

W.M. (Bill) Whiteman MA (1905–1989)

Honorary Secretary and Director of The Caravan Club (1938–1959)

Bill Whiteman was a tall man, who had an austere, Quaker-influenced upbringing and a public school education, emerging as a Cambridge Classics graduate. He could often seem remote and stand-offish, but those who knew him best were aware that his mind was constantly thinking ahead, concentrating on work and propelling his ideas along at a pace few could match. When once asked what he read for relaxation he replied ‘I never have time to read for pleasure.’

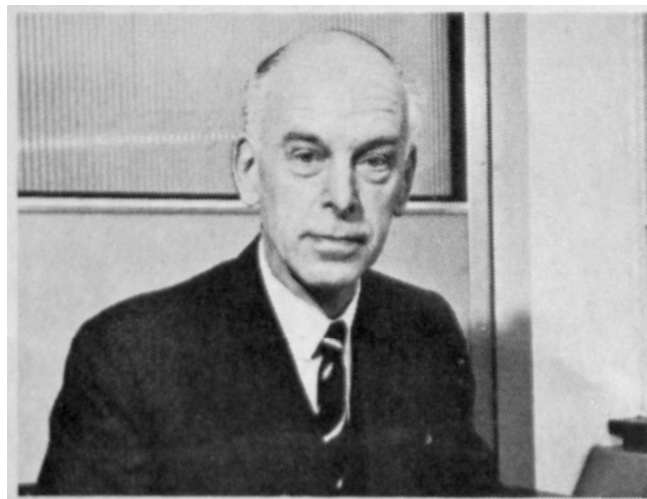


Figure 1: Bill Whiteman

His connection with The Caravan Club arose almost by accident. He arrived at Link House Publications from Withy Grove, Manchester's Fleet Street, to become Editor of The Caravan magazine in 1938, a newly-formed publication resulting from the merger of Caravan World and The Caravan & Trailer. With Link House Publications agreeing to back the Club, he was given the responsibility of being its Honorary Secretary and a Director. He held it together during World War II and afterwards recognised the importance of

touring caravanners, and the Club in particular, being seen as responsible users of the countryside and supporters of the conservation movement.

He had a keen sense of the history of the Club, renewing links with the family of Dr Gordon Stables and in the early days tracking down J. Harris Stone. He once said, 'I count myself fortunate to have been at the heart of the caravan movement for so many of the formative years, and to have entered early enough to meet all the chief personalities of trailer caravanning back to 1919, as well as several horse caravanners. If only, as a small boy, I had been introduced to Gordon Stables!'

He was an expert in every aspect of caravanning, and was responsible for The Caravan Manual, once essential reading for every caravanner, and The History of the Caravan, published in 1973. In 1939 he founded the National Caravan Council (NCC), acting as its Honorary Secretary for 10 years and Honorary Director for three years thereafter. Conceived by him as an umbrella organisation for the whole caravanning movement, it developed logically into the trade body it is today, particularly when the Club withdrew to adopt its present independent stance.

He had an unrivalled grasp of the legislation covering camping and caravanning and was quite willing to tackle any authority he thought in the wrong. When Purchase Tax, the forerunner of VAT, was introduced in 1940, Whiteman read the Finance Act through and spotted that it should not apply to caravans. The Inland Revenue did not agree but, wearing his NCC hat, Whiteman persuaded the manufacturers not to pay. The deadlock continued until 1946, when the government backed down. Whiteman also organised the Moveable Dwellings Conference in 1947/49, the report of which was accepted as the authority on the subject at that time. He served on the International Caravan Commission of the Fédération Internationale de Camping et de Caravanning (FICC) from 1947 to 1970, being President from 1957 onwards, and in all served on more than 50 caravan and camping committees and working parties.

In 1954 he lost his first wife who, with his two daughters, had enjoyed his caravanning life, and there followed a period where he became more remote and introspective, which may have exacerbated his problems with Club management. Having nurtured the Club on the enthusiasm of the Centres, he was never quite comfortable with the idea of its developing into the national organisation it is today, with its own independent headquarters, giving services akin to those of a motoring organisation. He was not in agreement when Donald Chidson, as the Club's Secretary, wished to invest in land to create a sites network and this led to internal discord and ultimately the break with Link House Publications in 1960, which he feared would not be in the Club's best interests.

When this was followed by dropping The Caravan magazine as a membership benefit in 1963 and its replacement by En Route, his direct involvement finally ceased, although he continued to take an interest in The Club and regularly attended Annual Members' Meetings.

He remarried in 1965, although his second wife, Mary, was not completely enthused with caravanning, and on his retirement in 1970 he threw himself into other activities, including Hampshire County Council's Community Service, fighting to preserve rural services and amenities, principally for those unable to make their voice heard.

He was made an Honorary Life Member of the Club, a Vice President of the Camping & Caravanning Club, an Honorary Member of the FICC, and was the recipient of an NCC Golden Jubilee Award for notable service to the industry. Bill Whiteman was, without doubt, the most respected man of the caravan movement in his day, a position acknowledged by the many who referred to him simply as Mr Caravan.

Extract taken from:

Ellis, C., 2006. *The history of The Caravan Club*. East Grinstead: The Caravan Club.

Further Reading:

Whiteman, W.M., 1973. *The history of the caravan*. London: Blandford Press Limited.

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