By Chris Britcher

TRIBUTES have been paid to Reg Turnill, the legendary BBC aerospace correspondent who reported on the most thrilling years of the space race, and who died this week.

Mr Turnill passed away after several months of ill health at the Pilgrims’ Hospice in Ashford. He was 97.

Born in Dover, he spent recent years living in Sandgate, where he became an active member of the community.

He enjoyed a remarkable career which continued long after his retirement, supporting and founding the popular HG Wells short story competition in Folkestone each year and personally putting up the £1,000 top prize in order to inspire authors to write in the style of the famous storyteller. It forms a key part of the HG Wells Festival in the town which Mr Turnill helped create in 2009.

But it was his time with the BBC for which he will be most remembered.

Having started his Fleet Street career with the Press Association when he was 15, he joined the BBC in 1956 as an industrial correspondent. Two years later, he was promoted to air and space correspondent and found himself at the centre of the fast-emerging space race between the US and USSR.

Among his assignments was a trip to Moscow to cover the first manned space launch, and reporting from the US on the Apollo Moon missions. It was in 1967 that his biggest scoop came when he was the first journalist in the world to break the news that Apollo 13 was in trouble when he heard the immortal words ‘Houston we have a problem’ as he made a late night visit to mission control.

Speaking of the moment years later, he said: “I was just leaving the deserted press centre when I heard the famous words. By 5am I’d broken the story. The astronauts were in deadly danger.”

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In 1969, he was on board the maiden flight of the first man on the Moon.

Concorde and continued his association with the BBC – most recently contributing to the corporation’s coverage of the death of Neil Armstrong, the first man on the Moon.

In later years, he became an active member of the Sandgate Society, and a key player in the HG Wells Festival.

However, he found his strict rules had to be relaxed in order to appease a modern audience.

Speaking to KoS two years ago, he said: “I wanted people to write the stories by hand as a condition of entry to address the low standard of literacy and handwriting these days.

“It’s an important art in itself and many of our most famous authors find that’s the best way to do creative writing. My aim in offering the competition in Folkestone each year and personally putting up the £1,000 top prize was to get people to mimic what HG Wells did in the 1900s.”

Organisers of this year’s awards said: “His death is a great loss to many as he was a great man. Our thoughts are with his family.”

King Spall, fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, added: “He was the astronaut who never made it to the Moon.”

He leaves behind his wife Margaret and their two sons.