Britain's best loved wine merchant dies at 53

28 Jan 2008 by JR

See Bill Baker - the movie.

The funeral of this much-loved wine trade stalwart will be held at 2pm on Thursday, 7 Feb at Wells Cathedral. *Donations to charity, in Bill's name, may be sent c/o Hill & Son, Funeral Directors, 18-20 St Thomas Street, Wells BA5 2UX tel +44 (0)1749 672 397.*

Bill Baker of Reid Wines in near Bath died in his sleep last night at the family holiday house in Rock, Cornwall. Pickwickian in aspect and increasingly generous of girth, he had quite unrivalled knowledge of fine and rare vintages, and had an encyclopedic, greed-inspired grasp of exactly where and what in the world was best to eat. (He would frequently stop off in six Michelin-starred Bray to have lunch en route back home from London. By himself.)

An accomplished blind taster and discriminating cook, he was profoundly opposed to political correctness, driving at frightening speeds around the narrow lanes of the West Country roaring "Bloody socialist!" at anyone foolish enough to impede his progress.

Hugh Gillam Baker was born on 6 July 1954 and shared most of his significant adult birthday celebrations with Simon Hopkinson, the well known food writer of the same vintage. Charterhouse and reading History of Art at Peterhouse, Cambridge were swiftly followed by a stint at Averys of Bristol before setting up in business at Reid Wines with Charles Reid, no longer invoved in this idiosyncratic fine wine business.

After a brief early marriage he married Kate Gaunt whom he had met at Gidleigh Park country house hotel in Devon in a splendid ceremony in 1991 in Wells Cathedral where their children, Polly and George, would eventually be choristers. The funeral will be held there, probably early next week.

Katie and Bill had recently enjoyed a trip *a deux* to the Margaret River in Western Australia where Bill was a wine judge ("they won't ask me again", he told me with worrying prescience) before another, over New Year, to Piedmont. He then set off to judge again in South Africa, where he met his half-sister for the first time for many years. I saw him for the last time last Tuesday night, only a few hours after his return from South Africa followed by immediate immersion in Liberty Wines' annual tasting, after a retirement dinner for Bill Gunn MW of Pol Roger. Bill (Baker) had been meant to stay with us but checked in to the Savile Club instead. He was most amused to find a taxi before the minicab I had ordered arrived. Last weekend he spent in Southwold as part of a regular group of tasters from the UK fine wine trade whose meetings will never be the same again without Bill snarling "tossers" etc etc as the identities of various producers were revealed.

He and Katie were due to meet their old friend Rick Stein of Padstow this morning. Very much a quill pen man at heart, as the 10-minute film on Bill on our Vintners' Tales DVD shows, he embraced emails eventually with surprising enthusiasm. The last one I had from him arrived at lunchtime yesterday, discussing the wines he had shipped to Davos to be served at the best (for wine) party there.

Perhaps a more representative email was another containing his report on the New Year trip with Katie: "P*ermonte spectacular - NL needs to visit - much great old fashioned food plus some quite sensible new stuff. Marvellous crisp sunny weather - why did we come back??*"

According to David Boobbyer of Reid Wines, who assures me that they intend to continue the business as usual as far as is possible, Bill's last drink was of a poor vintage of the third wine of the first growth, Pauillac de Ch Latour, which he pronounced "disgusting". That his last mouthful was so much less rarefied than what he usually drank will perhaps be one of Bill Baker's very few regrets