

A celebration of life William Lesley Harbord (Bill)

4th February 1933 – 3rd July 2021

2.45pm, 29th July 2021, West Norwood Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Bill was born in Lambeth on February 4th, 1933, the eldest child of Bill and Renee Harbord. Bill senior's family ran a photography business, and he was an expert watercolourist and tinter of photographs. Later, together with Bill junior they started up an antiques business, selling in Portobello and Bermondsey Markets. Their creativity rubbed off on both their children – his sister Jacqueline, born eleven years later, became a figure skater and was the British National Champion in 1962. We'll come on to Bill's creativity in a bit – it took many forms!

Bill went to Loughborough Junction School, though for part of his childhood, during the war, he and Renee moved out to Whitstable to escape the bombing, a time Bill really enjoyed, and he went back to Church Street Whitstable from time to time to indulge in a bit of nostalgia. He enjoyed most aspects of the war, actually, particularly picking up lumps of shrapnel and firing them from catapults made of inner tubes. Like many boys, he was allowed to run pretty wild at that time – Bill Senior did not have much time to keep an eye on him, given that he was busy both as a volunteer fireman and taking and tinting photos of soldiers – a business much in demand.

Bill probably left school at 14. The family emigrated for a while to Canada, settling in Galt, Ontario. There's a lovely picture from that time of Bill teaching Jackie to skate on a frozen lake – something that was to shape her life. But they didn't stay in Canada long. No sooner did they get home, than Bill headed back to Canada – he knew he was about to be called up for National Service, and he wasn't too keen on the idea.

Finally, after quite a bit of travelling, the Ministry of Defence caught up with him, and he ended up in the RAF in communications, based on Hayling Island. And after all that running away, he loved it, and had a great two years, and, as you'll hear in a minute from Vicky, it was there he met Enid, the love of his life.

Graham, Enid's son, was born after they got together, and went into foster care, though they kept in close contact with him. Graham's foster parents were great, but when he was six they pointed out to Bill and Enid that it was time to make him part of their lives, if they were going to – and they did. 1966 was an eventful year for the family. Bill and Enid married, Graham returned, and their daughter Alexandria died, in their basement flat in Wiltshire Road, just a few hours after her birth. Vicky was born the following year.

Graham will now talk to us about Bill.

My first memory of Billy – as I called him – was when he picked me up from my foster home and took me on a “get to know you” drive to Greenwich with Enid. The Cutty Sark and the Maritime Museum were our favourite destinations. The first thing he did when I bundled into the back of the mini traveller would be to pull the magnetic St Christopher ashtray off the dashboard and make radio contact with the Martians. He tells me they are very nice people and they are very interested in me. As the months turned into years he kept up the Martian contact and I was completely convinced by this!!

Then Billy and Enid married and rented a small basement flat in Brixton and I went to live with them. New name, new parents, new school, new area. Although it was a shock for me, the overriding sense in this new environment was fun and laughter.

We took nothing seriously: laughter, giggles. puns and on and on. Bill would not take even today seriously!! On the very few occasions I was in a church with him, he would wait until the end if the choir was singing and would say with a dead pan face "would someone please put that cat out"!!!

Alexandria was born in said basement flat in Brixton and died a few short hours after being born. She had a heart defect. I was way too young to realise what was going on and could not gauge the effect this tragedy had on Bill and Enid, but wanted to mention her name here today.

Vicky came along...within a year, and the stage was set for our family unit!

Bill and Enid sent me to stage school, Billy would drive me when the situation demanded, at 5.00am from Brixton to East Acton so I could catch the coach to the studio. He never ever complained.

Billy never gave us a sense that money was tight but he schooled me in the art of helping him push the mini traveller up to a speed along Wiltshire Road where he could jump back in and bump start it!! In fact I have a vivid memory us doing this when he had his arm in a sling as he had dislocated his shoulder at judo! Nutcase!

We moved to Hamilton Road in the early 70's as I became a teenager. He was the best father at this time. Although he was cultivating his anti-establishment persona he had also become alarmingly fit!! We would go running around Battersea Park track a few times to warm up then on to the Embankment, jog 2 lamp posts, spring 1 lamp post and so on, bridge after bridge!! Amazing.

We joined Crystal Palace sports centre when it first opened. Again we would run around the motor racing circuit endlessly!! He even fell in with a bunch of training boxers who would jog round dragging a car tyre on a rope tied round their waist!! Super fit.

During these years we discovered the joys of camping and spent all our summer breaks at East or West Wittering camp sites, such fun, such happy memories. with the Dagnells.

We moved to Norwood Road in the late 70s.

I married and moved out not long after we got to Norwood Road. Bill loved that house and loved Brockwell Park. He loved his dogs!!! Both our parents loved walking around Brockwell Park, throwing balls and frizbies for untrained, over fed, crazy dogs!!

Billy never held much respect for traditional education and would always just encourage us to be in "in the moment" not to stress over revision or exams. I gained a single "O level" in 1975. His reaction... well done Gra! He always thought that being able to juggle and do handstands would see you right in this world!

Billy was a gentle man. Wildlife and nature in general filled him with horror, that a small creature had to be killed by a bigger creature etc etc

Bill never shouted at us, he did not mind about the state of our house, our rooms or clothes, he just wanted us to be ok, to be happy.

He loved to debate! To provoke! He had endless theories up his sleeve as to the state of the world. but always managed to inject humour into what he said.

He was a family man. never went to the pub, always preferring to sit around the house, usually in his pants, tossing endless swan vesta matches into the bin or at least near to the bin, whilst forever re lighting his pipe!!!

We did not bring many friends home. Me, only one. Les! Bill loved Les and used to spend hours with us up Norwood Park, jumpers for goal posts, kicking a ball like friends, on our teenage level. "In the moment"

He encouraged me and Vicki to look on the bright side, to be optimistic, to have a laugh and to be ourselves.

All that said, he was not a saint!!! A cunning manipulator with a twinkle in his eye as he got older and more frail. Becoming weaker was hard for him and losing Enid was a massive blow. His final years were spent frustrated at his ever weaker body. But he did not complain, he did not get very crotchety! Instead he picked us off like ducks at the fair! Lidi sent for fags, me sent for whiskey, Jack and Max sent for more fags, cigars and whiskey, Vic getting just about everything else!!

Eventually his horizon narrowed down to a bed in a nursing home. He took this in his stride and soon became a favourite with the wonderful people there. It humbles me to think these unsung heroes do what they do.

One last anecdote. A couple of days before he died he asked me in his whispery faltering voice (on arrival at the nursing home) if I could have a "rummage around the bed". What for Billy I ask? The tv remote? Your phone? No Gra, he said, my "off button" - then his shoulders go up and down and his face has a wide grin.

Goodbye Billy Boy

You made us grin!!

But back to the 60s.

Bill had taken on a job which would shape his life, as a porter at Philips Auctioneers in Bond Street, and armed with his ever-increasing knowledge of art and antiques, he went into business with his parents.

And as if parenthood, study and business was not enough, during these years he was very active in judo, achieving a Black Belt second Dan and being a coach for the London County Council. At the same time, this was a man who would routinely drink half a bottle of whiskey a day, smoke endless roll ups, and eat nothing but fry ups. He could often be seen ordering a full English breakfast for himself, and a second one for which ever dog was his companion at the time.

In memory of all those whiskeys, we're now going to hear a song which Vicky and Enid used to sing to Bill as he poured another one.

Don't Sell Daddy Any More Whiskey - Molly O'Day & The Cumberland Mountain Folk

The flat in Wiltshire Road was condemned and demolished, a lucky thing for the Harbord family as they were moved by Lambeth Council to 39 Hamilton Road, the two top floors of a massive Victorian house, with lots of space and a big garden. Not that a garden was particularly important to Bill – he never gardened in his life, inadvertently creating a series of wildlife sanctuaries – though it was somewhere to let the dogs out. But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here because it was at the house in Norwood Road that Bill really enjoyed neglecting the garden. Why bother, with the whole of Brockwell Park right there, for Sukie, Emma, Tinkerbelle and all the other pooches who Bill adored over the years, to run in?

Bill loved his dogs, and he loved Brockwell Park, where he made friends with generations of dogs and dog walkers – some of the latter are I believe here today.

Bill and Enid adored each other, and their children say that they were perfectly matched. At some point they had been to child psychology classes, and had been told (this was the 60s, remember) not to impose rules on their children. And they didn't. Graham and Vic were never told what to do, never told to tidy up, left in other words to be as wild as Bill had been in his youth. And yet he loved them deeply, and always had their safety and future in mind. When Vic went out, she wasn't told what time to be back by, but there'd always be a £20 note by the door and a message telling her to use it to come back in a cab.

Vic would now, while remembering Bill with great fondness, like to read us that famous poem of the tensions between generations, Philip Larkin's "This be the Verse", and then she'll tell us more about Bill.

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.*

*But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sappy-stern
And half at one another's throats.*

*Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.*

Walks with William Harbord

Thank you for coming to dad's send off. At this time, I want to explore who was William or Bill Harbord - the father, the husband, the grandad, the arts and antique dealer and the man. Doubt if I can do him justice in five minutes, but here goes.

I read that poem written by Philip Larkin in 1971 because it appealed to him and represents the sheer audacity of the post-war generation, John Lennon, CND, and later Pink Floyd's The Wall "Leave them kids alone".

During lockdown, I managed to go for walk with Dad every day. His body creaked with age, and it could take him five or six minutes even to stand. When he emerged at the front door on his zimmer walker, I'd say to myself: "One day he won't open that door".

We did our usual bickering about the politics of the day. But on those lockdown walks I learned more about his life. He told me about growing up. This is all from memory, so I hope I'm getting it right. He described how his grandad Harbord was a good-looking man who came from Great Yarmouth to London to model hats for Moss Bros. I tried to discover why had we never seen much of the Harbord side of the family. He just shook his hands [gesture it] when I asked about that.

Before rationing Dad ate eggs, bacon and an orange. An athlete's breakfast. From age six, world war two began and after a short evacuation he stayed mainly in Brixton. He recalled wandering on Clapham Common alone wearing a gas mask while his mother was out at work. I always wondered if he became so laid back because he grew up with bombs dropping around his ears. As Felicity said, he kind of enjoyed the war, catapulting bricks across bomb sites with his friends. He allegedly could imitate a whistling bomb so well his mother sent everyone rushing to the Anderson shelter. It was only on the third or fourth time of this trick that he received 'a hiding'.

He was also a devil with his chemistry set. Bill's mother had banned him from using it, so the mix of chemicals and gunpowder was only brought out when she went to the shops. When one friend stationed at the window called out "She's back early and coming up the road with the groceries", a ten-year old Bill threw the whole lot onto the open fire. I can only imagine her dismay as she witnessed a large explosion from her front room window, as a cry of "Billy!" rose up her throat.

He was great fan of Richmal Crompton's Just William stories. Life imitating art no doubt. Dad told me how the gun powder of that chemistry set made its way to the Ritzy cinema in Brixton where he dropped small amounts of it into each of the ashtrays. Then he and his friends watched as the cinema goes jumped back at the tiny explosions occurring unexpectedly in front of them.

Dad's parents Bill and Renee had thought him too immature to return to Canada without them at the age of 18 or 19 in the early 1950s. He still chewed gum and made bubbles, so they might have had a point. To be on the safe side, they'd sent a social worker in Toronto to pick him up from the ship that carried him across the Atlantic. However, five of his mates were at the quayside, mobbing him when he arrived and dragging him off. He managed to wave from a distance to the social worker lady waiting for him with a placard.

*Dad had a habit of making friends. Even in the Sloane nursing home, where he spent his final days, everyone seemed to love him. Jackie the cleaner went to chat and laugh with him when her shift finished. "Your dad," the staff would say to me and Graham. "He's a lovely man". **But no one on earth thought he was more lovely than one Enid Shirley Willson, our mum.***

He'd met Enid on Hayling Island when he was doing his National Service (something he might have been dodging when he joined the Norwegian Merchant Navy, and then travelled in Sweden with Ted). It was the early 50s and a chance game of ping pong led eventually to one of the happiest marriages I've ever seen.

William Harbord was a striking figure. Elvis Presley-esque. I always remember when we went to the dentist in the West End. As we parked the Hillman Hunter a woman came ambling over to Dad and said: "Are you a movie star?" Mum and I heard it clearly and spent the rest of the day teasing him about it. He preened and smiled, only to confess later that she'd actually said: "Are you moving your car?"

While mum thought all other women would fall for his charms, Graham and I knew that no one other than our tolerant, kind and utterly laid-back mother could have coped with William Harbord's messiness. Even my sons who follow in his footsteps from time to time concede when their rooms are becoming "Way too grandad".

For Graham and I, our house as children was always full of pianolas, violins with missing strings, auction house catalogues piled a metre high, books and newspapers strewn on the floor, dog toys, our toys and the odd wardrobe placed for seemingly no reason in a narrow corridor. And the obligatory stuffed alligator.

“If you have stock, Vic,” he’d say to me, “You are safe, you have assets.” As far as we could tell, his role as a porter at Philips Auction house kickstarted the passion that - beyond family - became his life: art and antiques. Fascinated by a trade that combined the history and high culture of art and the sheer excitement of dealing, he went to the library of the Victoria & Albert Museum every afternoon he could in order to know more. He learned to recognise all the silver hallmarks, he got to distinguish his Tang from his Ming Dynasty vases, his Meissen and Doulton from his Wedgwood. He invented the SilTest pencil to help dealers identify plate from sterling and sold it by mail order.

Although he’d left secondary modern school at 14 (I think) with few qualifications, Dad had made use of the library where he was stationed for National Service and read many of the classics, especially Thomas Hardy. I remember when he asked me what I was reading in my first year at university. “Arist-o-phanes” I said. “You mean Aristophanes [pronounced correctly] you nana.”

A consummate autodidact, self-taught and proud he questioned the wisdom of me going to university. By the time I started my masters after a year at a French university and some time in a Polish uni I was rapidly becoming the worrying perpetual student of the family. I was so broke when he helped me moved into my college room, I had bin bags rather than suitcases “You look more like a refugee than a student,” he quipped as we dragged my possessions across the quad.

It was fair to describe Bill Harbord as something of a controversialist. Provoking a reaction became part of who he was. When our neighbour Marion Buhkari had open house with fabulous food (every month or so), she’d invite her fellow lecturers from The School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS). They were mostly women and it was the 80s. Naturally, he couldn’t resist saying something like: “Isn’t it funny how women always fall over when they run” and the room would erupt with indignation.

Dad’s conspiracy theories were legendary among his dog walking fraternity. When he met with the gang after the second lockdown last year Stephen and Dene were keen to hear the latest.

At one stage during our lockdown walks William Harbord tried to persuade me that covid was being passed through showers, and it was only a matter of time before the authorities worked this out.

His grandsons Jack and Max loved his theories, and sometimes he got it right – although the moon landings taking place in a studio in Washington and his ‘Shakespeare didn’t write Shakespeare’ ones were probably off the mark. But they kept my mum and dad in conversation for many years.

I think the man I’m trying to paint is a mass of contradictions. Highbrow, low brow. Incredibly intelligent and a businessman through and through, but at the same time relaxed, apt to generalise if it stirred a reaction and on occasions just out for a giggle.

He survived World War two and Covid. He survived an inordinate amount of whisky, fried food and fags. He was always his own man. Devoted to family. So happy in our company and the company of his friends, his business associates, fellow traders and his hounds.

I won't ever see him step out of his front door again, ready for a walk. But I will cherish the way he looked out for me and Graham and the way he made us laugh. On 3rd of July, the world lost an extraordinary character and as the song - and Enid Harbord - would say, a mighty fine man.

The seventies and eighties brought their own challenges. Renee died when she was only 62, and Bill was quite depressed for a couple of years, and then along came the Antiques Roadshow, encouraging everyone to think they could make money out of their junk. Instead of people calling Bill and his father in to clear their parents' houses, suddenly they were having things valued.

But he kept the business going, diversifying as much as he could, carried on with his judo and took up youth work. He became a legend locally, teaching self-defence to the women of Brixton, and becoming great friends with both his students and their partners.

Time passed, and Bill developed a new side-line. Pictures! It was what finally got his name all over the Daily Mail and the Telegraph. Let's not dwell on that too much, suffice to say, that if any of his artist friends are here today, well, you clearly did a very good job.

We know that Bill had a prankster nature. He convinced a neighbour she was being offered rehoming in the mansion in Brockwell Park, kept "Nuclear Power No Thanks" stickers handy to display in the car when passing through areas with nuclear power stations, and upset the feminists guests of a neighbouring academic with all sorts of loud, un-feminist remarks. This to the horror of Vicky, for whom this neighbour was something of an inspiration and mentor. Don't forget that Bill was a great admirer of Saul D Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals" which contains the advice: "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon. There is no defence. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also, it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage."

Bill and Enid always enjoyed a pun and a joke with each other and friends. Enid became ill with dementia in 2015. As ever, Bill took whatever happened with acceptance and tolerance, managing a laugh from time to time as he cared for her. She died in January 2019. She had been a chorister in her youth, and their neighbour, Grace Vaughan will now sing one of her favourite songs, Ave Maria.

Ave Maria, sung by Grace Vaughan

Bill never stopped working – almost to the end he was sending Graham off to the bank to get out cash and take it to people who were doing things for him.

Grandsons Sam and Luke came along in 1983 and 1991, followed by Jack in 97 and then Max in 2002. Enid and Bill often looked after Jack and Max as small children and Bill would scrunch up the newspaper into balls and create a play fight with the boys. Vicki would arrive home to find the living room floor hidden under a sea of newspaper missiles.

Max remembers Bill buying him a Samurai sword for his 15th birthday. This was removed to the garage and quietly forgotten by Vicki and her then husband Andrew. A number of BB guns were also given to the boys over the years, and a gun that was actually a lighter and shot flames. Graham and his then wife Sonia were quite convinced Bill selected gifts for their danger, squeaker or hooter factor.

Jack and Max both helped out their grandad at Portobello, and Max is now interested in taking the antiques business forward – something that pleased Bill immensely.

Nine-years ago, the brilliantly quirky and super smart Starr arrived on the scene. It was his biggest treat to see his great granddaughter on “Wiggy Wednesdays”. Little kids lit him up as much as dogs! And both Bill and Enid remembered with fondness their time Sam, Starr’s dad, went to stay with them for a while in Norwood Road.

But in the end, a lifetime of whiskey, fry ups and roll ups had to catch up with him, and after that fall, he really didn’t recover. The cause of death was put down as “frailty”, something Bill really wouldn’t have appreciated.