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Obituary

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Obituary: Professor Brian Arthur O'Connor



Brian was not only an internationally leading academic researcher and consultant in Maritime Civil Engineering but also a highly family-oriented man. He was born on 27 October 1940 to Jessica and Arthur and was the youngest son of a family of five children. He died in Stepping Hill Hospital, Stockport, on 7 October 2025.

Brian excelled at school; his academic excellence led to the award of a coveted Thomas Barlett Scholarship to the University of Liverpool and in 1962, he was awarded a first class honours degree in Civil Engineering. On graduation, Brian joined the Hydraulics Research Station at Wallingford, and here his interest in Coastal and Maritime Engineering blossomed. He worked on a variety of projects that stimulated his desire to move into the research arena, and he subsequently accepted a research post with Professor Roy Halliwell at the University of Liverpool to study the efficiency of dredging operations in the Mersey Estuary. This involved mathematical modelling and field work, and from the results of the study Brian was awarded his PhD.

Further research projects brought him into contact with Professor Don McDowell at the University of Manchester, and the success of these projects led to a lectureship appointment at the university.

His mathematical modelling work that predicted tidal movements and sediment transport in estuaries was world leading, and he created outstanding laboratory facilities, controlled by extremely valuable and sophisticated measurement instrumentation, to verify his mathematical models. One of his highlights was an extremely large model of the Mersey Estuary, which was the envy of all maritime researchers. Brian happily shared his results with other researchers to enhance his international collaborations and to further advance scientific knowledge.

Brian was indefatigable and extremely passionate about his work, and at Manchester he took over the management of the joint collaborative MSc course between the Universities of Liverpool and Manchester in Maritime Civil Engineering. The course quickly gained an international reputation and attracted large numbers of overseas students. This collaboration lasted for over 40 years and Brian established a very large cohort of alumni. Each year Brian organised a lavish reunion dinner where all students past and present could have a good time whilst enhancing their international collaborations and knowledge exchange.

In 1984, Brian was appointed to a readership at Manchester and in the same year he moved to a professorship at the University of Liverpool. Brian became Head of Department within a year of his arrival and this coincided with the time that universities began to see themselves as businesses rather than academic institutions. This created many challenges and Brian had to make step changes to keep the department afloat. He successfully oversaw a massive increase in staff and student numbers, and hence income. In this latter respect, Brian generated colossal amounts of research income, and at one point he was responsible for 40% of income to the department, in excess of £5m. Funds were secured from a wide variety of sources and Brian was the co-ordinator and driver of many major European Research Programmes, often involving up to 11 Partners. He also collaborated with American and Korean institutions. Brian also co-authored an internationally leading book with Professor McDowell, entitled *Hydraulic Behaviour of Estuaries*, which sold thousands of copies worldwide but in Brian's words 'only a few viewed the Russian edition'.

Brian travelled worldwide to present his work and he published over 200 academic papers in international journals and conference proceedings. He supervised numerous PhD students and countless MSc projects, and organised and presented a large number of short courses to UK and European industry engineers. He was the Chief Editor of the *ICE Maritime Engineering Journal* and was awarded

a prestigious Halcrow Award for one of the best scientific publications in this journal.

He was a Chartered European Civil Engineer and Fellow of the Institution of Civil Engineers, and was also the recipient of an Industry Design Council Award for his work associated with the Wirral and Mersey Estuary. He also acted as a consultant to many UK companies, where he worked on many prestigious projects including the proposed Cardiff Bay, Mersey, and Severn tidal barrages.

Golf was one of Brian's favourite pastimes and he was one of the founder members of the University of Liverpool Golf Society, where he enjoyed great success, winning several trophies. Brian's other passion was collecting antiques, especially clocks and pocket watches, swords, golf clubs, and a true emporium of collectable memorabilia. Every room in the house was a mini museum and a collector's delight.

Brian was a consummate conversationalist and wherever he went he always found someone or something to chat to. Family holidays were usually taken in Scotland, where Brian's joy was to discuss his golfing adventures with the local golfing community and to explore old golf courses and antique shops.

Brian finally took the decision to retire in 2003, and he welcomed the title of Emeritus Professor. In his retirement, he continued to

advise, encourage, and promote new avenues of research and to act as a consultant to many companies. Essentially, the only thing that changed in retirement was that he swapped his salary for his pension, and he was happily able to play a little more golf.

In summary therefore, Brian was an extremely happy family man, supported every inch of the way by his outstanding wife of 57 years, Sheila; and his love of family life was echoed by the enthusiasm, excitement, and happiness he generated in his grandchildren. As an academic he was internationally recognised as an outstanding researcher, a loyal colleague and mentor, and an excellent and intuitive research supervisor.

He is survived by his two sons, Stephen and Nicholas, seven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. He will be sadly missed by all his family, friends, and colleagues.

Professor Adrian Saul (former colleague) and Tony Clarke (brother-in-law)

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