PROFILE

Mike Allen

Our new president, Mike Allen, came into this world in February 1952; the second son in a household of mixed English – German parentage. Infancy was passed in Beckenham, his birthplace, before spending the year ahead of formal schooling entrusted to the care of a maternal grandmother living near Hanover. Much of this time was spent becoming proficient in several card games, especially canasta favoured by grandma. At the age of five it was necessary to rapidly re-learn English on returning to these shores in time to commence full time education.

At age seven the family moved to Thorpe Bay, still within comfortable range of 'the City' for a commuting accountant father. It was on the delightful sun-kissed sandy beaches and rock pools of 'Southend-on-Mud' where the first stirrings of interest in things deposited along strand lines captured a youngsters imagination, nurturing a fondness for collecting stones and fossils and developing an interest in the world around.

Another family move at age eleven eventually proved to be a blessing as the local grammar school in Haywards Heath provided the opportunity to study O, A and S levels in geology, a subject not then widely on offer, and only newly introduced into the school curriculum. A project on the varying purity of the Chalk of the Sussex Coast combined a passion for both chemistry and geology, and contributed to the choice of University course at Bristol, reading chemistry as a subsidiary subject for the first two years, graduating in single honours geology in 1973. During this time he joined the Geological Society of London as a student member. A year of further study followed, taking the MSc course in Rock Mechanics and Structural Geology at Imperial College, before deciding that it was time to start earning a living.

Three potential roads opened up with job offers from Soil Mechanics, the Institute of Geological Sciences (now the British Geological Survey) and the National Coal Board. It was the third of these avenues that was taken up in 1974, offering a Sassenach the chance to discover the unknown world north of the Watford Gap, having only ever ventured further north on a few family holidays and university field excursions. That choice has never been the source of any regret!

After an initial period of general training and introduction to the underground environment, a career followed in deep mines as an exploration and mine geologist based mostly in the Nottinghamshire coalfield. At the time, the heralded "Plan for Coal", with the potential for new coalfields, offered a bright future that seemed to stretch far ahead. The post offered much variety, initially working on the Vale of

Belvoir exploration programme while also providing a geological service to colliery management and planners on matters of safety (both underground and on colliery spoil tips) and forecasting geological risk to production. Various positions ensued as internal reorganisations followed, leading to a more expansive office-based role ranging from seam mapping, reserves evaluation and subsidence enquiries.

An overseas secondment to B.P. Coal South Africa in 1981 was spent working on an exploration project assessing reserves for a new coal mine in the northern Transvaal. This was at a time when apartheid was still an uncomfortable reality and the country needed new reserves to sustain its 'Sasol' oil requirements in the face of economic isolation.

Following the development of a professional institution of geologists during the 1980s with some interest, chartered status was gained in 1991. Views on the future of coal changed as political and environmental factors began to alter attitudes, such that the industry underwent a massive change with large-scale colliery closures and then privatisation in 1995. This led to the necessity to seek pastures elsewhere, outside geology.

When an advert calling for part-time tutors in adult education came to his attention, he was prompted to establish an introductory course on geology at Judgemeadow College in Leicester, which continues as an informal meeting of friends and for whom he organises geological excursions during the summer.

Over the past decade he has become an increasingly active member of several geological societies, helping with conservation work, penning articles for newsletters and currently chairing the Education Committee for the Warwickshire Geological Conservation Group, overseeing their winter lecture and summer field programmes.