

Robin Wilson CBE

by Coultershaw Trust | Feb 2, 2020 | News

It was with sadness that The Coultershaw Trust heard that Robin Wilson had passed away on the 11th November 2019. 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 - leaving his mark by overseeing the expansion of the school facilities.

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 that provided an excuse not to have to play cricket. He told his son James on several occasions that the attraction of sailing was being independent and in control and escaping from being told what to do!

In spite of completing 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. He then went to work for the engineering firm Halcrows, but the focus of his life was on gaining a place in the 1956 Olympic sailing team. At some point things changed and his attention turned to his professional career and he 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. Robin was proud of their 3 children, Jacqueline, Ginnette and James, and their 6 grandchildren.

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, 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. Ginnette and James arrived shortly afterwards and in 1970 they moved to Grove House at Little Bognor.

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" In his year as president Robin and Gillian toured the UK and abroad encouraging engineer projects large and small.

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), 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, quite often the same one".

Robin's work colleagues have said of him:

"Robin encouraged an ethos in the company that all subscribed to, an allegiance to the client, absolute integrity in terms of professional obligation. He was a team builder, there was not one person in the company who did not like him. He was my mentor and helped me enormously in my early career. He was tough but utterly reasonable. He taught the engineers how to write reports succinctly and accurately. His advice was to aim the report at an intelligent grandmother. He had intellectual clout".

Those are characteristics of Robin that we have seen and enjoyed at Coultershaw. His enthusiasm was boundless and no task was beneath him – he was equally at ease using his considerable charm to squeeze favours from high places where favours were needed, or oiling the machinery. It was only last spring that Robin was on his hands and knees painting white the edges of the steps in, and around, the Engine House.

I only really got to know Robin since 2016 when I was invited to become a Trustee at Coultershaw, having only met him briefly at the open evenings. I appreciated his friendship in those few short years – to me he was a giant of a man, but a very gentle and humble giant.

Robin has for many years been so influential and such an integral part of Coultershaw's success – his input will be missed, but we are thankful for the legacy that he has left in our care.

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.

Recent News

Robin Wilson – photos February 5, 2020

Robin Wilson CBE February 2, 2020

Coultershaw open during National Mills Weekend on Sunday 10th May 2019 February 22, 2018

Coultershaw Souvenir Mug now on sale May 18, 2017

Coultershaw open on Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd September 2019 as part of Heritage Open Days May 18, 2016

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