

A select sludge shoveler

At 87 years of age, John Fitzmaurice is only recently retired from a long, full and successful career as a sewerage specialist. He spoke to **Mary Searle Bell** about his life as a sanitary sludge shoveler.

John Fitzmaurice was born in 1929 at the start of the Great Depression. Those years of hardship left a permanent mark on his generation but provided a wealth of opportunity as he matured.

“It affected people of my age throughout our lives – it made us cautious about spending – but I consider us the lucky generation,” he told the Water Journal.

“Those of us born in the Depression suffered deprivation but there was a corresponding low birth rate and this made it easy to get jobs throughout our lifetime.”

Also, being born between the first and second world wars meant that, while he trained and served in the military, he was never called to war. John volunteered for the Royal NZ Engineers, serving 12 years in the territorial force and retiring with the rank of major.

In the early 1950s, John completed a Bachelor of Civil Engineering degree and, in 1952, started work as an assistant engineer for the Drainage Board.

“There was a wealth of opportunity for graduates at that time,” he says.

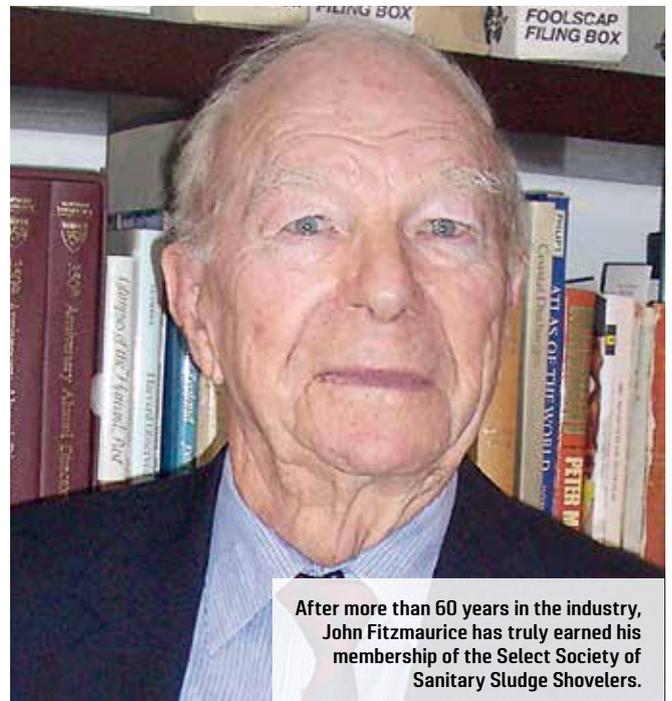
The most glamorous was the construction of the Auckland Harbour Bridge, but there were many other large civil projects underway.

John had begun working on the Browns Island Sewerage Scheme. However, when Dove-Myer Robinson was appointed chair of the Drainage Board in 1953, he brought delays to the project by appointing a panel of overseas experts to review the highly controversial scheme.

Inability to progress on the project prompted John’s boss, Ron Browntree to suggest he apply for a Fullbright Travel Grant to study sanitary engineering overseas as there was a shortage of expertise in New Zealand.

So he did – and was granted the funds to travel. He applied to six different universities and was accepted to all. His final choice was the prestigious ivy-league Harvard University where he would study for a Master’s Degree in Sanitary Engineering. A big factor in his decision to go to Harvard was that the university also offered him a half-time position as a teaching fellow.

This role as assistant to the professor of sanitary engineering entailed marking papers and taking a few lectures when the



professor was called away to advise the government on some matter.

“I was only a page or two ahead of the students,” laughs John. However, this work provided the necessary money to cover his living expenses.

The terms of the Fullbright travel grant allowed him to work during its two years’ duration. So John doubled up on his coursework to finish his study in just one-and-a-half years. Over the summer break and in the eight months following the completion of his degree, he had a job with a consulting civil and sanitary engineering firm, Brown & Caldwell.

Meanwhile, back in New Zealand, the Browns Island Scheme was abandoned in favour of oxidation ponds at Manukau. And it was Brown & Caldwell who were appointed, in 1955, to design this sewerage scheme. It was commissioned five years later in 1960.

Upon returning to New Zealand, John resumed his role with

the Drainage Board, staying there for 12 years and dealing with the ongoing problems with the Manukau scheme. Shortly after it opened, the Mangere Wastewater Treatment Plant had issues with bad smells and midges among other operational problems.

In 1963 John left the Drainage Board to set up his own consultancy in partnership with Lester Steven, who he had met while working in the USA. Steven & Fitzmaurice were integral to the sewage schemes of major towns throughout New Zealand. Projects included the Hamilton Pollution Control Plant, sewerage schemes in Tauranga and Mt Maunganui, the milliscreening plant in Hutt Valley, sewerage projects in Blenheim and Christchurch and the Invercargill sewage treatment plant.

The company grew to include five partners – the name change to Steven, Fitzmaurice & Partners reflecting this.

However, with the economic downturn in the late 80s, work dried up. John says they were approached by another consulting firm with a view to merging. While they thought this was a sound idea, they also thought it better to go elsewhere. So John approached Ron Carter of Beca Collins Hollings & Ferner (now Beca Group) and in 1989 they merged to become a division called Beca Steven.

Once the merger was complete, John was appointed as executive director. A year later he became a consultant to Beca Steven, a position he held for five years.

He then spent six years as deputy commissioner of the Environment Court and also served as the deputy convener of the audit group for Project Manukau, a position he only retired from in 2013. In this role he was responsible for overseeing the resource consents for Mangere Treatment Plant upgrade – this \$460 million project was the biggest local body expenditure to that point and involved the progressive removal of the oxidation ponds and their replacement by nine large BNR (biological nitrogen removal) activated-sludge reactor-clarifiers.

John has also served as chair of the NZ Institute of Engineers (1963-64) and has been involved in Water New Zealand from its very early days when it was the NZ Water and Wastes Association – his membership number is 00014 – and he helped draft the association's constitution. He is a life member of this association as well as of the Water Environment Federation (WEF).

One time WEF president Geoff Scott selected John for membership of the Select Society of Sanitary Sludge Shovelers, or SS as it is known. The society honours 'outstanding, meritorious service above and beyond the call of duty'. Back in the day, John says, membership required being immersed in sewage. John was duly inaugurated into this elite group when a plug burst in the manhole he was working in, flooding the manhole and drenching him in filth. He wears his golden shovel insignia with pride. [WNZ](#)