

Goodbye to a gentleman geologist

Dr W (Bill) L Barrett (1937-2009)

A former chairman of the BDA, Dr Bill Barrett is best remembered for advancing quarry geology and its associated exploration drilling

BILL BARRETT, aged 72, passed away on November 7, 2009. He was a gentleman in the true sense of the word – a modest man, but one whose achievements throughout his life and career were remarkable.

A renowned mineral resources geologist and past chairman of the British Drilling Association (BDA), Bill recruited, trained and encouraged many young geologists, and laid down the foundations of the quarry geology profession.

Born on June 10, 1937, in Fort Portal, Uganda, Bill was the second son of Sidney and Pita Barrett, and spent his early days on their tea and coffee plantation, revelling in the wealth of birds, animals and nature that surrounded him.

Schooling was in Kenya, at the Duke of York Public School in Nairobi, where he captained the cricket, hockey and shooting teams, and also attained the rank of Cadet Commander in the Combined Cadet Force.

After achieving five A-Levels, Bill went on (having turned down a place at

Cambridge) to Aberystwyth University, Wales, where he graduated in June 1961 with an honours degree in geology and a postgraduate diploma in micropaleontology. It was at Aberystwyth that he met Isabel, his future wife.

Bill could not be kept away from his 'homeland' for long and returned to Africa in 1961, where Isabel joined him and they were married in 1962 at Vriika Cathedral in Fort Portal.

They were the proud recipients of a royal white cowskin drum as a wedding present from the local king.

Employment was taken up with Kilembe Copper Mines in Uganda, initially as a field geologist, which enabled Bill to undertake various expeditions to different parts of the country and, across the border, into the Congo. Within seven years, he rose to senior mine geologist, had three children – Mark, Andrew and Gill – and enjoyed countless safaris and camping trips into the game reserves, all of which he thoroughly enjoyed.

Bill and Isabel were able to stay close to his mother in Uganda until October 1968, when he decided he needed to study just a little-bit more, and he moved the family to the UK while he obtained a doctorate in geology at the University of Leeds.

Incredibly, Bill managed to complete his PhD thesis on the stratigraphy, structure and mineralisation of the southeast part of the Ruwenzori Mountains (Mountains of the Moon, Uganda) in 18 months, instead of the more usual three to four-year period. Sadly, however, his mother passed away just after he left for Leeds in 1968.

Returning to Kilembe Mines in May 1970, Bill became chief geologist and there he remained until the political and economic climate became too unstable under Idi Amin. In 1973, the family was once more 'packed-up' and moved to the UK. If tempted to reminisce, Bill and Isabel would tell of the long and arduous journey they undertook across the mountains to escape the dangerous political situation in the country at that time:

Bill joined Tarmac Quarry Products in June 1974 as its first geological manager, and stayed there for over 25 years until his retirement in 2000, shortly before the Anglo American takeover.

In Tarmac's pioneering days, Bill relished the challenge and led the way when quarry geology was in its infancy. As the company grew at a

phenomenal rate in the late 1970s and 80s, Tarmac relied very heavily on Bill's judgement throughout numerous acquisitions, takeovers and mergers. As the workload increased, he continued to improve standards and set up a wide range of systems, procedures and techniques, which are still used and fine-tuned today.

Bill set up an in-house drilling team, Millfields Geotechnical, which became

the envy of the industry and added specialist roles such as geotechnical engineers and hydrologists to the department. His interest in drilling led to him becoming the sixth chairman of the BDA (1987-89), where he always ensured that matters gained a fair hearing.

Bill's responsibilities with Tarmac also extended overseas into North America, the Middle East and Europe, so he learned to speak both French and German to a high standard. He loved the little challenges associated with this work – flying through a thunderstorm in a light aircraft in America or eating ducks' feet in China.

Perhaps the one thing he would have been most proud of (apart from, of course, his family) was the recruitment and training of so many young geologists. Many are now spread throughout the industry – he gave them the skills and confidence to progress onwards, many to attain senior roles.

Bill's influence extended beyond his role with



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Tarmac. He made a positive contribution on a variety of committees and organisations, such as the Advisory Committee of the British Geological Survey, the Mineral Industry Research Organisation and the BDA. He was also an external examiner on the masters course in applied geology at Leicester University.

In particular, Bill was a founder member of the Extractive Industry Geology conference, and gave a thought-provoking talk on the quarrying of limestone at the first conference at the headquarters of The Geological Society in 1978. He went on to become chairman of the organising committee for the 1989 event, held at Birmingham University.

These bi-annual conferences have gone from strength to strength and, even in his retirement and despite poor health, Bill still managed to act as a corresponding member on the committee organising the 2010 event, offering much appreciated advice, comments and opinions. The committee is proposing to issue the proceedings of the Cardiff 2008 conference in his memory, with a suitable dedication.

Bill Barrett was indeed a remarkable man. He made an impression on and nurtured so many people. He advanced both quarry geology and its associated exploration drilling. His companionship, wisdom and good judgement will be sorely missed.

Compiled by Paul Brewer (Paul Brewer Geological Services), Brian Stringer (BDA national secretary) and Colin Pigott (BDA director)