

Anne and Bill Barbour

An obituary

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Bill Barbour, who has died aged 89, was a classicist, code breaker, soldier, schoolmaster, political activist and voluntary worker. He was born in 1920, to a family which had founded Combe Barbour (originally Barbour), the Belfast engineering firm; after the Great War the business failed and William Pirrie Barbour, one of a large family, was raised in relative impoverishment. His progress in life was aided by his intelligence, not wealth. Educated first at Bangor Grammar School, he was a scholar at Trinity College, Dublin and took a first in classics in 1942.

At the start of 1943 he moved to London to spend 18 months at a branch of the Government Code and Cipher School directed by A.G. Denniston; there he worked on Yugoslavian, Finnish and (most remarkably) American diplomatic codes. He had been interviewed for the job in neutral Dublin on the recommendation of his college tutor Joseph Johnston. Nights were spent firewatching at St Paul's.

London had a lasting effect on his life as he met at the Foreign Office a young secretary named Ann Burrell, who herself spent part of the war working at Bletchley Park; they married in 1948 and had four children. In 1944 Bill joined the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers as a private; the next year he transferred to the Intelligence Corps in Cairo as a sergeant.

Returning to England in 1946 he became a schoolmaster, first at Kingswood, then in Colchester. In 1951 he returned to Ulster to teach classics at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen. There he spent the rest of his career until his retirement in 1983, culminating in appointment as a housemaster, first for day boys, then for girls.

His retirement was hardly inactive. His political interests began with membership of the Ulster Liberal Party (to which his grandfather had belonged in the 19th century). In 1964 he assisted in an acrimonious Westminster campaign in Fermanagh, South Tyrone on behalf of Giles FitzHerbert, Evelyn Waugh's son-in-law. From its foundation in the 1970s he was a very keen member of the non-sectarian Alliance Party, for which he was an unsuccessful candidate and whose honorary President he became.

Bill Barbour was also involved actively in the British Legion and chaired its Housing Association in Northern Ireland. He promoted the cause of integrated (i.e. cross-community) education and helped to found primary and secondary schools in Enniskillen. Both he and his wife (who shared many of his interests) worked for the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Although his principles were strong, his manner was invariably gentle and patient and, sometimes, genially eccentric; his handwriting was exceptionally elegant; he played chess and cricket; he was rational and a rationalist. Ten years ago Ann Barbour developed Alzheimer's; as the disease worsened, his care for her became more devoted. On 23 November 2009, perhaps acting, so his older son suspects, on a pact agreed with his wife at

an early stage in her illness, she first took her life and then he took his own. Their deaths shocked Northern Ireland and they were widely mourned.

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