

Memories of Wilbert McKee

From the Stockport Express



• Wilbert McKee and, right, some of the classic cars which formed a parade at his funeral

Classic car man's farewell parade

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A POPULAR racing mechanic was escorted to his funeral by an entourage of vintage cars.

Wilbert McKee, who passed away at the age of 89, was a highly respected mechanic who was renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of cars.

He made a prolific contribution to the world of British racing, working for the likes of Connaught, Buckler, Lotus, Ferrari, Jaguar, Aston Martin and Rolls Royce cars over the years.

Wilbert counted racing legends among his friends, chauffeured film stars and even owned a car with royal

connections.

On Monday, his funeral cortege was escorted from his home in Heaton Mersey, along the A6 to Stockport Crematorium by an entourage of around 20 classic cars, including his own Buckler racing car, a 1929 Rolls Royce and a 1938 Buick.

Wilbert's love for cars really began when, as a young man, he bought a clapped out old 1936 Mercedes Benz Spezial Roadster for £15 to tinker with,

As it became too expensive to run, he decided to sell it, and when he took a closer look at the paperwork discovered it had once been owned by Wallis Simpson, the wife of Edward the VIII.

The car is now in the Stuttgart Mercedes-Benz Museum and is estimated

to be worth several million pounds.

When he was 20, Wilbert moved to England from his native Northern Ireland to work on the famous Connaught racing cars.

From there, we went on to work for Buckler race cars, before going to work for the Lotus racing team.

He also worked for Ferrari, where he met Enzo Ferrari, and went on to work for Jaguar and Aston Martin.

While working for Rolls Royce, he was once asked to chauffeur a potential customer - the film star Diana Dors.

On another occasion, during a quiet moment when he worked at Oulton Park, Wilbert took Formula One driver Graham Hill's baby son for a walk in his pram, in an

effort to stop him crying.

But after being startled by a friend, he managed to accidentally tip the baby - future racing driver Damon Hill - out of his pram and into a muddy puddle.

Wilbert later owned a motorbike shop in Hyde, where his customers included TT racers.

Beyond his life's work, Wilbert was a devoted family man.

Julie Banks, the daughter of Wilbert's partner of more than 30 years Eileen, said: "Wilbert stood by us all over the years and supported us in ways that we needed.

"He treated us like his daughters and I am proud to say that he called us his family. He will always be loved, and each of us will carry treasured memories of him forever."

Memories of Wilbert

Speaker
Julie Banks

"Firstly I would like to say thank you to all of you for coming, especially to Simon and George who have been busy contacting all of Wilbert's friends. I know that Wilbert would have loved the entourage of classic cars and could probably tell a tale about all of them.

Wilbert met Mum 31 years ago during which time they were inseparable. He touched all of our lives in so many ways, and he was and always will be a cherished part of our family.

Wilbert stood by us all over the years and supported us in ways that we needed. He treated us like his daughters and I am proud to say that he called us his family. He will always be loved, and each of us will carry treasured memories of him forever".

What lovely words spoken by Julie, a fitting tribute indeed... One thing that I quickly learned about Wilbert was that he was so very loved and respected, though he probably didn't realise just how much, as he was unassuming and not the kind to encourage or expect praise.

For some he was the quietly spoken man who lived down the road, for others he was the guy who could often be found in his overalls tinkering with cars or tuning up bikes for the local kids. That was until the police asked him to stop because they couldn't keep up with them! As we have heard from Julie, for Eileen and her family, he was their rock, the one who stood by them through so many of life's challenges and celebrations. They depended on each other... For his friend Simon, who counted Wilbert as one of his closest friends, he was not only a great friend, he was the learned colleague who Simon had heard about for 30 years or more, he got to know him when Wilbert knocked on his door one day ten years ago. From that day on their friendship was formed and it was so good for them to have someone to talk to who understood each other's part of the industry.

Wilbert was a well-known F1 and TT racing mechanic who could also turn his hand to body work and pretty much anything else racing car related, at his happiest in his overalls, tinkering with cars.

When he worked on formula one he rubbed shoulders with the likes of Graham Hill and Jackie Stewart, he worked at Oulton Park as mechanic for Graham Hill and in a quiet moment he was given the task of pushing Graham's son around in his pram in an effort to stop him crying. Whilst on his rounds, he was spotted by a friend who Wilbert had not seen for a while. His friend prodded him, making him jump and he tipped the baby out of his pram into a muddy puddle, you can imagine the scenario, Wilbert turning up with future racing driver baby Damon Hill covered in muck and having to explain to Graham how he got the baby so dirty!

So how did the boy who was born on a farm on the 27th June 1927 in Ballinahinch in County Down, Northern Ireland get to become one of TT and F1 racing's best known and well respected mechanics? Wilbert had a typical farm upbringing, he was a very private man who didn't say much about his life growing up but he did say that he enjoyed his childhood on the farm with his sisters Isobel, Ena, Hilda and brother Lesley, he told many tales of farm life but his love of cars began properly when Wilbert bought a clapped out old 1936 Mercedes-Benz Spezial-Roadster for £15, towing it to the farm to work on as a hobby, something for him to tinker with in his spare time.

Well, he got it going and upon realising that it would be too expensive to run he sold it to an American pilot for £200, it was only when he looked properly, when handing over the paperwork that he realised that it had in fact been owned by Wallis Simpson wife of Edward the V111. It now holds pride of place in The Stuttgart Mercedes-Benz Museum and is estimated to be worth around £20,000,000! He obviously did a great job with the car, the spark was well and truly ignited and his life's passion was set.

Rather than work on the farm, Wilbert went to work at the Belfast Telegraph where he met the owner Bobby Baird, also a car enthusiast and racing driver, Bobby was a man who had connections with Connaught which led to Wilbert coming over to the UK when he was 20 to work on the famous Connaught Racing cars, so that was that, the beginnings of his lifelong career working with the cars that he so loved.

From Connaught he went on to work at Buckler where he worked on suspension and body work for Buckler race cars, he and Simon restored a Buckler which he painted silver with a green shamrock on the bonnet in homage of his Irish heritage of which he was very proud. A picture of the car hangs in the lounge and the first person to drive it? Was Graham Hill... at this time he was also working part time in the evenings for Colin Chapman who poached Wilbert to work for him, Colin went on to found Lotus and Wilbert worked on the Lotus racing team. If you know where to look there are tributes to Wilbert on the internet.

A tribute to Wilbert from Buckler reads as follows "Many of us in the Buckler Register will cherish Wilbert's vast knowledge acerbic sense of humour and friendship. It is difficult to realise that Wilbert was 89 years old. He was still actively working with Simon Isles on Bucklers and many other cars to the level that would put many of us to shame" finishing his tribute with "Wilbert, of course, worked at Bucklers in its heyday and his first-hand knowledge, that he freely passed on, was invaluable to us all. I recall chatting to him at one Buckler Day about my 90 and he was able to tell me exactly how the unique front suspension layout came about and how it was intended to have coil spring front suspension but was converted back to leaf spring at the last moment.

This font of knowledge and nuggets of information and link to the past of Bucklers are now sadly lost for ever. Wilbert we will very much miss you but I'll wager that you are up there right now building a fuel tank for some heavenly classic car".

After Lotus Wilbert worked for Ferrari where he met Enzo Ferrari, his CV reads like a Who's who of British Racing... he went on to work for Jaguar, Aston Martin and Rolls Royce where he was once asked to chauffeur a potential customer who turned out to be Diana Dors, stopping off at The Yellow Broom in Cheshire for lunch, he was good friends with Mike Hawthorne, Stirling Moss and Archie Scott Brown. He worked at Wilmslow garages for Peter Brewer racing Aston Martin GT4 Zagatto, owned an E.R.A racing car which he sold to Peter, there are pictures of Peter racing it.

In 2013 Wilbert received a lifetime achievement award from his classic car club, at the same time it was Aston Martin's Centenary year, on hearing about the award the managing director of Aston Martin wrote to Wilbert stating that 'you should reflect on the glory that you deserve on your contribution to Aston Martin' Apparently Aston Martin would have gone out of production were it not for the likes of Wilbert and his contribution to the company. Not surprisingly he got it up to absolutely phenomenal speeds.

I mentioned earlier that he was great at tuning bikes, and not just for local kids... he went on to own a motorbike shop in Hyde where they not only serviced and sold motorbikes but they built them too for racing and riders raced for him in the Isle of Man TT races, most notably Joey Dunlop and Phil Mellor. He had class wins with his own bikes beating the Honda works teams.

We have heard a lot about his passion for racing cars but he did have another passion, Eileen, they met in 1985 through a friend and have been inseparable ever since, spending every day together. He was so protective and caring of her and her

family, always thinking of her. He would be out shopping and would say 'let's get some of these, Ma likes them' he always called her Ma, a term of endearment that stuck. He was selfless, always thinking of what she liked and what she would want. They enjoyed many trips out and some great holidays in Ireland.

He was part of many a classic car club and was featured in the Hare and Hounds Club magazines, and someone shared this on the Facebook group page. "Well, this morning I received some very sad news, my old friend Wilbert McKee (alias Thomas George) passed away in Wythenshawe Hospital last night, for those who knew him he was one of the most knowledgeable car people you could ever wish to meet. All the members of the MHVC and The Hare and Hounds Car Club will miss him dearly". He is even in next year's Rochdale Owners Club Calendar.

Wilbert was known as someone who had your back if you were in trouble you could always count on him to be there if you needed him. Happy to impart good advice personally or on the phone, he was just a nice, friendly guy who everyone had a good word for. A 'what you see is what you get' kind of guy, like all of us he could be stubborn, even cussed, and when he didn't like something he had this saying 'Bloody awful, bloody rubbish'!

But you know.. when the chips were down he would say to Julie "don't you worry about it darlin' it'll get sorted" and it did... Julie's Dad died over 30 years ago and while nothing can ever replace him, she says that he was the next best thing, so lovely and so caring of everyone. In his last six months when his health was starting to fail he found it so frustrating that he couldn't do as much as he had always been used to, but he did keep his mind active and could tell you everything that was going on in the world, and on the Sunday evening when his health was taking a turn for the worse he still found the energy to ask how Ma was doing, he was devoted to her to the end.