

# Obituary – Bill Purves 1934-2016

by Tim Maguire, Celebrant, Caledonian Humanist Association

Bill Purves was born in Edinburgh on 4 February 1934, the only child to William and Edith Purves who lived in Seaview Terrace in Joppa.

✖ Bill's father was an actuary, but Bill was already more artistically and practically inclined. Despite that, after attending Melville College, which was then in Melville Street, Bill's father got him a job in insurance with Guardian Royal Exchange who were in the building on the corner of George Street that now houses the restaurant Amarone.

Bill hated the boring world of insurance and everything about it, so it's hardly surprising that he didn't do as well as his father had hoped, but the one good thing about being there was that he could do his work quickly and spent the rest of his time at the Lane Sales or reading books.

He took the early lunch hour that nobody else wanted, so that having gulped down a bite to eat he would be round at the auctions, buying furniture, both to resell and to furnish the house. He had the gift of seeing the beauty in things that others missed, and he enjoyed restoring his finds himself.

Bill had two spells on George Street, broken up by a two-year spell in the Naval Intelligence Section, which is how he spent his National Service, listening in on Russian radio traffic at the height of the Cold War. He was posted to Cuxhaven near Hamburg, where he had to learn Russian, and of course German too, and even after his National Service had finished, he was recalled as a reservist every year for several years afterwards.

It was in 1955 that Bill met his first wife, Marion Pringle, and they married and bought a flat at number 1, Scotland Street four years later in 1959.

They had two daughters, Caroline and Catherine.

✖ By this time, Bill's love of classic cars was already evident, as he and Marion had bought their first car, a 1934 Jowett, which his father named Belinda. Every summer the family packed Belinda to the gunnels and spent July and August camping at Largo, in Fife.

It was no ordinary tent. Bill designed the tent himself and commissioned Blacks of Greenock to manufacture it for his family. And in the summer of 1965, they remember waving together from the sand dunes at the flower-decked train that was the last on the East of Fife railway line to Elie and beyond, before the Beeching cuts.

Bill continued to work at Guardian Royal Exchange until the year he took advantage of the chance to attend the Courtauld Institute in London as a mature student, where he served a term as president of the Student's Union. Bill studied art and architectural history, and as part of his course one year he travelled to the north of Italy in his beloved Belinda to study architecture.

With a delicious irony Bill's tutor was Anthony Blunt, who famously, or perhaps infamously, passed secrets to Moscow while working for MI5 during the Second World War. Bill did rather wonder why it was that Blunt took a sabbatical year while Bill was there, but that is yet another question about The Cambridge Spy Ring that will probably never be answered.

Bill loved the freedom of London: it was the swinging sixties after all. Both girls remember that he always loved bright clothes, and he wore beautiful jewel-coloured shirts with his velvet jacket. Sandra explained to me he had actually designed

some of his own clothes and some of his ideas were made up for him on Carnaby Street, on the grooviest street in what was at the time the world's most fashionable city. And later, when the girls were 10 and 8, Bill took them to Carnaby Street to buy them hot pants, the height of fashion in 1970.

It was in 1968 that he met the woman who was to become the love of his life, at a party in Marylebone. Sandra Whitlam was an engineer, and they soon found themselves madly in love.

Their first pad was at No.1 Windmill Street in North Soho, where they met lots of people from the world of television, and it was on Windmill Street that they watched the moon landing in July 1969. Soho was an interesting place in those days: it was the centre of London's sex and crime worlds, and Bill had many stories about the Turkish and Greek Cypriot gangsters who ran the place in those days.

When Bill graduated, he and Sandra came back to Edinburgh together. Marion and the girls stayed at number 1 Scotland Street, while Sandra and Bill moved into number 4 along with Bill's father, who had had a stroke. He lived there with them until he died in March 1978. Scotland Street has always had its share of characters, which is probably why Sandy McCall Smith chose to set his novel at the famously non-existent number 44. When Bill moved in, you couldn't get a mortgage because of the subsidence, and there had been more than one brothel on the street back in the day.

During the late 60's and early 70's Bill started to restore buildings all around the New Town, putting back the original features and adding huge value to other people's properties, but typically not charging anything like enough for doing so.

He was passionate about the area in which he lived. He campaigned to have the New Town properly restored, and became a member of The Georgian Society. He was involved with the Drummond Civic Association and Drummond Place Gardens and was

instrumental in getting their railings restored – when the girls were growing up there had been none around the garden, because they'd all been taken away and melted down, as part of 'The War Effort'.

Bill had a passion for the past. He saw beauty and value where others didn't, and he loved raking through skips and junk shops as well as auctions for interesting things to restore. Bill zagged when the world zigged.

He took what was then a perverse view that if most people didn't like it, then there was bound to be something there of interest to him. Books were very important to him, and his house is filled with technical books as well as tomes on architecture, lighting and cars, steamers and canals.

It was at around this time that Bill started his lighting business on St Stephen Street, which in the early 1970s pretty much smelled of pot and patchouli oil – all except for Mr Purves's Lamp Emporium at number 59, which smelled strongly of paraffin.

Mr Purves's Lamp Emporium didn't keep regular hours. Bill did try to get people to sit in for him but that didn't really work. Bill still had to look after his father who by then was in a wheelchair, and that meant that sometimes Bill simply had to drop everything and run.

The only reason he could do this was that Sandra had a 'real' job as a professional civil engineer, mostly in Glasgow where she commuted every day, although she later joined Lothian Region.

Looking after the shop, and looking after his father took up most of his time, but he also got involved in the restoration of The Waverley. Now there's quite a story attached to this, so sit back and make yourselves comfortable.

When Bill was young, his family had often taken him 'Doon the

Watter' on the Waverley, and Bill's father knew a man who had been the skipper on the Waverley when she had been sunk during the evacuation of Dunkirk. In 1947, when Bill was 13 he went on a trip on the Lucy Ashton and it turned out that by then the man who had been the skipper on the Waverley when she was sunk was now the skipper of the Lucy Ashton. He invited the Young Willie up to the bridge, and allowed him to take the wheel, so of course, Bill was hooked. The bold captain said "Would you like to see me tomorrow?" Bill said, "yes sir!" and the captain said, "I'll be on another ship tomorrow", and sure enough he was.

The next day, Bill was at the quayside, scanning the horizon when into his ken swam a vessel that looked like what Bill thought was the Jeannie Deans, but it was not: it was of course, The new Waverley and it was on board The Waverley that Bill spent the rest of his holiday.

In 1974 Cal Mac decided that they would have to sell the Waverley because they simply couldn't afford to keep her running, and after much discussion they agree to sell it for a pound to The Paddle Steamer Preservation Society – who had to borrow the pound to do the deal in the first place.

Bill and Sandra attended a meeting in the James Watt Dock in Greenock where it was suggested that The Paddle Steamer Preservation Society themselves should run it. So they set about raising funds, and indeed The Waverley was back on the water the following year. Ian Burroughs, who was involved in Western Ferries, was the prime mover, and for several years the Waverley sailed from Anderson Quay all the way down the Clyde before she found herself stranded on the Gantocks on an ebb tide.

Bill and Sandra had supplied some lights for the Waverley, so they hurried over to retrieve them before she went into dry dock. When she finally made it back to work, she began to sail further afield, initially to Liverpool and Fleetwood and then

in 1978, she sailed all the way down to the Thames, and it was there, on board the paddle steamer that had meant so much to both of them, that Bill and Sandra had their wedding breakfast, on 28 April 1978. It must have been a very welcome breakfast, because the previous evening they and their guests had all gone down to London by the overnight train and on the way down, they drank the bar completely dry!

Bill continued to be involved with The Waverley for a long time. His nephew Magnus remembers seeing his Uncle Bill in full kilt regalia standing on deck when she docked in Tighnabruaich, and the girls remember joining Bill and their grandfather for cruises all around the Kyles of Bute.

Engineering was a profession for Sandra, but an all-consuming hobby for Bill. He knew about car engines and architectural structures, but he was entirely self-taught. After the Waverley was up and running, he and Sandra got involved with the Edinburgh Canal Society which at the time had nowhere to live, and once again he was a prime mover, responsible for building the society's base and its boathouse at Harrison Park, and becoming its Boatman.

In typical Bill fashion, he found a collection of motor boats abandoned in a shed: they were of the kind he remembered from his childhood on the Clyde, so he brought them to Edinburgh, restored them and housed them at Harrison Park and that was the nucleus of their fleet. He remained very much involved with the society for many years and he was very much a part of the campaign to reopen the canal, which eventually happened thanks to the Millennium Funding.

He was still very much involved till 2006, when his health began to give him some problems, and that was when he really got back into cars.

Bill began to have problems with his health after the turn of the millennium when he and Sandra were involved in a nasty car

crash en route to the Auto Jumble at Beaulieu in Hampshire.

Sandra was thrown out of the vehicle and landed on her feet: her glasses had flown off her head, and she had a cracked bone in her wrist, but otherwise, she was OK. Bill on the other hand was not so lucky. He was taken to hospital with a head injury, and it seems likely that the crash may have caused the brain damage with which he lived ever since. He immediately became less independent, but otherwise was very much the Bill we all knew and loved.



Bill with Bradford and  
Belinda

It was in the 90s that his style began to change. Some of you may remember Bill's propensity for wearing medium heeled court shoes with his faded blue boiler suit, as well as with his A-line kilted skirts. He was always an original dresser.

And it was around then that I learned that you engaged Bill in conversation at your peril, because he was a great one for fixing you like the Ancient Mariner and giving you a monologue on the pros and cons of double-flanged pin hinges.

It didn't really matter if the subject didn't interest you, or if you were in a bit of a rush, Bill was interested, so you had to go with the flow and wait for him to stop. He was oblivious to this to the extent that if he and Sandra were at a party or any other social gathering, Sandra quickly learned that she had to give herself at least an hour to plan an exit before Bill would finally be ready to leave. Phone calls with Bill could go on for a long, long time too, but he had so much enthusiasm for his subject, you could never be grumpy for long.

Bill was without doubt, a character. He was public spirited, he was nationalistic without being a party man, and he was much loved by all who knew him. Sandra really was the most

important person in his life, and she managed him as nobody else could ever have done.

Bill's health gradually declined over the last year, but he refused to give up or give in.

He was taken to the acute stroke ward at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and he walked out of there twice – on two sticks, because he didn't like the Zimmer frame – and he somehow managed to get onto a bus without any money or even a bus pass – and both times he was rescued by the police.

After his stroke Bill's speech was unintelligible, so Sandra was never able to find out how he managed this.

The second time, the police not only rescued him but they also very kindly gave him a lift home.

***William (Bill) Purves Born Edinburgh 4 February 1934 and died Edinburgh 6 October 2016***