

Obituary – Bernard Joseph Heath 22nd March 1928 – 31st March 2022

Throughout his 93 years Bernard was a great enthusiast for cycling and the outdoor life especially in wild and mountainous areas. Everyone who knew him had great respect for his enthusiasm, hard work and dedication, for his organisational abilities and the unassuming and modest way in which he conducted himself. He was very generous with his time and money and he has left a tremendous legacy.

Bernard was born in 1928 to his parents Jessie and Joe and he had one elder brother, Stephen. They lived at Marsh on the outskirts of Huddersfield. Bernard started work at the age of 16 at Hopkinson's Valve manufacturers on the accounting side and eventually qualified as a Chartered Management Accountant which led him into teaching accountancy and eventually to run his own business.

In his formative years cycling became a favourite pastime with explorative trips into the Peak District. During this time he stopped at his first Youth Hostel, a feature that was to be repeated probably over 1,000 times throughout his life. Getting together with other cycling friends they re-formed the Huddersfield Section of the National Clarion after the Second World War. This gave a focus to his cycling but this was interrupted by two years in the Royal Navy.

In 1953 due to the restrictions of the National Clarion, Bernard and several other keen cyclists formed the Huddersfield Star Wheelers. This was 'their club' and Bernard, known as 'Beef' to his cycling friends, made a major contribution to its development over 15 years acting in various official positions and organising runs and cycling events. For this he was made a Life member. Saturday afternoon runs were put on for new and especially younger riders and many people remark what wonderful memories they have of those runs. One said 'every run was an adventure and with Bernard it always involved some riding on rough tracks'.

Bernard dabbled in time trailing and in 1963 recorded 224 miles in a 12 hour event and he took part in some cyclo-cross events but his heart was in club and leisure cycling, especially off the beaten track, and this led him to work with others to become a founder member of Rough Stuff Fellowship (RSF) which was formed in 1955. In late 2021 the RSF awarded him 'Life membership' to recognise the contribution he had made over the years.

His love of wild places led him into the mountains of Wales and especially Scotland. For ten years his annual holidays were spent with a friend, Frank Goodwin, cycle-camping in the glens and mountains of Scotland. They explored just about every glen pushing or carrying the bikes over high passes and fishing the lochs to supplement their food supplies.

In 1958 Bernard was a key member of a group of four cyclists who crossed the interior of Iceland by bike to become the first to do this, a memorable achievement. This was followed by a further sole three and a half month tours to Scandinavia and in 1963 a long European trip taking in Germany, Austria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy and France.

During his wanderings in the mountains and glens in Scotland he had noticed many unlocked shelters and mountain huts, generally termed bothies and he had stopped overnight in many. Someone suggested to him that there should be a national organisation to maintain these buildings many of which were in need of repair. Bernard took this idea and in 1965 he brought together a number of like-minded people and the Mountain Bothies Association (MBA) was formed. Over fifty years on, the MBA is now a hugely respected charitable organisation that has 3,500 members and looks after over 100 bothies in Scotland, England and Wales.

In 1968/9 whilst taking a year out to identify bothies that needed renovation Bernard met Betty Taylor who was also an outdoor enthusiast and very keen to conserve wild areas, nature and the bothies. Bernard and Betty were married on 14th March 1970 and what followed were forty five years in which they both helped on or organised bothy renovation projects and contributed to the management and direction of the MBA. In recognition of their contribution to the MBA in 1991 both Betty and Bernard were awarded the British Empire Medal.

In 1970 Bernard and Betty had moved to Thurso where Bernard taught accounting at the local Technical College but in 1980 they opened a scrap metal business in Thurso which they ran until retirement in 1991. Both worked very hard at the business and they agreed that working for themselves had been one of the most pleasurable and worthwhile things in their lives.

They had moved house from Thurso to Brough near Dunnet Head and occupied a site overlooking the Pentland Firth and the Orkney Islands. They purchased some land nearby and planted a wood of mixed trees on the surrounding barren Caithness landscape. Thirty years later the wood has matured and has been handed over to the Dunnet Forest Trust and it is known as 'Heathsfield'. They lived at Brough until moving back to Thurso around 2005.

The trips to help renovate Bothies continued and they climbed the Scottish Munros (282 mountains over 3,000 feet in Scotland). Both were very fit and continued cycling, walking and camping.

In 2003, at the age of 74, Bernard rode from Land's End to John O' Groats a distance of 1,510 miles which was accomplished in 28 days along with two colleagues from the Huddersfield Star Wheelers. The route took on a series of minor roads and tracks through the mountains of Wales, the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales the Islands and Highlands of Scotland, Cape Wrath and the north coast of Scotland. This was a great accomplishment that he had not previously achieved.

In retirement Bernard and Betty were very active with Bothy renovations, mountain walking and cycling, with some trips involving Bernard's brother Stephen and Nephew James. They also visited many uninhabited Scottish islands. Gardening and looking after their cats was also fitted in to their busy lives. Bernard kept cycling fit by riding a minimum of ten miles each day and he enjoyed numerous cycling away trips with Huddersfield Star Wheelers colleagues in Wales, the North Yorkshire Moors, the Yorkshire Dales, Norfolk and Suffolk and the Lake District and attended some Rough Stuff Fellowship meetings. He even managed a two months cycling tour of New Zealand and went on a tour of the bothies in Scotland, England and Wales and slept at least one night in each. In his later years Bernard became more vocal about green issues and the need to save the planet and wild places.

For the last three years Bernard has lived comfortably in the Pentland View Nursing Home at Thurso suffering from dementia which has robbed him of the memories of his and Betty's wonderful achievements. Regrettably, Betty died in early 2021. They had no children but the name Heath lives on through all their achievements and their Huddersfield based nephews Anthony and James.

Through the Mountain Bothies Association, the Huddersfield Star Wheelers and the Rough Stuff Fellowship Bernard has left a substantial legacy that will live on and we must include 'Heathsfield' at Dunnet as a physical monument to both of their lives. People who have come into contact with Bernard throughout his life hold him in high regard and have great respect for him. Whether it be his encouragement to others, eating the spotted dicks he produced over a camp fire, or the abiding memory of his kindness and care for others, he will be remembered for what he has achieved and his enthusiastic impact on other people.

Adrian Hinchcliffe

Huddersfield Star Wheelers, Rough Stuff Fellowship, Mountain Bothies Association.