

Towards the end of last year we lost two people who had contributed much to Petworth during their lives. Petworth Pages would like to thank the families of both men who have allowed us to tell their stories.

Robin Wilson CBE 1933–2019

Written by Tony Sneller January 2020 – “I have to thank Jacqueline and James for making available a copy of the eulogy they gave at the Thanksgiving service for Robin at St Mary’s Parish Church, Fittleworth on the 26th November. I have drawn heavily on their words. Thanks to Gillian and Ginette for their permission to write this obituary.”

It was with sadness that The Coultershaw Trust heard that Robin Wilson had passed away on the 11th November. The Heritage site as we now know it was very much Robin’s creation. He was instrumental in the foundation of The Coultershaw Trust in 2002 to take responsibility for the site from the Sussex Industrial Archaeology Society, and has been the Chair of Trustees since then.

It was Robin’s inspired leadership that led to the successful bids to the Heritage Lottery Fund. This enabled an extensive survey of the site to be undertaken and paved the way for the inclusion of the Engine House and the hand pumps, the building of the boardwalk across the course of the canal, and the restoration of the warehouse to provide a meeting space and much needed workshop.

Robin was born in Croydon in 1933 and after the death of his mother when he was 3, he was brought up by grandparents whilst his father managed a mine in Nigeria. He was the third generation of the family to go to Glenalmond College near Perth, a happy time and the start of a long connection as he recently spent 6 years as chairman of the school council.

At 15, Robin was given a small dingy and this started his lifelong passion for sailing. He took his love of sailing back to Glenalmond and set up a sailing club.

In spite of competing in regattas around the country, he gained a bursary to go to Glasgow University and, much to the surprise of his school tutor, graduated with a degree in Civil

Engineering and from there went to work for the engineering firm Halcrows and subsequently completed a masters degree.

Apart from his ongoing love of the sport, sailing had another major impact on Robin’s life – it was at the boat show in 1956 that Robin met Gillian who was working there and they were married later that year. They celebrated their 63 years of marriage 8 days before Robin passed away.

About this time, Robin was recruited by R Travers Morgan and stayed with the company for the rest of his professional life. Some of his first projects were in south eastern Nigeria and Robin and Gillian and Jacqueline lived there for a while. In 1960 they came to live in Pulborough; an ideal location strategically placed near the mainline to London and with easy access to sailing at Itchenor. Ginette and James arrived shortly afterwards and in 1970 they moved to Grove House at Little Bognor.



Robin, (2016) on the foundations of the old toll cottage at Coultershaw

Robin became a partner in Travers Morgan in 1965, senior partner in 1985 and chairman in 1988. His specializations became motorway route location studies, environmental assessments, public enquiries, highway design and traffic and transportation studies. He developed the civil engineering side of Travers Morgan so much that they became the go to company for government investment in the transport system, and by 1989 they were 1500 strong with offices around the world.

Robin was a member of the Institute of Civil Engineers (ICE) for many years and was elected to the council in 1977. He became vice president in 1988 and president in 1991. His presidential address, in typical Robin style, began: “In the next ten years, the institution will be faced with the challenge of further changes which, I trust, will be met not as threats to a well-established order but as opportunities to better serve society”.

Robin retired, if that is the right word, from Travers Morgan after his year as president of ICE – but he did not stop. He became president of the Construction Industry Council, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering (only 800 in the entire world) and advised the government on the Channel Tunnel. He was president of the Smeatonian Society, the oldest engineering society in existence, ensuring that Princess Anne took over as patron from the Duke of Edinburgh. He became Master of the Worshipful Company of Paviers, during which time he determinedly sought to petition for a Royal Charter, previously denied by the Court of Aldermen in 1683. Deservedly he was awarded a CBE in the Queen’s Birthday honours in 1992.

Robin’s achievements seemed boundless as was his energy. He purchased a part share in a sailing boat, Kittiwake, that was moored at Itchenor and in 1977 he became the youngest commodore of the club. The next four years involved planning and fundraising to expand and modernise some of the Club’s facilities.

In their tributes, his family have said that “he was self-effacing, kind, generous and funny, he loved cracking a joke,