

PAUL NORMAN WILSON

Lord Wilson of High Wray, O.B.E., D.S.C., H.M.L., M.A., FICE, FIMECHE.

(1908 – 1980)

Lord Wilson of High Wray, a life peer, was born in Kendal, then in Westmorland, in 1908, the son of Norman F. Wilson and great-nephew of Gilbert Gilkes. Paul Wilson was educated at Gresham's College at Holt, in Norfolk, and read Mechanical Sciences at Cambridge. During school holidays and long vacations he worked for Gilkes and on completion of his degree he worked for Stewart and Lloyds in South Africa.

The family firm of Gilbert Gilkes and Gordon was founded by Gilbert Gilkes in 1881 after he had bought the agricultural firm of Williamson Brothers of Kendal which also made water turbines. Williamsons had made 439 turbines before the sale to Gilkes.

Gilbert Gilkes, a Quaker, had met his wife, a Miss Wilson, while at Stramongate School in Kendal. She was part of the large family of Wilsons who were connected with the carpet mill, Castle Mills, on the far side of the river Kent from the body of the town of Kendal. Castle Mills is adjacent to the Canal Head which was the terminus of the Lancaster Canal. When it lost its function on the arrival of the railways in Kendal in 1848, Canal Head became Williamsons' works in 1856. The Gilkes's were childless, and so the business passed to Norman Wilson, a nephew.

Norman Wilson was a pillar of the town of Kendal, twice being its Mayor. He had been trained as a Mechanical Engineer at London University where one of his tutors was Professor Unwin. His contribution to Gilkes was as a turbine designer and a competent businessman.

Paul worked at Stewart and Lloyds, in order to gain experience away from Gilkes. He met and married his wife, Val, in South Africa and returned to Gilkes in 1934 when his father and his Crewdson cousins were part of the organisation. Paul joined the Navy in 1939 and was an RNVR officer working as an engineer. At the end of the war he was a Lieutenant Commander and was awarded the D.S.C. in 1945. For much of his naval career he was the Engineer Officer in charge of big cruisers. His return to Westmorland marked an entry into political life. He was a Socialist in a Liberal stronghold. He came to the attention of the Labour Party and, though never an M.P., he was appointed a Governor of the B.B.C. and of the Science Museum. He was created firstly, Deputy Lieutenant of Westmorland in 1965, and was Lord Lieutenant when the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland merged in 1974. He was then created Lord Lieutenant of Cumbria although his allegiance was always to Westmorland. He had the county boundary sign on his gate at the house he built at Gillinggate in Kendal.

Westmorland was an interesting area and there was no class distinction between 'County' and 'Trade'. In this context Paul was a natural leader. It was he, for instance, who persuaded Bibby Ltd. and their subsidiary, Henry Cooke of Beetham, to rescue Heron Corn Mill. The mill was opened by Princess Alexandra in 1975 and on that occasion Paul wore the full fig of his Lord Lieutenant's uniform.

He was intensely interested in the history of engineering and in the history of the water turbine in which his firm had been pioneers. He joined the Newcomen Society for the study of the history of engineering in 1951 becoming its President from 1973-1975 and to take up the reins as Acting President in 1976. He organised two of the Newcomen Society's Summer Meetings in the Lake District in 1967 and 1975.

His interest in water-power systems led him to join the then Wind and Watermill Section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and he was its Chairman from 1976 to 1978. He wrote two of its watermill booklets: "Watermills – an Introduction" and "Watermills with

Horizontal Wheels”.

He was elevated to the peerage in 1976. My wife and I used to scan the Honours Lists to see his arrival as a Knight Bachelor only to find that he had jumped a step and become Lord Wilson of High Wray! High Wray, in Lancashire beyond the Sands, was the family home of the Wilsons. He was quite active in the House of Lords and worked well under the instructions of the Whips. As he was also a business man, his attendance was limited.

Paul Wilson died on February 24th 1980, the day on which I had taken his place at a Public Enquiry in Kendal over proposals for Heron Corn Mill. For me, I lost a good friend.

J. Kenneth Major
For the Mills Archive Trust, 2003