

# GORDON V.R. HOLNESS

ASHRAE President 2009-10



**Tim Dwyer:** My name's Tim Dwyer, I'm from the ASHRAE Historical Committee, and this has been recorded at the ASHRAE Summer Conference in Denver, Colorado, on June 24th, 2013. Well, Gordon, perhaps you could start by telling us about where you started off in life.

**Gordon Holness:** Well, I started off in life in England. And where are you from, Tim? And I was born and raised in Shirley, just outside of London. Actually, I was born three days before the start of World War II. And my dad, who was an accountant, spent most of the time during the war as a firefighter, fighting the fires in London. But my sister and myself, my mother and father lived, as I said, in the suburb of London, and we had to evacuate quite a few times because of the bombing in World War II. I went to a small school in Shirley and then I graduated from there and went to Selhurst Grammar School.

**Tim Dwyer:** Okay, so, was that really the point at which you switched into the engineering world?

**Gordon Holness:** Not really. I think that Selhurst Grammar School was a great start to my education. I had always loved maths and sciences, and so it was sort of- sort of a natural direction that I was going in. But I think it wasn't until I went down to Chichester, my parents moved to the south coast of England, the village called Selsey, and I went to Chichester High School. Both Selhurst and Chichester are both all-boys schools. But there I sort of really sort of found my niche in terms of pursuing the sciences and the maths. It was just always something that I just felt comfortable in. So, that's sort of how I sort of drifted in that direction.

**Tim Dwyer:** So not so much a vocation, but it's just an occasion of your skills led to engineering?

**Gordon Holness:** I think that's probably true. The, but I think where the kicker came of, my parents weren't very well off. And so, when I graduated from high school, the reality was I had to go and get a job. And so, I found myself, really by chance, working for the West Sussex County Council in the engineering department there. It was it was an available job rather; it was fortuitous more than anything else. But in that job, I was dealing with mechanical systems for municipal buildings and schools and the like. And let me tell you, I really liked that. So, I thought, "This is kind of neat stuff." And so, what I did was say to myself, after two years of working in that area, that if I really wanted to make that my vocation, I needed to get a real education. And to do that, I had to go up to London.

**Tim Dwyer:** And so where did you study in London?

**Gordon Holness:** I went first off to Croydon Technical College and got my mechanical engineering, registration there. And then I wanted to get specifically into the HVAC industry, and so I went to the National College in London. And I studied there, uh, to get my IHVE registration in those days. Today that's known as CIBSE, the- the Chartered Institute of Building Inst- Chartered Institute of Building Services Engineers. And so, I completed my education there and, of course, in England that's the equivalent of professional engineering as we see it here in the United States.

**Tim Dwyer:** And when you, when you actually used your skills that you'd developed at the ecologies, what sort of work did you actually undertake in those early days?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, I started working for a small consulting company in central London. And, I mean, that really was a fantastic opportunity. Probably only had, like, I think we had six employees. And so, it was really a hands-on sort of jump in the deep end and, go experience. And so, a wonderful opportunity to get sort of in-depth knowledge of what goes on in our industry. Of course, a lot of the buildings we dealt with in those days were probably in the 1920s and 1930s vintage. You have to remember that these were the days of the slide rule and the hand calculations, calculators had not yet come along. In fact, I spent a lot of time drawing ink on linen. It was sort of a different experience than you see in today's world, where you have all the electronic tools and computers available to you.

**Tim Dwyer:** Very much a different world, and it's really, I suppose, as a young, professionally qualified engineer of 25, I guess, as you were at the time, you made a made a decision which probably set you on the path to ASHRAE.

**Gordon Holness:** Well, yeah, it was, that was a big decision. England was going through some turmoil at that time, and there was a so-called brain drain of young engineers, and Bob Tamblyn, my mentor, actually who's an ASHRAE member was recruiting for his consulting company in Toronto, and I interviewed with him and grabbed the opportunity, and next thing you know, I'm on a plane to Canada to start a whole new life there, and that start really did get me into ASHRAE, into ASHRAE because Bob was very much a believer in the society and what it can bring and help young engineers and so he introduced me to the Toronto chapter and the rest, you might say, is history.

**Tim Dwyer:** And when you joined Bob in Canada, what work did you actually undertake?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, I did some design work. I was, I was employed as a sort of intermediate engineer at that point in time. But you know what Bob really did for me? They had been very, very successful, uh, in designing major buildings all around Ontario and into Quebec. But he had a lot of trouble in startup on those buildings. And so, he threw me into the deep end to get all those, all those buildings up and operating. So, you'd go into the field, and you'd find out what

the problems were, what the issues to be resolved were, and how to fix 'em. A real in-depth experience. It was, it was great. I loved it.

**Tim Dwyer:** So, what we call commissioning today, I guess, was, uh, the work you were involved in.

**Gordon Holness:** This was, this was before the days of AABC and Test and Balance. Uh, in fact, Bob really wanted me to get into the Test and Balance building business on their behalf. Um, but I really loved design. I really wanted to get back to design. So, unfortunately for Bob, I left, and I went down to Windsor, and I joined the company in Windsor, Ontario, and started working there as a senior engineer.

**Tim Dwyer:** So, you had lots of practical experiences now behind you. Did that mean you didn't need to study any further?

**Gordon Holness:** Oh no, there's quite a bit of difference between the educational systems in England and those of Canada and the United States, and I needed to get my professional registration. So, I went to Lawrence Technological University and, uh, studied there, fluid mechanics, strength of materials, and all that good stuff and passed all of those, and then sat for the examination for part one and part two, P.E. In, in the United States, in Michigan, and then also took the exams for, Ontario.

I had met my wife, Sue, in England, actually briefly before I left England, and so I went to Canada and told her all the great things about living in Ontario, and she followed me there. And we met and married and had a great life living in Windsor. Unfortunately, she, uh, she suffered from a brain tumor and died at the early age of 30. So, that was really trying times. It was, just something that took me a long time to get over. And then almost 10 years later, uh, when I had thought maybe I was left, I was left with a single life, shall we say, I met Audrey and walked into the room and that was it. And 30 years later, we are very happily married and living down in West Palm Beach, Florida.

**Tim Dwyer:** And I guess you had no, uh, no expectation of what was to come in terms of the exciting ASHRAE life that was ahead of you at that stage. Perhaps, let's just stay in the 50s and 60s. Can just give us a feel for what the industry was like in the 50s and 60s?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, as I said, it was, uh, it was a year of hand calculations and, you didn't have the documentation of, of existing building systems. And of course, air conditioning was almost a rarity in England at that point in time. It wasn't until I came to the United States, or I came to Canada, that I really got more in-depth experience, you know, on the air conditioning side of the industry.

**Tim Dwyer:** And that was looking at new buildings, or was that still, as you were in London, looking at, existing buildings?

**Gordon Holness:** No, it was a whole new field. It was all new building construction. In fact, one of my first jobs in Toronto was working on the administration building for the Montreal Expo in 1967. So, yeah, it was very much new construction. I mean, Toronto was a vibrant city just exploding in new construction. And so, it was a great opportunity to sort of learn what was going on in the industry at that time. This is where ASHRAE, I think, really helped me, because that experience and in meeting my peers, both at the chapter meetings and then ultimately at these at the regional and society meetings, sort of gave me the confidence to sort of understand what the new technologies were and where we were headed.

**Tim Dwyer:** And the standards you were using at that time were they still British standards, or were they Canadian, or were they ASHRAE standards?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, my Bible in those days, in those early days, in the late '50s, was the was the CIBSE, well, in that case, the IHV Design Guide, 1959. Uh, you didn't have the multiplicity of technical, technical journals and articles available. Of course, when I came over to the States, all of a sudden, we had the ASHRAE journals, and the handbooks, and that was just a plethora of information which was unprecedented in my mind. It was just a great resource.

**Tim Dwyer:** So, exciting times, and, of course, this coincided with your introduction to ASHRAE in Toronto in 1965.

**Gordon Holness:** I think you, 1965 is when I joined the Toronto chapter, and, uh.

**Tim Dwyer:** And how active were you initially? Were you able to launch yourself straight into the chapter and become an active member?

**Gordon Holness:** To be honest, in Toronto, we were so darn busy. I was travelling so much, troubleshooting and testing and balancing that, while I sort of got access to the resource, I didn't really become active until I moved down to Windsor and joined the Windsor chapter. And then I did become active in the chapter. But my real activity occurred when I moved across into the United States and joined the, at that time, the Michigan chapter. Now it's the Detroit chapter of ASHRAE.

**Tim Dwyer:** And what was your, what did you do in that chapter? Were you involved in any of their major events?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, I got involved in a number of different committees. I worked my way up through the chairs. My real love, frankly, at the chapter level, was energy management. I was doing a number of projects that I entered into the society Energy and Technology Awards programs, some success. But I chaired the Energy Management Committee, and when you do that, you're gonna get started getting involved on the regional level, because as chair of Energy Management, I became the Regional Vice Chair for Energy Management attending now the regional committee meetings. And that led me into joining activities at the society level, because as the Regional Vice Chair for Energy Management and then I was on the Society Committee

and that really sort of got me attending society meetings. I think my first society meeting was probably back around 1979, 1980.

**Tim Dwyer:** I'm trying to get you; I'm trying to get you to talk about CRCs.

**Gordon Holness:** Okay, no, no, that's fine.

**Tim Dwyer:** So let me start that again. Let me start that again. A major part of chapter activity, of course, is a fellowship that's built up at activities such as CRCs. Have you had any experience with those in the period that you spent in your early years?

**Gordon Holness:** Yeah, I worked, as I say, worked up my way through the chairs and became president of the Detroit chapter, and then, as part of that, I became the alternate, then the delegate to the CRCs, I was active in those CRCs and eventually chaired the CRC for at the Cincinnati meeting.

**Tim Dwyer:** And then perhaps you could talk a little bit more about your wider activities within ASHRAE society itself, because you've been involved not only in the chapter lead activities, but also in the broader activities, the international activities of ASHRAE.

**Gordon Holness:** It actually been an incredible experience. You sort of get drawn in by the camaraderie and by the peer-to-peer relationships that occur at the society level. So, yeah, I went through energy management, became and chaired the Energy Management Committee. I went on to join the Government Affairs Committee. And chaired that. And so, it just, you just get drawn deeper and deeper into that. I was involved in the Advocacy Committee when it first was formed. I got onto Tech Council, then onto Pub Ed Council, then onto Educational Council. It was, it was just a wonderful experience. A lot of the work we were doing in, from a design standpoint at the company, involved things like thermal storage, for example. And so, I had been a part of TC 6.9 thermal storage for a number of years, and it's just incredible, the shared experiences you can get just talking to your peers on the committees, like TC 6.9, 5.8 Industrial Ventilation, I think we were pretty innovative in those days. We did a lot of automotive work, heavy industrial work. And automotive plants in the United States typically were not air conditioned as we think of them. We came out with a whole design concept known as pre-cooled low-level air distribution. Which provided enhanced comfort conditions for the workers in industrial plants. And a lot of that technology and a lot of the validation, if you like, of the ideas we were generating came through all my discussions with my peers at ASHRAE. It just was an invaluable experience.

**Tim Dwyer:** So, you truly had a broad base of ASHRAE experience, uh, that led towards your board activity, and did that shape your attitude to participation in the board?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, let me tell you, I just love my experiences working with ASHRAE, and, I think as I went through up through the company itself and became president of a pretty large architectural engineering company, I said to myself, you know, I really would like to get involved similarly in the corporate side, if you like, of ASHRAE, the overall administration, and starts looking at where the society as a whole should be going and needs to go. And so, back in

around 2001, I let it be known that I would be interested in moving forward, and the opportunity came up to run for the Board of Directors. And I was lucky enough to be chosen. And that was the start of, it's almost like an eight-year run. I served three years on the on the Board of Directors, then you serve two years as a Vice Chair. I was in a hiatus for one year running around serving on different committees and then went up from Treasurer to President-Elect and ultimately to, president. You, it's as I said, an incredible experience because it's like a growing crescendo of activities as you get more and more immersed in what is happening with ASHRAE, both, within the United States as well as overseas. I think it's fair to say even today that the international side of our operations was growing faster than the domestic side. And so, the opportunity to travel internationally and meet with our international chapters and international associate societies was just an incredible experience.

**Tim Dwyer:** And, of course, throughout this period, you didn't forget your roots and maintained active interest in 62.1, of course, which is one of the flagship standards of ASHRAE, *Ventilation for Accessible Indoor Air Quality*.

**Gordon Holness:** Yes, I was very much interested in where 62.1 was going a lot of evolution going on, particularly as it related to environmental tobacco smoke. Besides sort of sitting in on, SBC 62.1 meetings, I also served on the World Policy Committee for Standards, and ultimately the Standards Advisory Committee, and we heard a lot from the tobacco industry in regard to 62.1. We also learned a lot, heard a lot from the chemicals industry. We were surprised to learn that all these chemical propellants and deodorants and that sort of stuff have an impact on indoor air quality. And so, as ventilation rates change within the standard, then those industries would file appeals, if you like, to the proposed direction we were going in. So, I ultimately served on the ASHRAE appeals board panel and in the end, defended ASHRAE and appeals to ANSI, successfully, I might add.

**Tim Dwyer:** And, of course, that wasn't just restricted to perhaps some years you've worked in ASHRAE over some years, but you also worked on the appeals for Standard 34, of course.

**Gordon Holness:** Yeah, both well, it was on the ventilation side, it was 60, it was 62.1 and 62.2, which is the residential side, but a lot of work was being done on refrigeration safety standards, and 34C was well, 34 was part of that, and Standard Addendum 34C was being challenged by the industry, by some of the industry who didn't like the way the rating systems were coming out. So, I was involved again in the appeals panels hearing those concerns. Again, gave you a chance to meet my peers in, with the expertise in those fields, and it was, it was just a great opportunity to expand my knowledge.

**Tim Dwyer:** During your period of office, there were great ambitions for changes for ASHRAE. And how did you manage those ambitions?

**Gordon Holness:** There were multiple steps to that. First off, I served on an ad-hoc committee on, a globalization roadmap. How do we serve our global community? We are an international society, but when you look at the reality of all our technical committee meetings and how people



can participate in those meetings, it is tough for international members to be part of that, and so we worked hard on electronic communications. We worked hard on programs like GoToMeetings. How do you have meetings that are dynamic and active that people can attend from afar? The biggest challenge, I think, was looking at how we make ASHRAE more valuable to our members. We did have a goal. I think I rather enthusiastically said at one time, "How do we double our membership? Not simply increase it by 5% a year or 10% per year, but how do we realistically double our membership over a period of, say, 10 years?" And to look at, to do that, you've got to look at actually how we serve our members, both in terms of our publication sales, but also in terms of their access to information and the cost of that access. How do we make those things more affordable to them? You have to remember, we went through this whole financial sort of meltdown of the late, you know, 2008, 2009 period of time, just as I was coming into office. Affordability was a big issue. So, we looked at seeing how those programs could be made more available at a reasonable cost to our membership. At the same time, we were looking at what our opportunities are to grow the society, its financial base, how to increase its financial viability; move from a 20 billion, 20 billion would be nice, 20-million-dollar organization to a 50-million-dollar organization. And I think that means you need to look at providing services and operations in different ways than we had traditionally done.

**Tim Dwyer:** And what do you think people will see as your lasting legacy from your term in office?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, um, number one, hopefully that my presidential theme, energy efficiency in existing buildings does result in a standard that I think has tremendous, can have tremendous benefit out there in the field. There's a lot of enthusiasm from different code jurisdictions on doing that. Think about a dense, open environment like say, Boston or New York. They're challenged to expand new construction because of limitations in their infrastructure. And so, energy efficiency in existing buildings can free up that. So that's, I think, one of the major aspects of I think I'd like to be known for. Rebuilding the relationships with our international partners, I think, is another area where I think we worked hard on, and spent a lot of time, traveling and doing that, as well as meeting in Washington with with the Department of Energy and AIA and USGBC and other organizations. So, I think improved relationships would be another area but if you get into the, like, the functional operations of the Society what I tried to do in my, in my midterm was to look at where we needed to go with, say, Members Council, Public Council, and Technology Council, what changes I felt we needed to make in terms of improving their operations and service to our members. And so, I put out a roadmap at that point in time in terms of what changes could be made, should be made to the Society. Did I achieve all of those? No. But I think I left my successor, Lynn Bellenger, a good path to run down as we move forward.

**Tim Dwyer:** And slightly tougher, I guess, is to, with a benefit of hindsight what would you have done to approach that presidential year differently?

**Gordon Holness:** That is really tough because, as I say, you get so immersed in everything that's going on, building up to, as I said, a crescendo of activities that planning, I guess, would be the right word. Could I have planned better so that we achieved more deliberate steps along the way? Possibly. But no, I actually came away feeling that we had achieved a great deal.

**Tim Dwyer:** And since those days, have things moved on, do you feel, in ASHRAE?

**Gordon Holness:** Um, yeah, I think that many changes have occurred. I listened today at the, or yesterday at the board meeting. They're coming out with a new five-year strategic plan looking at the next steps in the organization. So, yeah, ASHRAE is a very dynamic society, but it is challenged. Uh, it is challenged by the economy out there. It is challenged by the needs of our younger members. It's a different dynamic out there than we've been used to.

**Tim Dwyer:** You set into play the work that ASHRAE does at the moment with virtual meetings with GoToMeetings and other pieces of software. Do you see it as a challenge for ASHRAE or is that an opportunity?

**Gordon Holness:** Oh, I think it's a great opportunity. I'm delighted to see the new program come out called ASHRAE Exchange. A forum. We always had the think tank, but the think tank, that Larry Staples did such a great job with was more limited to if you like, the, life members and fellows of ASHRAE. The ASHRAE Exchange is an open forum, for exchange of ideas and information that everybody has access to. And I think that's exactly the type of program that we need to attract our younger members. Can you imagine the opportunity they have? To go onto that website and express a concern or an idea or a project that they have and get feedback from their peers. It's the right media, I think, for communication with them as we move forward. So, there are a lot of exciting things that are happening. But as I said, this is a different world. The, if you look at the 20- to 25-year-old, they live on the iPhone or the iPad they're used to instant answers to questions, instant solutions and that's challenging. We are a structured organization, a process-oriented organization, with a lot of pride and legacy, and there's a validity to that, those processes, particularly as we are because we are a standards-writing organization, and we're governed by ANSI and others in terms of reaching consensus in coming up with those standards.

**Tim Dwyer:** Very good. So, what has ASHRAE meant to you personally?

**Gordon Holness:** Well, I don't want to sound trite, but ASHRAE changed my life. The opportunities that gained through my relationships in ASHRAE, the knowledge learned, the confidence gained. You know, you attend all these meetings, you participate in all these committees and chair, these different groups. It actually teaches leadership skills. And I don't know any other way that you could obtain that. It literally gave me the confidence to move forward. I can't tell you how many times in meetings with clients I would cite ASHRAE material. And it gave me credibility that I might not otherwise have. It's just an absolute, invaluable part of who you are, and you sort of don't really know that until it's already there, but you learn it along the way through all those all those years, if you like, and relationships build up



through the chapters, through the regions, through the society. I have just loved my relationship with the society.

**Tim Dwyer:** And so, what, uh, advice would you give to young people who are looking for a career in HVAC?

**Gordon Holness:** Join ASHRAE as soon as you can. We strongly encourage, we've done, I think we've done as a society a great job in building up the student level, the student chapter level of society, going into the high schools, going into the universities, and letting the students know who we are and what we are. But for those students, I'd say get involved. Um, there's no better way of learning the industry and learning where your career can take you than starting off as a student member of the society. It's something you'll never regret, the time you spend. It'll be paid over many times.

**Tim Dwyer:** Well, Gordon, it's been a privilege, speaking to you today. Thank you for giving up your time, and I'm sure many people will benefit from your video.

**Gordon Holness:** Well, thank you for the opportunity, Tim I've enjoyed this session. It, all I can say is it's ASHRAE has been just a tremendous benefit to me, and hopefully I've been a benefit to them. It's been a wonderful experience, so thank you for the opportunity to, sort of, pass this along to, uh, to the next generation.