

The Black Hole in Newton's Pool

Newton's Pool was the E Branch facility for underwater explosive testing. At a maximum depth of 7m and with charges suspended at mid-depth it allowed the measurement of free-field shockwave parameters out to about 2m from the charge. The normal maximum charge weight was 8lb TNT equivalent. A spectacular plume of water, some 30m high would signal the test firing of a big charge and a powerful ground-borne thump would shake the control room on the poolside. One day when the button was pressed, nothing happened. The detonator had functioned but the booster had failed and fragments of the detonator case had severed the cords holding the charge which was now lying somewhere on the bottom. I had always wanted to explore the bottom of Newton's Pool - could this be my chance? In the summer months we often enjoyed a quick dip in the pool to cool ourselves off but I had always wanted to bring in my aqualung to have a proper look at the bottom. It took a bit of persuading George Whitbread and Griff (the Site Safety Officer) to agree but in the end they agreed, subject to my having a safety line attached. The water was surprisingly clear and the bottom was quite firm and smooth. In the middle however, things were different. I found a pit full of oozy black mud. The happy chirruping of my exhaled bubbles changed to a dull 'gloop, gloop' as I pushed into it. The underwater torch was useless and I was reduced to groping around blindly with my hands trying to locate any large lumps but there appeared to be no firm bottom - just an increasing viscosity with depth. I gave up any hope of finding anything, extricated myself from the mud and swam back to report my findings to George and Griff. They seemed relieved that they weren't going to have to report how one of the staff had drowned in Newton's Pool. So we were still left with 8lb of unexploded Poly-X somewhere in the bottom of the pool. It was decided to carry out a counter-mining operation and a very large charge was lowered into the bottom mud and detonated. But it wasn't half as much fun!

Jim Hawkins JUNE 2001