have achieved a notable "first", as **Ben Wood** discovered when he met with David a few days prior to his "year in office" getting underway

Speaking to David a few days before the presidential inauguration and the start of his year as CIWM's 102<sup>nd</sup> president, it's clear that here is a man with a passion for what he does. I chose the headline because, looking back over my notes, he talks on several occasions about "taking the next step" or, more specifically, helping others to take the next step on their waste and resources journey, but more of which later.

I'm not sure if David sees the presidency of CIWM as a small step – although it's one he is very proud of making – but for a man who has achieved a lot in his career to date, it's certainly a logical step to take, and one he is more than capable of excelling in, that much is clear. But it's the words that follows that famous "one small step" quote where I think we will see his impact: one small step for David Wilson MBE, but one giant leap for... well, "the developing nations of the world" could be just one answer, as one of the priorities for his presidential year is to focus on what he calls "the global waste emergency", which sees 40 percent of the world's population lacking even basic waste management provisions.

## An Introduction To Waste

BUT LET'S start at the beginning, and find out a little more about our new president who, like many before him who have held the role and gone to achieve great things in our sector, claims he "happened into waste" in the early days of his career.

Following completion of his first degree at Oxford, studying chemistry, David says he simply wanted to do "something environmental", which led him to a doctorate sponsored by the Old Harwell Laboratory, applying a systems approach to planning for



municipal solid waste management. To cut a long story short, he stayed for a further seven years as a waste consultant, initially running the hazardous waste research unit for the then named DOE, and later as the resident project manager in Hong Kong, developing a computerised decision support system to help it prepare for its first ever solid waste management plan. This was his first major involvement in "global waste and resources", and also the first evidence of helping others to "take the next step" on their own journeys.

Notably, this also allowed David to revisit his doctorate work, written up as a book on waste management planning technologies. "I did something I've never done before or since in that job," David added. "I told them what they wanted to do was never going to work, but if they did it 'like this', then it 'might' work... but it will cost you twice as much as your budget. Much to everybody's surprise we won the job!" It meant that in 1982 he and his family moved to Hong Kong and he proudly says of that time that "we were 15-20 years ahead of our time" in helping plan a system.

Those of you who already know David, will note that he very quickly

acquitted the job title of "consultant" and that it is one he still has today, albeit as an independent consultant on the global waste and resources stage and, indeed, this is where David lays claim to his "presidential first", describing himself as the "first career consultant" to become CIWM president. Despite the fact he has the Professor title, he sees himself first and foremost as "career consultant number one" in the presidential list, as opposed to the third Professor (after Margaret Bates and Jim Baird) in a row!

But between his Hong Kong adventure and now, David also embarked on an exciting opportunity with the then small consultancy firm, ERM. Just "20 people above a chemists shop on Baker Street" as he describes it, but which he saw grow into one of the world's largest consultancy businesses, with around 2,500 employees in 100 offices across 30 countries by the time he left 20 years later. Drawing on his international experiences already, David spent a decade as a partner in the business, responsible for its international waste management practices, which again ties in to his "global waste" priority as president.

"My bio basically shows a common

feature of my work over the last 40 years has been advising cities and governments to identify and take the next appropriate steps in developing their own sustainable waste and resource management systems. I've been fortunate to have been able to split my time between the UK and Europe, and emerging countries in the Middle East, the Far East, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union." It's little surprise that in his inauguration speech, David thanked his family for their understanding of him being away, and so far away, for much of his career to date.

As an independent consultant, the globetrotting is now all his own choice of course, but I (and indeed David himself) wouldn't rule out further "adventures in waste" overseas!

Within the UK, however, David recalls that much of his early work was on implementing the Control of Pollution Act, and he smiles as he recalls how, as a child in his native Belfast, being driven to the seaside and passing the local tip near Newtownards, which was always on fire! Perhaps the retained image subliminally led to this future career, and a desire to find much better solutions!

## An Introduction To CIWM

HIS FIRST encounter with the Institution came when he joined ISWA's first working group on hazardous waste. "I thought, if I'm representing the UK on this, I really ought to be doing it as part of CIWM," he laughs, "and I served on that group for 30 years."

Again, he talks about what that entailed, and about "offering advice and identifying the next, appropriate steps". A career in consultancy, and on working groups and committees, means there are countless individuals, governments and organisations that have been advised on their next steps, and are doubtless all the better managed in terms of waste and resources for it.

As president of CIWM, David is keen to visit as many Centres as he can ("but I can only do that if they invite me," he adds)... and while they may not be as far flung as the Middle East, the willingness to travel is still very much in evidence!

"My main motivation for doing this, after 40 years in the sector which has given me a lot of career satisfaction, is to give something back.

"If they want me to be there as a figurehead, or to chair meetings, that's fine, but I have a range of topics I can draw on from working on projects over the years and I'd be very happy to talk about them too." The message, it seems, is make the most of your president – he is ready for action and raring to go... just ask him!

Now I know David is keen to make use of the Journal over the coming year, and he will write next month in more detail on his themes and priorities for the year ahead, but suffice to say his very well received inauguration speech highlighted some interesting ideas, such as why solid waste management is not viewed in the same way as the other essential utility services here in the UK, and of course his international theme.

David has led work on the United Nations Environment Programme, and ISWA's inaugural "Global Waste Management Outlook", published a couple of years ago. Given his experience and dedication to the improvement of international waste management practices, it will come of no surprise to hear that David is patron of the WasteAid UK charity, and for his presidential project, launched at his inauguration, CIWM

commissioned a toolkit, aimed at developing the skills of waste professionals in the least developed countries, and you can read more on that project over the page.

So, CIWM's first career consultant president embarks upon his year, and his varied and globetrotting career takes on another challenge. However, David concludes our interview with an anecdote... "At ERM – a very broad environmental consultancy – it was always considered that my experience had been very narrow, having spent my career on waste matters. But it was Gev Eduljee, who I brought in to ERM, who always chuckled at that notion, and he said that I was actually so broad in my experience, that I could fall off both sides of the table at the same time!"

Hopefully the experiences of this year make Professor David Wilson MBE, president of CIWM 2017/18, even broader. ■

