

OBITUARIES

ROBIN ANTHONY BENDALL 1925-2003



Robin Bendall was born in Clifton, Bristol on 16th March, 1925. He was educated at St Brendan's College, Clifton; in 1943 he took the wartime radio physics course at the University of Bristol. In 1945 he joined the Royal Navy and spent much of his time in the service as a Leading Radio Mechanic aboard the submarine depot ship H.M.S. Adamant in the Pacific. In the course of this he visited Hiroshima, the target of the world's first atomic bomb; an experience he never forgot. He returned to the University on demobilisation to complete his BSc in physics. On graduation in 1949 he joined the Bristol Aeroplane Company's newly formed Guided Weapons Department, becoming known in later years as one of the '49ers', the founding fathers of the department. He worked on the design and development of instrumentation for firing trials, and on the design of range facilities for trials in the UK and at Woomera in Australia. Eventually he became Engineering Executive responsible for all trials, test facilities and operating teams. He retired in October 1986.

Robin became an enthusiastic member of the UBSS in his first year at Bristol and resumed his activity as soon as he returned from his naval service. He served on the committee from 1950 to 1952 and it was during that period that he made an outstanding contribution to the Society. There was a general feeling that the standard of underground surveying in the Society was not high. It was also apparent that it was not possible to form sound views about the origins of caves unless accurate surveys were available. Fortunately, two seminal figures came together at this time; Robin and his friend John Crickmay. John, who is now one of our honorary life members, worked for the Ordnance Survey. The two of them put their heads together and devised new underground surveying techniques that would improve accuracy. Robin decided that the new techniques should be tested by a complete re-survey of GB Cave. Assisted in particular by Noel Blackwell, Joan Light (Pitts) and Tom Zealley, this was done and the result published in 1951. The surveying was marked by innovations such as the use of ex-RAF hand bearing and astro compasses, hydrogen-filled balloons, permanent marking of survey stations, calculation of errors, computation of the data and plotting of the survey on a co-ordinate basis. All this set a new standard and is a monument to Robin.

His other great contribution was his part in initiating the Society's long continued programme of exploration and research into the caves of the Burren district of Co.Clare. He was a leading member of all the early expeditions. Although a lot of new exploration was

carried out, the survey of the Coolagh River Cave was the backbone of the work that was done there in those first years. In the Burren at that time, surrounded by a vast area of largely unexplored limestone, we were rather like children in a sweet shop. It was the discipline of the survey that Robin imposed on us that kept us from rushing off in all directions and crawling down every new hole in the ground that we saw. Even at night in the hotel bar the tables were covered with sheets of survey data while he made rough sketch maps of the day's progress. The survey enabled us to understand the main sequence of events in the formation of the cave and it also pointed the way to new discoveries. It was published in 1953 with a description and analytical discussion of the cave, and is the second great monument to Robin's contribution to the Society.

Robin had Irish ancestry. His interest in genealogy led him to visit Ireland on several occasions in later life. Once he took his family to Ballynalacken Castle, which had been the base for our activities in the Coolagh River Cave, to call on our old friend and hostess from the 1940s, Maisie O'Callaghan. He is survived by Shirley, his wife of fifty years, and by his sister Chrystal. Both came to Burrington with him on caving trips while he was active in the Society. He is also survived by his sons Richard and Michael and by his four grandchildren. All have our sincere sympathy.

'Bob', as we called him at University, to the slight irritation of his family who used the diminutives 'Rob' or 'Robbie', was a great guy. His former colleagues at BAC speak of him warmly and with respect. They use phrases like... 'a privilege to work with'.... 'strong opinions voiced with confidence but always ready to listen'... 'kind and considerate, honest and unassuming'. He was fascinated by his work, loved problem solving and was excited at being at the cutting edge of technology. To those of us who knew him through University these descriptions do not come as a surprise.

He was tall, fair, handsome, seriously determined but with an irreverent sense of humour. When he appeared at Burrington, after returning from the navy, with his carelessly worn sheepskin jacket, his ex-navy gear and hammock, he provided exciting leadership for the younger students.

That affection and respect was displayed at his funeral service. Holy Trinity Church Minchinhampton was packed with former friends and colleagues on 8th July 2003. Canon Michael Irvine included generous mention of Robin's work with the UBSS. The presence of old friends from the Society showed our affection and gratitude for his contribution to the Society half a century ago.

Arthur ApSimon & John Pitts

Bibliography

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