



# Operations MAN

As Mike Monaghan's career has developed, so too has his passion for the water industry and the people who work in operations.

**BY MARY SEARLE BELL.**

**I**f you grow up in St Helens in the northwest of England, there's a very good chance you'll end up working for the town's largest industrial employer, world-leading glass company, Pilkington. That was the case for Mike Monaghan's parents, brother, and just about his whole extended family, however, when Mike was set to leave school in the mid-80s, he opted for a trade apprenticeship rather than a career in glass.

He was fortunate to be offered three apprenticeships to choose between. He opted for one as an electrical field service engineer with, what was then, North West Water. Following privatisation a few years later, the company was renamed United Utilities, and is the second largest water company in England/Wales.

"The package was better," says Mike of his decision to go with electrical services engineering. "And the industry looked interesting."

He spent the first 14 years of his career as an electrical field service engineer, maintaining water and wastewater





Mike Monaghan

treatment plants across the north west of England, until the mid-1990s, when there was a change in how the UK disposed of its biosolids. For more than 100 years, sludge collected from the sewage treatment plants in the Mersey Valley was piped out to sea. In 1998, United Utilities opened a state-of-the-art sludge dewatering facility and a fluidised bed incineration plant.

“I was given an opportunity for early involvement in the commissioning of the plant and the operations side of things really appealed. So I ditched the electrical services engineering to become a process engineer.”

His new role was that of Process Controller with the Shell Green Mersey Valley Sludge Processing Facility. This plant is responsible for the dewatering and disposal of wastewater sludge from the Manchester and Liverpool regions.

“This facility was dealing with 6000 cubic metres of sludge for a population base of approximately seven million customers. To put that in context, it deals with more sludge than the whole of New Zealand produces!”

For five years Mike worked at the plant, and while he enjoyed it, he and his wife Shelia were toying with the idea of living abroad.

“We had been on holiday to New Zealand and really liked it – the lifestyle, the Kiwis – it was a real draw. So, we thought we’d have a go at emigrating.”

In 2003 the couple and their three school-aged children arrived in New Zealand.

“We came on the back of my electrical ticket, thinking I’d get back into electrical engineering, but an opportunity came up with Palmerston North City Council [PNCC] at the wastewater treatment plant, and I thought I’d prefer to stay with the water industry.”

The role was that of wastewater treatment plant supervisor. Coming from a big commercial company, with over 4000 employees, to local government had its challenges for Mike.

“I didn’t really know how local government worked,” he says. “And the scale of things was so different.

“I enrolled for a National Diploma in Wastewater Treatment, and met a few great people down there on the course. I think it was shortly after that time when I first got involved with the Water Industry Operations Group (WIOG) too.

“I began to grow a real affinity for the operations sector and helping other operators to gain knowledge through training and networking, and having a voice became a real passion for me.”

Mike was elected to the WIOG committee in 2008 and has recently completed four years as chair of the group.

“It was a truly honourable moment to be recognised by my peers and elected to chair,” he says, and an even prouder moment when he received the WIOG service award – the twisted tap – which recognises an individual’s effort, commitment and services to the organisation.

Meanwhile, back at PNCC, the water treatment plant supervisor left and Mike stepped in while a replacement was sought. Instead, however, a new role was created with Mike in mind.

**“The challenge for us all is to be absolutely sure our systems are sound and we are doing everything we can to ensure we are providing safe drinking water.”**

In 2007, he was made senior treatment plant supervisor, and was responsible for looking after both the wastewater and drinking water teams. Consequently, to round out his education and complement his wastewater qualification, he completed a Diploma in Drinking Water.

Change came again in 2014 when the department Mike worked for at council had a reshuffle and Mike became the treatment plants manager, with overall responsibility for the operation of all treatment plants, bore stations and pump stations for wastewater, stormwater and drinking water. He reports directly to the general manager of City Enterprises, the council’s in-house contracting division responsible for the maintenance, operation and construction of its infrastructure networks and facilities.

He was delighted at the 2016 WIOG conference to have the Palmerston North drinking water judged to be the best tasting in a blind taste test by a panel of expert judges.

On the wastewater side of things, PNCC is heading into a resource consent review process – the plant is due for reconsenting in 2022 and there is much to be done between now and then.

Currently, each year, some 12.9 billion litres of wastewater from the city is delivered to the main treatment plant in Totara Road, where the majority of contaminants are removed before it is passed through wetland ponds and then discharged to the Manawatu River.

“There is a lot of work to do to explore all the options to find the best solution going forward,” says Mike.

Naturally, he believes his current role has more than enough to keep him engaged and excited for the foreseeable future. In addition, he has found PNCC to be an excellent company to work for.

“PNCC has been a great employer – letting me develop and grow over the years,” he says. “Here, you are treated as a person, not a number. That is the biggest difference between United Utilities and my experience with the council.”

He is very aware of the responsibility of his position and the importance of the work his team does.

“Take a look at Havelock North and what happened there – anyone with a responsibility for providing drinking water is watching the outcome of that situation with keen interest.

“We have to continuously improve and upskill the operations sector,” he says. “The challenge for us all is to be absolutely sure our systems are sound and we are doing everything we can to ensure we are providing safe drinking water.” **WNZ**