

Being authentic, true to oneself – and having fun!



Stuart Wheaton is an upstream oil and gas leader with nearly four decades of experience spanning onshore, offshore (shallow and deepwater) environments across continents from the North Sea to Australia, and South America to Africa. Now, as an Independent Consultant with Wheaton Energy, he advises on global projects covering upstream and geothermal energy assets, focusing on sustainable practices and comprehensive project lifecycle management. Stuart's career is marked by a profound commitment to safety first and a keen ability to lead, manage and inspire teams across diverse cultural landscapes.

Who is Stuart Wheaton? Please tell us about yourself.

I'm an Ipswich Town football and Gloucester rugby fan, which causes daily elation and despondency, but am happily married to my childhood sweetheart Tanya, who is a maths teacher. My two (kind-of-grown-up) sons, Jack and John, now provide carbon offset to my upstream career by working in renewables.

I studied chemical engineering at Imperial College, London, back in the medieval times of the 1980's, when there wasn't even an internet.

Beyond being a sports fan in anything that moves these days (having kids encourages this), I used to play rugby and judo. My main interests centre on travel and walking holidays, wine (drinking it and collecting it) and reading history. It's amazing what the past has to teach us about the present and the future.

Please walk us through your career. How did you ultimately become a Founder and Independent Consultant at Wheaton Energy?

When leaving school for a year before, and when at university, I was sponsored by British Gas. This was the national corporation and not the later BG or Centrica, i.e. before Maggie privatised it. This provided various great eye-opening experiences at sites around the UK. This included a summer at the original Rough gas storage site at Easington, when it was being built, and a later summer at the Hornsea salt cavity gas storage site further up the same coast.

On the latter, a Halliburton rig crew came on site with a land snubbing unit – it was my 'first well'. It was these experience that got me interested in the upstream industry. And the more I looked at it, all the

better. I was really keen on the opportunity for international experience and travel – there is a whole wide world out there. And this was a long time before cheap flights with Ryanair, easyJet and the like.

After considering various options, in 1989 I joined the mothership 'Big E' – Exxon/Esso – in London, as a graduate reservoir engineer. I still look back and thank Exxon very much, now ExxonMobil, for how they developed me, and the mentoring received. This was by formal courses in 'exotic' Houston alongside being very fortunate to work for and with great teachers such as Jess Stiles – later of SCAL fame, and known to many petroleum engineers out there today.

This was in the heyday of the Shell-Esso Joint Venture in the UK sector producing over a million barrel of oil equivalent (BOE) per day. My first field started small on Brent doing some 350 kbd oil at the time! It was a non-operated but very busy environment at Esso with a great variety of fields to work on.

After some two-and-a-half years the opportunity came up to go operating in Australia with Exxon. So, in late 1991, off we went to Melbourne (we were married by then), and this meant working on Bass Strait, Australia – at that time some 15 producing platforms and 400+ active offshore wells.

I started on sub-surface there, but then went into production operations including in the final year being trained up to be a platform supervisor/OIM on the mighty Cobia. Marvellous! A great experience over three years plus. Being a young Pom offshore in Australia is never to be forgotten.

Exxon then took me from surfing and sun in Oz, to Aberdeen, where you can still surf but it's a bit colder. This continued my operations work as an onshore superintendent seconded in to Shell Expro working fields such as Cormorant, Eider and Dunlin. I did this for two years. But then this is that moment



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after some 7-8 years where you then have to decide in a large company to make the long-term commitment, possibly to be a 'lifer', or go and try elsewhere. I did the latter in 1996.

Firstly, I was a production engineer on Liverpool Bay for BHP for two years, and then their field partner LASMO tempted me to move over and go international. Those years at LASMO were a great grounding and as a production technologist I ended up working in Libya, Venezuela, Iran and other very not mundane locations. This was largely on single status rotations to the remote field. I look back with gratitude and smile greatly at the places and people experienced: 50°C in Libya Sahara well testing, to torrential downpours in Venezuela trying to make rod pumps work under armed guard.

But oil prices at the time weren't great and LASMO was taken over by Eni, but as a door closed, another opened. BHP asked if I would come back, and I worked for them for a further two years out of London on a North Sea subsea project. By then our two sons had been born and a settled life beckoned!? So, you know what happens next...

A great industry friend contacted me in early 2003 and asked if I might be interested in a sub-surface manager type role in Cairn India. Well, the rest is history. We went out as a young family for four years and I was very fortunate to be in the Cairn India family in Chennai and then Delhi, for what was to be the ride of my working life.

The growth of the original offshore fields such as Ravva and CB/OS-2 was cause enough, but the discovery of the onshore Rajasthan oil fields another level. Some 125 (yes, one hundred and twenty-five) onshore E&A wells were drilled and nearly all tested in a period of about two-and-a-half years. I led the sub-surface team that executed this amazing programme, alongside some towering drilling and operations individuals.

Then, seven Field Development Plans subsequently put together and approved, and a team built up to some 150 people. When people ask me today if I'm working hard (and having fun), nothing can quite compare to what happened there. It was the making of my working career and for us as a family with what we experienced. The Rajasthan fields have now

happily produced over 700 million barrels, and still look like they are going along nicely today.

But it's also fair to say that it was proving difficult to then stay longer in India – our elder son needing secondary education not available in India at that time, and yes, I was a bit worn-out! So, it was a good time to take a break and a change. I did some consulting for ~6 months but realised I really missed the operating and doing.

It was in early 2008 that the opportunity came up again via a great contact, the former BHP HR manager who knew me and was now at Tullow. By then I'd also realised that I was more of an independent oil and gas company person than a super-major one.

After interview I took the job as North Sea Asset Manager doing my best to lead a team working the mature ex-Phillips assets in the southern North Sea including the Bacton terminal and Hewett Field.

But in life you must also have some luck as well as be good, and Tullow with its partners hit big with the deepwater Jubilee find offshore Ghana about two months after I had started in the Chiswick office.

Now this really was a 'tiger-by-the-tail' moment for 'little' Tullow, but it was a company up for the challenge. I was transferred over, essentially as Ghana Development employee Number 1, and the deepwater baptism immediately started.

By creating an Integrated Project Team (IPT) with field partners Kosmos, Anadarko and GNPC, the field was appraised, developed and on-line by the end of 2010 – in some 1,200 metres of water with a 120 kbd FPSO on top of it. Tullow's role was the well construction and building the country organisation to then produce the field following handover from the IPT. We did it. This was the experience that truly exposed me to multi-billion dollars, multiple international location projects involving world-scale contractors and interfaces. Remarkable. The country of Ghana is a wonderful location.

After a year or so of production at Jubilee, Tullow moved me on to a 'head of function' type role across all technical and operations disciplines, and a seat on their Excom. It was a wild and busy time in Tullow



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with activities in more than 20 countries centered mainly on Africa. More discoveries in Uganda, Kenya and other locations followed.

However, I am believer that all good things, do in the end, come to an end; they just do. And the 2014 oil price slump hit hard and the ability to carry on, as we had, then had to stop.

Sometimes, an opportunity will arise, which is out of the blue really, and may catch your eye on a day when on others it possibly wouldn't. And this is what happened in 2015 when Premier Oil contacted me to ask if I might be interested in a role leading their UK business out of Aberdeen. I took it. It was an opportunity to truly lead and be accountable for a multi-field set of assets – mature ones, new ones and some in development. With the 2014 drop in oil prices and a 'troubled' new project at Solan trying to start-up, it was quite a time to keep things safe, control costs and deliver on the promises.

The period 2015-2018 lives in the memory for what we all did – sorting out Solan as best we could, running our assets safely and to a profit, and delivering the big Catcher project to its schedule and cost budget – also ahead on its production promise. Lots of JV Partner, other oil company and Government interaction – and this was at the time the OGA, now the NSTA, was finding its feet. Premier also purchased the upstream E.ON UK assets at the time so integrating the businesses together was also very rewarding. Lots of people managing and leading experiences here!

In 2018, Premier moved me to London, and I again took up a world-wide HSE, technical and operations lead role. This now included the Falkland Islands, Mexico, Indonesia and Vietnam, in addition to the UK. We even drilled a well in Alaska. It was great to be back in international 'variety'.

In early 2020 I was made up to the Chief Operations Officer bringing in the Business Units also under my role with related HSE and P&L accountability. But of course, you never know what is round the corner, and the small matter of Covid-19 soon arrived.

Like many others we launched intensively into how to manage this safely and effectively, while maintaining production and projects. We did this but

the arrival of very low, even negative oil prices (remember that day?), was a big hit on Premier, like it was for many others. By the end of 2020 we had been taken over by Chrysaor to form Harbour Energy. All the same, I positively decided to stay and lead the company's International Assets as an Executive VP in the new company's leadership team.

The recovery from Covid and integrating the two companies together, while also remembering Chrysaor had evolved itself from bringing assets from three companies together, was again a challenging time but was completed. A particular highlight in this time was the Andaman Sea deepwater gas discovery at Timpan in 2022 off Sumatra, Indonesia – acreage Premier had acquired several years before. Further large gas discoveries have been made since that time.

So, we get to 2023, and Harbour launched a needed organisation re-work after it had been up and running for some two to three years. I had made it to the grand old age of 57 and decided, very amicably, to depart as part of this review. The final year had involved working on the now well progressed Wintershall-DEA and Harbour Energy deal. All the best to the Harbour/WDEA team on the next steps.

But, for me, not to retirement, just yet, and in 2024 I formed my own 'one-man band' consultancy and I'm very gratified that in recent months several clients have already asked me to look at assets in a variety of countries including Angola, Austria and Kazakhstan.

It's been interesting to bring together my wide-ranging experiences of over 35 years and apply them to support others including their current operations and forward investment decisions. I'm working now on about half time, and in this condition it's also time to do that 'big jobs' list you never seemed to get round to and take some more holidays. Never say never to full time working again, as you never know what's coming, but this is a happy place to be today.

Could you describe the key moments or experiences that facilitated your transition from hands-on technical roles to executive leadership positions and to, most recently, become a Founder?

In writing the above career progression, I would pick



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out the moves and roles in Australia, India, Ghana and later to Aberdeen (Premier) as the four key steps – after Exxon had given me such an excellent grounding.

All these steps were a progression in variety of work and/or responsibilities. Where the variety of work was not just about the technical but much about people, culture and organisation interfaces. Seeking out breadth of experience and location has truly helped – and make sure to do the field work as well as the office. I can't overstate enough the importance of that last point. I still really enjoy time in the field where, frankly, the real work gets done.

And then finally, without being arrogant, be confident, given those experiences, to step out of one's comfort zone. I didn't know anything much about deepwater when starting on Ghana but after three years of a very steep learning curve, with a great team to learn from, we were running the 120 kbd production of a major deepwater project in a country that had never seen that before. It can be done.

How have you navigated and adapted to the dynamic nature of the energy sector throughout your career, both in terms of responding to the changing landscapes of the industry and evolving your leadership strategies during these periods?

I am a firm believer that you must make your own choices to develop your career. I think that's even more the case today, whatever the industry or arena you work in. Always be kind and respectful, and thankful for what you receive but, to progress, you must choose what's next and not just what's given. I believe my career history is an example of this. Work hard where you may be and do what you say you will do, but then you will know when it's time for a change – be it an internal move or to move to another place.

Also keeping the faith, as when things are down – including the oil price! – then opportunities will still come. Those moments of working hard and doing your best will be recognised by others and remembered, and I think that's happened to me several times. And when that call comes, don't ignore, take a good look and take some risk. India

could have worked out differently for us, but it didn't. I'd like to think those I have worked with, and I have led, will say I'm empathetic (nearly all the time!). That I seek out to mentor and coach by giving time, and that I am driven for the team to deliver. I've held this all the way through, and it seems to have worked.

Be authentic always – you are what you are – a bag of genes and experiences gained from when you were born. Others will need to be asked about their views of me, mind!

And finally, even when rising through the ranks, I kept my technical work and interests up to date. I'd highly recommended keeping your roots intact and healthy. It's all coming back to me right now as a one-man consultancy. But it's more than that, you can talk with and encourage everyone, throughout an organisation, when you are genuinely understanding and are interested in how everyone can and does contribute to the wider success.

Looking back on your career, what are you most proud of, and what would you have done differently?

Taking some care here, that with pride there can soon be a fall!

I look back with deep fondness on the time in India and what was delivered, and especially now that the young team we grew there is widely spread across the industry. They are working in all kinds of countries and projects. The Rajasthan exploration and appraisal campaign is unlikely to ever be repeated with so much covered in such a short space of time – can you believe we cut 4.5 km of core... and we used it too.

I think also understanding that safety and environmental performance to very high standards is so very important. Leaders set the standard here in what they do, what they ask, and then they speak by actions rather than words. For example approving asset integrity budgets, approving training programs, and yes making sure safety comes in front of production. I've learnt and done all of this. It really matters.

Many of my other experiences beyond India are a



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very close second!

But in summary, the most pride I take is seeing the people I have met and worked with, positively proceeding with their working lives, and hoping I had a small contribution in helping them get there.

And what could I have done differently? There was a time when I was so engrossed in the technical delivery of my work that you can lose sight of the wider picture, and the role of others. Delivery in upstream is not by individual contribution, it's too big for that and the issues too wide-ranging. I learnt that and it's a lesson well learnt – if you get that, you'd be amazed how many times extraordinary things can be delivered by extraordinary teams!

How have you built and sustained high-performing teams during challenging periods, such as mergers or global crises, in your roles as Chief Operating Officer and EVP Head of International Business?

Thinking back, I've probably experienced four major up-and-down cycles in the oil patch in my career. I can only re-emphasise the need for well-selected and motivated teams that want to go to work, enjoy it and get well rewarded with fun, development, recognition and, yes, well paid, for doing that. Every time, the successful workplaces have done this.

I think it's also key for the leadership to lead and know that they cast a shadow – people watch you and take notes! So even if there is pressure on, prioritise safety and don't cut back. Keep the core team together and motivated through the tougher times. And know how to celebrate success. I will repeat that being authentic as a leader is so important – don't be what you aren't, and be empathetic, as you usually do not know what is really on someone else's mind.

I have found if you do all of this – and it's not easy to be it all the time – then when the tougher times come, there is at least understanding of why it is this way.

Reflecting on your vast experience, what advice would you give to young professionals aspiring to leadership roles in the oil and gas sector?

I will keep this to a bullet point list!

- The industry isn't disappearing because it can't disappear, the world needs us. But let's do a safe and environmentally friendly version of us, always.
- Make your own career decisions, after listening respectfully, but make your own ones, do not leave it to others.
- Take some risk – get out of your comfort zone and try something new, or even very different, especially if you aren't enjoying what you are doing.
- Go out and see the world – the oil and gas industry is everywhere, so do not stay home all the time. Of course, sometimes we must think of others too, but you'd be surprised how much they want to come with you. We went overseas with our sons at ages 2 and 4, and never looked back.
- Be the best version of yourself – work hard, play hard, be kind, be respectful, but be yourself (and not some MBA version you think you need to be!).
- Keep your technical and operational heartbeat. Keep yourself up to date. I'm eternally grateful to the SPE, with whom I'm a Life member now, for a being a great vehicle to do that – go on, write a few papers, add to the industry record, and above all help others to get the knowledge!
- "Proceed until apprehended" – it's so easy to reason why not to do something, not even get started, so let's get going!
- And finally – have fun!

