

Summer in the Scillies

Some places are redolent of another time and place, others by a personal presence unseen, but overpowering. As I sit and watch the sunset in the remote and gorgeous anchorage of St Helens Pool in the Isles of Scilly there is a friendly ghost by my side, and his name is Bill.

Bill Robinson came into my life during my teens, about the time I bought my first sailing dinghy. Bill was in his forties by then, but I knew of him already as a local character and renowned dinghy sailor. Bill was kind enough to give me the benefit of good advice on sailing matters, most of which I promptly (and stupidly) ignored. Fortunately for me, Bill was wise enough to know in advance that this would be the case, and kind enough to forgive it as the arrogance of youth.

Bill had grown up by the sea beside the River Exe in Devon, before joining the RAF as a fighter pilot flying the early generation of jets. He had a fund of great stories of those days flying Hunters from coastal bases such as Bradwell and Chivenor, and of flying displays at great air shows. He had also got the sailing bug, and raced dinghies like National 12's and Larks at a competitive level. Later in life he had trained as a teacher, with a parallel career as a photographer and journalist, specialising in sailing matters.

Bill was a true eccentric – not the grotesquely fabricated kind to be found on television, but the old-fashioned English type. Bill genuinely didn't think he was odd, it was everyone else who was. Quite what the kids he taught made of him, or his ways, I do not know, especially as some of his teaching techniques were decidedly different, but I do know that, had it been me in one of his classes, I'd have enjoyed him.

Completely without pretence, Bill delighted in the ridiculousness of life and was always ready to laugh at himself. He delighted in causing gentle mayhem through the letters page of the local paper, the Gazette (known as the "Guts-ache"), under a variety of *noms de plume* such as Colonel Bloodnock and Mrs Hilary Bracegirdle, who spouted a hilarious form of Victorian madness on local matters of the day, saw Reds under every bed and still believed we had an Empire. That anyone should have been daft enough not to see these missives for what they were was unbelievable to all those but the afflicted, who were often moved to apoplexy by Bill's teasing. Letters of response awash with vitriol and vituperation would follow, ensuring that the letters page would be required reading for some weeks to follow.

Later in life Bill began to suffer from hay fever, and took the opportunity to do something about it in a novel way. Out on the water he suffered far less, so he built a plywood Van de Stadt pocket cruiser called "Idlebird", just big enough to take him down to the Isles of Scilly during his long summer holidays, where he could sail around living off the land and the sea, without the nuisance of hay fever.

Idlebird was spartan – to describe her as basic would have been too generous. But everything was there, and together they sailed safely and efficiently for years up and down to his beloved islands. In this way, Bill became an expert on the Isles of Scilly,

penning a number of excellent articles on sailing around them, full of colour and life and wonderfully barny bits of lore.

By this time I had progressed to my first “proper” yacht, a 27ft UFO, and with Bills’ advice ringing in our ears, I and three friends set off for our first cruise to the islands. Wild weather on the way, a fuel pipe that came off depositing all of our diesel into the bilges, thick fog on our way into the islands and a frighteningly near miss with a coaster on the way back were what we had signed up for, and we had a fantastic and memorable time. And we had all become addicted to the islands, as Bill had known would be the case.

What did I learn from Bill? Some very simple lessons. Always retain a healthy respect for the sea, never waste a fair wind, and if you have to move, move now. Oh, and always carry plenty of anchors – Bill had no less than five aboard Idlebird. Good lessons, and they have never let me down.

By the time of his retirement, Bill and I were constantly in deep discussion about our ideal cruiser for the “big one” – round the world. Of course, we had very different ideas, but Bill beat me to it and bought a steel hull and deck from the board of Nick Skeates, called a Wylo II, a gaff rigged ocean going Land Rover. Of course, she had some of Bill’s hallmarks from birth, such as no cockpit (why, Bill, why?), but as several of her sisters have been sailed everywhere highly effectively, there was no doubt in my mind that Bill would get there, too.

Sadly, as so often happens, fortune was waiting just around the corner, and disaster struck. One bout with the big C was defeated, but a second proved too much, and Bill’s powerful spark was extinguished. And so ended the life of one of the kindest, funniest, generous spirits I have had the good fortune to know.

The great American writer and humourist Damon Runyan was once asked how he would like to be remembered – “with affection, once a year, by one good friend”, was his reply. To me the islands will always be about Bill, and as I look around his favourite of all of the anchorages that he knew so well, I kept expecting to catch a glimpse of a little blue yacht tucked away in the best spot in the place.

But she wasn’t there, and so I did the next best thing, pouring a libation of Messrs. Tesco’s finest Chateau Cardboard (Bill would have shunned anything more extravagant) over the side, to Bill, with thanks for the fun, advice and inspiration that brought us here, and that will carry us towards the horizon - and to remind him that he will be with us, too, at least once a year.

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June 2009