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Inside Innovation

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NASA, the 'right stuff and flights of hyperbole

ONE of the best things about operating in the Science Park is the quality of people you meet – and surely George Abbey has to be one of the stars. Yet I doubt if you know the name...I didn't.

Could you name Lewis Hamilton's top mechanical engineer or the chief designer of his car?

It is a fact of life that certain roles capture the headlines, while others are destined always to be in the back rooms, at least as far as the public is concerned.

Let me mention a couple of names connected with George.

Jim Lovell – do you remember him? He was played in the movie by another new friend of Northern Ireland, Tom Hanks. Jim was the mission commander of the ill-fated Apollo 13 and it was George who led the earth-bound NASA team which delivered him and his crewmen to safety.

Another name (though this time of an inanimate object) is the International Space Station. George Abbey is the man credited with keeping the project alive post-Perestroika and advocating its sharing with the Russians. In effect, George is "manned mission NASA".

You might not agree with his conclusions and, if blogs are to be believed, you might not like his management style but you would have to respect his presence and his achievements.

He retired in 2001, as Director of the Johnson Space Centre in Texas, from where NASA-manned missions are controlled once the rocket or shuttle leaves the atmosphere over Florida.

George was brought to Belfast by the International Space School Trust (ISST). This charity is tasked to use astronauts as inspirational role models for children, to encourage them to value education and themselves.

The combination of intellect and physicality and the intense competition to get into space has become known as the 'right stuff'.

Astronauts come from all backgrounds and cultures and are walking examples to kids that the 'right stuff' comes from within, and not from where you live.

ISST organises teacher programmes and kids camps at NASA and also arranges astronaut visits to schools and to meet the public worldwide.

I told George that sometimes, in flights of hyperbole, that we call the Thompson Dock complex the 'Cape Canaveral' of 1912. He looked closely at the machines, read every poster board, asked a few questions, and agreed wholeheartedly. He might not be the last NASA guy to visit Titanic's Dock and Pump-House. Watch this space!