

Obituary: Robert Bartholomew, last surviving member of family who steered Edinburgh-based cartographers

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Robert Bartholomew, map publisher. Born 11 January, 1927, in Duddingston, Edinburgh. Died 30 April 2017, in the Grange, Edinburgh, aged 90.

Robert Gordon Bartholomew (1927-2017), former Production Director at John Bartholomew & Son Ltd, passed away peacefully on 30 April 2017 at the age of 90 at Marian House Care Home in Edinburgh. Robbie was the last surviving member of the Bartholomew family to work in the firm, representing the last of six generations of Bartholomews who had successfully steered the Edinburgh-based cartographers over the best part of two centuries.

Robbie was the second youngest in a family of two girls and four boys, and was schooled at Rochester House in Coates Gardens, Wester Elchies on Speyside and the Edinburgh Academy. One of Robbie's first recollections of Bartholomew's Duncan Street works was being taken as a small boy to see the 'big hole', which had been dug beneath the basement in 1932 to a depth of 400 feet, to supply well-water for the new air-conditioning plant. Bartholomews had always excelled at the accurate registration of multiple colour printing pulls, but this demanded ever more precise control over the expansion and contraction of paper during printing. Water at this depth could be obtained at a constant 3 degrees Celsius or 38 degrees Fahrenheit, with a capacity of up to 5,000 gallons per hour. Bartholomews were one of the first printers in the country to have such an installation and it was used for accurately controlling temperature and humidifying the air.

He did his national service in the Gordon Highlanders, and then the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, with which he spent 18 months in Malaya, looking for communist terrorists around Ipoh, but never found any. From 1948, he left the army and gained a thorough grounding in printing at Heriot-Watt College on Chambers Street, whilst serving an apprenticeship, and he also spent some time with Meiklejohn, a small London publishing company his father had set up. He formally joined Bartholomews in 1953, the same year that his elder brother, John Christopher (1923-2008) became Cartographic Director. Robbie became Production Director in 1955, and the following year, he was joined by his elder brother Peter (1924-1987), who with a management and accountancy background, became a very able Managing Director.

Over the next three decades, Robbie steered the firm's production work through profound changes in technology, with growing automation and efficiencies, set against a backdrop of ever-expanding print volumes. In the years immediately preceding the First World War, Bartholomews' printing averaged 7 million items per year, but by 1975, these had grown to more than 100 million, from a similar number of printing machines. There was also a steady shift away from large, unwieldy flatbed printers, printing one colour at a time, to using rotary offset printers, particularly high-quality Roland two-colour, and then four-colour printers. This in turn facilitated the transition away from lithographic stones, to using glass,

and then to film, an expansion of platemaking and photography work, and the growing automation of folding. The first folding machine, a Quad Demy Cundall, was introduced in 1955 – before then, hundreds of thousands of maps were all folded by hand in the Mounting Room by “girls” (some of whom were up to 60 years of age).

Bartholomews made their name as high-quality cartographers, arguably with their heyday in the years of Robbie’s grandfather, John George Bartholomew (1860-1920). In the post-War period, a growing public acceptance for cheaper, lower-quality mapping, as well as the much lower labour and production costs of overseas production made trade increasingly difficult by the 1970s. Bartholomews survived for much longer than many other family firms, but were eventually sold to Reader’s Digest in 1980, who in turn sold the firm on to News International in 1985, becoming part of HarperCollins in 1989. Robbie retired from the firm in 1987, the year Peter died of a heart attack; his brother John retired in 1989. In some ways it was a sad end, but the legacy of the firm lives on in many ways, not least as the Collins Bartholomew brand, in the imposing classical facade of their former Duncan Street premises, and in the firm’s impressive archive, probably the largest commercial cartographic archive in the World, that survives in the National Library of Scotland.

Robbie had a very full and happy personal and family life. In 1955 he also married Jean Thin in St Giles Cathedral, uniting two well-known Edinburgh families, Jean being from the family of Thins the booksellers.

They lived in Newington and the Grange for the rest of their lives, and had three children – David, born in 1956; Jane in 1958, and Elspeth in 1961. Many happy holidays were spent at a country cottage he acquired near Broughton in the Borders, a cottage which is still in the family. It was however a deep sadness to him to lose his daughter Jane Torrance in 2008 and his wife Jean in 2013.

Robbie’s faith was important to him. He was ordained on elder at St Michael’s Church, Inveresk on 11 May 1952 – we have just passed the 65th anniversary of his ordination. On moving his membership to Mayfield he was admitted as an elder in 1958. He also served as Presbytery elder and became involved in central church committees, and for quite a few years he did stewarding at the General Assembly. After he retired he and Jean became active members of the Mayfield Milers walking group.

He joined the Executive Committee of Edinburgh Abbeyfield Society in 1963 and served for many years, being chairman for three years.

He was a member of the Merchant Company and served on the Association of Assistants of the Merchant Company from the end of 1981 until at least 1987, being vice-convenor of the Merchant Company Education Board for Daniel Stewart’s and Melville College. He has been involved in the Grange Association virtually from its inception, and was Chairman of it for three years from 1985. He especially enjoyed producing *Grange, A History in Maps* (1991), and spent many hours in the nearby Map Room of the National Library of Scotland keeping its staff very much on their toes as he did so.

Robbie was a great enthusiast for family history for many years, He and Jean enjoyed travel and visited family all around the globe and he was a Life Member of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (co-founded by his grandfather John George Bartholomew, with his father and elder brother John, both doing terms as its President), attending its Winter Talks in Edinburgh until his late eighties. He had a quiet and genuine care for people, a gentleness and kindly nature. Many people were drawn to his honest, straightforward manner, his politeness and natural charm.

Christopher Fleet