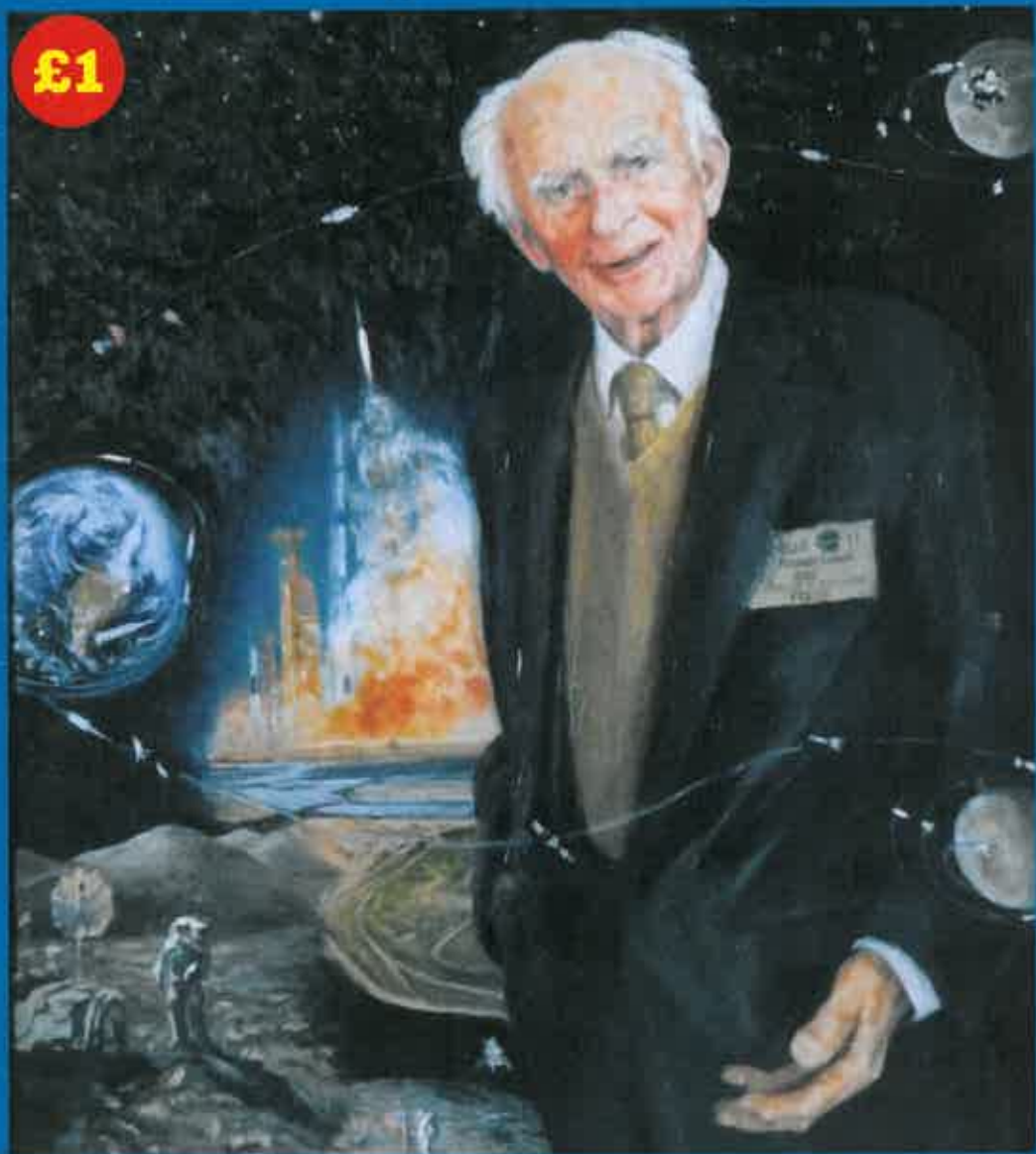


Folkestone Creative

What's on around Folkestone and Hythe • May/June 2013

Martello Tower for sale!
James Bond in Kent - Part Two
The Funeral of Reg Turnill
Sea Cycles - A short story

£1





The Funeral of Reg Turnill took place at St Paul's Church in Sandgate on 8 March 2013

*This address was given by James Wilkinson,
former Science Correspondent of the BBC*

REG HAD A HIGHLY distinguished career at the BBC. He joined the BBC right at the start of space exploration. In 1957, a year after he joined the corporation, the Soviet Union launched the world's first orbiting satellite Sputnik. That started the space race and from that moment Reg covered every significant event in the space programme. Even after he was forced to retire at the BBC's compulsory retirement age of 60 he continued as a freelance working for John Craven's Newsround and for Blue Peter.

When he retired I took over Reg's responsibilities in Radio News and from then on for many years I would regularly meet him when we were both reporting on the space programme at the launch site at Cape Canaveral and at Mission Control in Houston. During that time I was left in no doubt of the high regard the experts at NASA, the American Space Agency, had for him.

He was something of a celebrity among the American Press. He always had the same seat in the front row of the Press grandstand overlooking the launch site. The pattern was always the same. As soon as the rocket or space shuttle had been launched, Margaret would set up her primus stove and make a pot of tea. The Americans thought this was wonderfully eccentric and it would feature in the local paper.

His biggest story was probably Apollo 13. On 14 April 1970, as the astronauts journeyed to the moon. He was the last person left in the press area and just as he was about to leave, he heard the astronauts say 'Houston, we've got a problem.' An oxygen tank had exploded and for several days it was not clear whether the astronauts would be able to come back to earth. For the next few days Reg got very little sleep as he was on air pretty well continuously, giving updates on their hazardous journey home.

Reg had a love/hate relationship with the BBC. He believed that if a reporter was not very good at the job he would be promoted to management with maddening consequences for those at the sharp end. Indeed the last letter he wrote, a few weeks before he died, was to the Daily Telegraph pointing out how this policy had finally ended in meltdown at the BBC over the Newsnight debacle. He felt it was final proof of what was generally known as Turnill's law – that things only got worse.

In the sixties and seventies television reporters had a far more difficult job than today in getting their pictures back to the BBC. Today there are satellite links and

you are live on air in a matter of seconds. But in the days of film you had to seal your film in its tin, take it to the airport and ask a passenger or a pilot to hand carry it to Heathrow where he would be met by a courier. If you tried that today you would probably be arrested.

But radio too had its problems and Reg took rather a jaundiced view of the BBC's engineers. I remember an occasion at Cape Canaveral when he was trying to do an interview with London and could barely hear them. The producer said to him – don't worry Reg the engineers are working on it'. 'Yes', said Reg, 'they have been for the last 30 years.'

Reg was impatient with BBC editors who did not seem to trust their own staff. If he had an exclusive story the BBC would often not believe it until the story had appeared on a news agency like the Press Association. As Reg used to work for the Press Association this was doubly galling.

He was the proud possessor of several records – he was the first journalist to fly faster than the speed of sound. And, at 80, he was the oldest man ever to experience weightlessness. That was in one of NASA's Boeing 707s which used to fly parabolic curves, which gave some 20 seconds of weightlessness each time.

And then there were the BBC accountants. In those far off days of journalistic excesses, expenses claims were often more fiction than fact. It may be an apocryphal story, but it has the ring of truth. The story goes that Reg became conscious-stricken and calculated that he must owe the BBC about £3000 in wrongly-claimed expenses over the years. He wrote to the management offering to pay it back. The reply came that there was no mechanism by which this could be done – would he therefore accept this amount in recognition of his long and distinguished service.

Those about to retire from the BBC are sent on a pre-retirement course. And even here Reg found things on which to cast his quizzical eye. He once told me, in his rather jaundiced way, that the only thing he could remember about the course was being told – don't wear your slippers all day or your feet will swell up.

After he retired he was very active with the BBC Pensioners' Association which he helped to found. He did much to improve the pensioners' lot. He also used to boast that because he'd lived so long he'd taken far more out of the pension fund than he ever put in.

His book writing was prolific. He wrote the *Observer's Book of Manned Space Flight*, edited the massive and authoritative *Jane's Space Directory* and a number of books on space exploration, culminating in the 400 page book *Moonlandings, An Eyewitness Account*, published by the Cambridge University Press a few years ago.

It is for his reporting on space that he will be long remembered. It led to him being the only non-American journalist to be given the Chronicler's award by NASA. The citation said that his work had been an inspiration world-wide.