

Obituary – Bill Yardley

by Dave Stewart (FAusIMM) & Neil Fowke



William (Bill) Yardley died on the 5th August 2007 aged 58. His death was a result of cancer, which was diagnosed less than six months before. He was a member of the NZ Branch of the AusIMM.

Bill was born in Westleton, England and migrated with his family to New Zealand when he was in his early teens. When he left school he attended the University of Otago, graduated with a BSc (Honours) in Mineral Technology in 1971 and was awarded the James Park Memorial Prize for Applied Geology. After graduating Bill disappeared overseas, spending most of that time working in Falconbridge Nickel Mines in Canada before making his way slowly back to New Zealand via several countries including the USA and Jamaica. Bill's life was a bit of a mystery during this time but when he returned to New Zealand he quickly settled into a range of jobs, mainly associated with the mining industry. These included science technician at Victoria University and mining engineer for State Coal Mines. Bill then went back "on the coal" to obtain enough face experience to qualify for a New Zealand 1st class mine manager certificate of competency.

He was a unique person in many ways and not the least of those was his great intellect. He was a member of MENSA and was a voracious reader with an incredible knowledge on most subjects. As would be expected with a person like Bill he did not like the mundane, and this resulted him seeking new challenges on a regular basis.

He returned to Wellington as mining engineer responsible for South Island investigation and development. He then took on mine management positions as assistant manager at Strongman underground mine, manager of Stockton No 2 opencast mine, and manager of Whareatea and Sullivan Mines on the Denniston Plateau.

He became an Inspector for Mines and Quarries with the Dept of Energy and after leaving that position, managed two small underground mines on the West Coast. The Tiller Mines were notorious for a steep and undulating coal seam that challenged every manager and miner who ventured near it. He left this position in 1989 to move to the North Island, but soon returned south as Mines Inspector again, and then became a mining engineer for CoalCorp NZ Ltd. He went back up to the North Island in 1995 and worked with Solid Energy Ltd as a mining engineer until 2004.

Bill was married in 1979, and had three boys with his first wife Sheryl. They lived on the West Coast and in Wellington for most of that time. When the children were still quite young, his marriage broke up and he spent many of the following years alone. However, he was always positive and optimistic in love as well as in life, and he eventually met and married Lesley in 1997. They had 10 wonderful years together.

Bill disliked bureaucracy and red tape. It did not fit well with his innovative 'lets investigate' attitude, and as a result from 2004, he found it more satisfying to work as a consultant. In this role he did a lot of work for Solid Energy Ltd in the North Island on projects relating to Mangapehi Coalfield, Waikato Coalfield thick seam mining studies and pre-feasibility and feasibility studies for the Huntly North project, along with other underground evaluations. He also wrote many training manuals for the Extractive Industries Training Organisation (EXITO), and these have since been used by many trainees within the industry.

Despite being probably the last of the 'back of a cigarette packet' engineers, Bill also embraced computer technology with the same enthusiasm and intellect that he approached everything else. He introduced new technology before the software was incorporated into the company systems, and used this knowledge on many of the projects he worked on.

The choice of career he decided upon was always one of interest, because he clearly had the potential to follow any path he chose. Typical of Bill, he decided on an industry that was full of challenge and fraught with difficulty but he also saw it as one where he could widen his scope of interest. As a result he knew almost everyone of long standing in New Zealand mining and quarrying and had worked in most of New Zealand's mining areas. He would take out exploration licences and permits, usually without much capital, and even though many of his colleagues and advisors would caution him, Bill was always positive about the potential. He would have read up on the area, explored the mining options and market potential and would take these new ventures on with 'eyes wide open'.

He had a good personal rapport with all he met. Bill was a very witty person, with a good sense of the ridiculous, and always had some great stories to tell. He was a modest man, well suited to a mentoring role and he could argue technical issues with anyone without it leading to acrimony or broader disagreement. He disliked pomposity and privilege and was a truly thoughtful and generous man.

Bill never did find the valuable mineral prospect that would allow him to live a life of leisure, but that was not what really drove him on. It was more his desire for diversity of life, for the challenges that each venture threw up and his overall optimism that kept Bill going. The trappings of wealth and status would never have sat comfortably with him anyway.

Bill's sense of humour, his simple and positive approach to life, his marvellous intellect, and his true generosity will be dearly missed.

Bill is survived by his wife Lesley and his three children from his first marriage, Matthew, Jake and Ben.