

## **Alan Frederic Wright (1934-2013)**

The sudden death of Alan towards the end of June stunned his many friends in the U.K. and has left a large hole in the activities of a range of organisations. He was a man of many parts with interests and contacts around the world.

He died in the same house in which he was born although for some of the years in between he had a cottage in Woking until it became necessary to look after his elderly mother. His roots in Quinton, Birmingham varied from Scouts where he rose to the position of assistant Scout Master; to the Church where he helped in a variety of ways; to long distance walking where was still trudging through Wales and up Plynlimon mountain only a few days before he died; to the Dudley Canal Trust where for some years he assisted with the restoration work and fund raising. Among their boats the Trust has an historic tug/icebreaker which Alan much enjoyed steering around the canals- no doubt it took him back to memories of the Antarctic. He was also active in the Five Ways Old Edwardians Association of his School. Only a few months before his death, he wrote a piece for the Association Newsletter detailing his professional career and present interests.

But what of his background? From the King Edwards School he went to Birmingham University and gained a BSc in Mechanical Engineering. From there he went to Bristol Siddeley Engines on rocket research – yes, for a while he was a rocket scientist. From there in 1960 he joined the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) which soon after changed its name to the British Antarctic Survey (BAS). He completed two winters in the Antarctic where transport was by husky dogs and skis. That experience shaped his character yet is difficult to imagine for those who never saw such a level of raw nature.

His Antarctic connections continued to be a big part of Alan's life and he regularly attended reunion meetings where he was clearly at home in the company of fellow surveyors. Many ex-FIDS colleagues travelled long distances to attend the funeral.

During his time in the Antarctic he surveyed what is now known as the Wright Peninsula on Adelaide Island. How many of us can say that they have a part of the world named after them? For his icy endeavours he received a Polar Medal although true to his modest nature, a fact of which not even most of his closest friends and colleagues were aware. In recent years he took a nostalgic trip revisiting the area where he was based.

It was after the Antarctic, over some 40 or so years, that I got to know him through his activities during 15 years as a Technical Sales Engineer with Tellurometer (UK) Ltd and later when, for 30 years, he ran his own firm of Global Surveys Ltd. There he specialised in Transit Satellite receivers and then GPS receivers. His work took him all around the world and gave him stamps from some 80 countries in his passport.

In 2008 his years of experience with many models of the Tellurometer made him an ideal co-author of the definitive book\* on the story of the Tellurometer. This drew extensively from his period with the firm and the contacts he made then and in later years. In 2009, when in South Africa, he went considerably out of his way to visit the widow of Dr Wadley (inventor of the Tellurometer\*\*) who then lived on the borders of poverty near Durban. Coincidentally, she only died earlier this year. During that same visit Alan gave a presentation on the Tellurometer to the SAIEE (South African Institute of Electrical & Electronic Engineering.) During a meeting in Cape Town the same year Alan, with colleague Brian Sturman, persuaded an original set of the M/RA1, of 1957 vintage, to work.

With his semi-retirement and shorter full retirement, he became an active contributor to The FIG (International Federation of Surveyors). He specialised within that

organisation in its History of Surveying & Measurement Group, (IHSM), latterly being involved in the Struve Geodetic Arc\*\*\* World Heritage Monument and its possible enhancement incorporating the Arc of the 30th Meridian to South Africa. For some years he led the ICES (Chartered Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors) delegation to FIG and was much respected in that role by all those who he came in contact with. Aside from historical matters his main interests were in Commission 5 (Positioning & Measurement) and Commission 6 (Engineering Surveys).

He was an avid participant in numerous international and national surveying conferences in all five continents and with his roving survey work had in his passport something like 80 countries visited. He would often ask the questions that others were afraid to ask.

He made a regular annual pilgrimage to the European ski slopes pursuing the skills he had honed in the Antarctic so many years before. Even earlier this year at age 78 he was doing the red runs.

Ever the complete gentleman, nothing was too much trouble and he was always first to volunteer. Generous at all times whether in word or kind. Whilst he could be described as something of a loner; possibly arising from his period in the Antarctic; because he was always happy to go off travelling on his own, but then he was just as willing to join others if the situation arose. Often he would add a week or two on to a Conference to travel around the country concerned. He was never happier than when he could be of help to someone whether driving them to appointments or helping them in a myriad of other ways.

He was very much the practical man rather than writer of technical papers. On two occasions he joined my wife and me on safari trips to game reserves in South Africa. This appealed very much to him since he had not previously participated in such an activity.

His one big disappointment was the failure, over many years, to find a permanent home for his large collection of Tellurometers and other instruments. He was really looking for a Museum of Mapping to be formed but alternative solutions will have to be considered. His untimely death leaves that problem still unanswered and if readers of this can make any suggestions or recommendations as to a good home for the equipment that would be much appreciated. In the first instance please contact: [jim@smith1780.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:jim@smith1780.freeserve.co.uk) for details of the collection.

One always looked forward to his Christmas cards which invariably featured old maps of the World in full colour. Not the cheapest of cards, but very memorable. He will be sorely missed as an ambassador for the profession and for the fine example he set the following generations.



The Polar medal



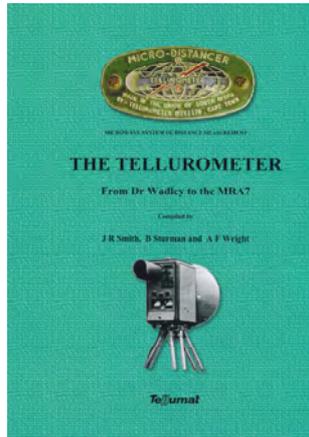
The Wright Peninsula

An extract, (courtesy of BAS), from the British Antarctic Survey 1:250,000 scale map Adelaide Island and Arrowsmith Peninsula. Wright Peninsula is a well-known and important feature because of the location of the Rothera Research Station and people travelling on it for field training, equipment testing and recreational travel from the base had to travel across Wright Peninsula to access the rest of Adelaide Island. The British Antarctic Territory gazetteer entry is:

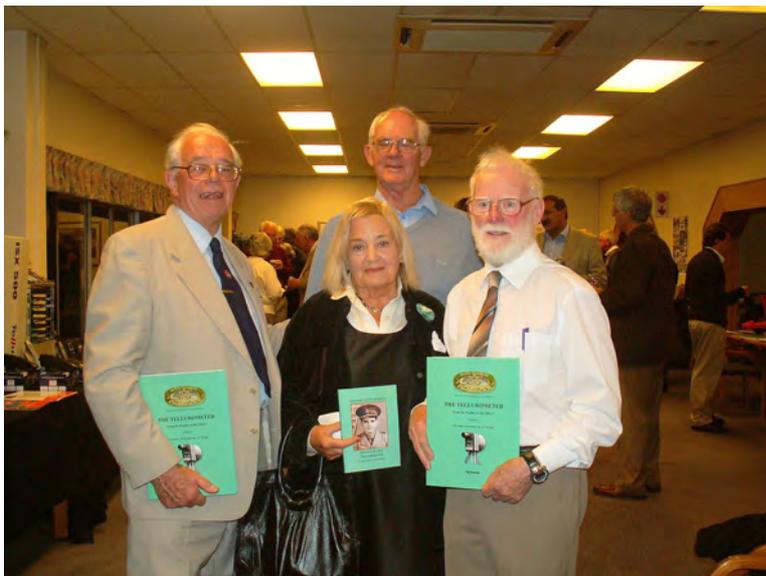
“ ... between Stonehouse Bay and Ryder Bay, SE Adelaide Island, following survey by FIDS (Falkland Island Dependencies Survey) from Adelaide, 1961-62, was named after Alan Frederic Wright (b.1934), BAS surveyor, Adelaide, 1961-63 ”.

## Footnotes

\* *The Tellurometer. From Dr Wadley to the MRA7.* J R Smith, B Sturman & A F Wright. 2008. Published by Tellumat, South Africa. 243 pages. 203 Illustrations.



\*\* The first commercial model of the Tellurometer, the M/RA1, appeared in 1957 with a range of 35 miles to  $\pm 2$  inches  $\pm 3$  ppm. Alan was able to supply a photograph for the book showing the use of that instrument on the Ridgeway baseline in 1957.



Cape Town. May 2009. Jim Smith, Brian Sturman, Mary von Hirschberg (a sister of Dr Wadley) and Alan Wright, with copies of the Tellurometer book and the accompanying, smaller volume, *Trevor Lloyd Wadley. Genius of the Tellurometer.*

\*\*\* Many readers will be unaware of this World Heritage Monument which is a triangulation scheme, observed between 1816 and 1855, stretching from near Hammerfest in Northern Norway to near Odessa on the Black Sea. The enhancement to this is further triangulation from that original scheme, first to Crete then over the Mediterranean Sea to join the Arc of the 30<sup>th</sup> Meridian down to Buffelsfontein near Port Elizabeth in South Africa.

Jim Smith, with contributions from friends and colleagues of Alan.