

Obituary for Reginald Bloom

Born: 11 September 1922

Died: 9 September 2012

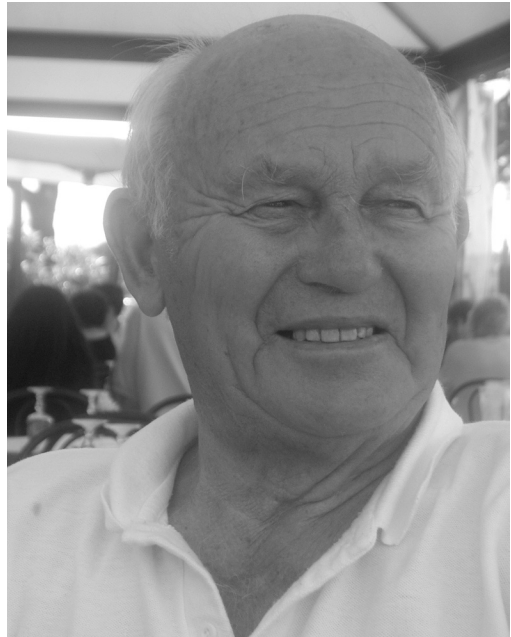
Reginald Bloom was born in Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex, England, in 1922 into a famous 'Lifeboat' family. He was the sixth of seven children and was the last of them to pass away. He hated school and much preferred to be out fishing with his father or taking wealthy London charter parties up the Stour and Orwell Rivers.

When he was very young, he took his father's shotgun without permission and went out on the saltings and shot a goose, but realising the goose would give the game away he left it. His dad was waiting when he came back and beat him for taking the gun and then beat him again for not bringing back the goose! He was a fine amateur cricketer and sailor and came back to sailing in later life, getting tremendous enjoyment from just being on the water.

He fibbed about his age and joined the Navy, serving in the minesweepers throughout the Second World War. After the war, he was a professional yacht skipper but then travelled to East Africa with his wartime captain, John Seago, for a lark as he didn't fancy an English winter on the yacht. They started a business collecting and transporting animals and birds back to Britain, Europe, and the United States when zoos were restocking after the war. They were pioneers of their day with their animals being caught from open moving trucks with rope lassos on bamboo poles. But what fun they had and what stories he told!

Reg met Margaret when she was working in the Reptile House at the London Zoo. After they married in 1953, she went out to Africa and spent the next three years alongside him. On their first night under canvas, they collected the largest puff adder ever recorded, which had sloughed its skin on their tent pole. It went back with a returning Colonial Officer the same day, so it arrived just 48 hours after Margaret had left the zoo! Among their achievements, they brought back the first white rhinos, jumping hares, and naked mole rats and quite possibly saved the Mackinders eagle owl from extinction.

Reg had an instinctive empathy for the needs of wild animals and birds brought into human care. Couple this with a far sighted and practical approach to the design of their enclosures, based on his African experiences and observations, and



Reg Bloom in 2004

you have the ingredients of his future working life.

Wanting to start a family, they returned to England where he began life in the zoo world by becoming curator of the Chester Zoo. Three children later, they moved on to build and open Twycross Zoo in a partnership with Mollie Badham and then on to the Flamingo Park Zoo in Yorkshire.

Reg relished starting new projects. He was not an easy man to work for as he drove his staff as hard as he drove himself; but if you did get through the first few months, then you had, quite literally, a friend and mentor for life. None of this would have been possible without Margaret who was a perfect match for him. She calmed him down, ran the office, hand-reared all the zoo's orphaned and rejected babies, soothed the owners of the zoo, and persuaded indignant staff to stay on even though Reg had repeatedly called them a lazy, useless, etc. etc.!

When Reg did try to get away and take the whole family with him, those times were memorable. Like spending one whole summer camping on a beach in the Isle of Man while he laid out and built the Curraghs Wildlife Park. Not content with just sitting on the beach after work, he had the whole family making long lines with about 50 fishhooks on each that were then set along the beach at low water. So successful was this fishing effort that all the locals were doing it within a week, and you couldn't walk safely on the beach anywhere below the high water mark!

Then, there was the time he had the zoo carpenters help him convert an old fish and chip van into a camper. He then took the family on a gentle European road trip covering 12 major zoos in Holland, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland in 12 days!

Wanting to work more with the family, he went into partnership with the owner of Clacton Pier to convert their Olympic pool into a dolphinarium. This endeavor operated successfully for many years until a severe easterly gale cracked the pool and emptied the water into the sea. In a blizzard, the Clacton Lifeboat crew helped evacuate the killer whale and other dolphins out of the empty pool, onto trucks, and away to safety.

With Peter and Anthony totally involved from the mid-1980s, Reg was able to step back but, of course, continue to benignly interfere. He kept his hand in by training parrots and macaws for parrot displays, and he bought a boat and started sailing regularly, although his much abused body was starting to rebel, and he suffered more and more from arthritis in his legs. Each decline in mobility was fought against, but once the inevitable was reluctantly accepted, then the new mode of transport was exploited, and once again he would be seen around town. So, legs gave way grudgingly to a bike, then a trike, then assorted motorised buggies, and finally wheelchairs.

Reg and Margaret had a long and happy marriage, and Margaret has been a rock in the last few years as Reg became increasingly lame and frustrated with his lack of mobility. Without her, he could not have died at home which was very important to them both.

Peter, Anthony, Kathy & Margaret Bloom
Brightlingsea, UK



Reg and Margaret Bloom, 2012

Endnote

- ¹ In the UK (and rather bizarrely Southern Ireland), coastal communities usually have a Lifeboat for going out to vessels in distress. The RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) and all their lifeboats are bought and maintained by donation as there is no government funding. Because of this, many boats are named after cities or wealthy benefactors. In the U.S., you have the U.S. Coast Guard who watch, monitor, and have rescue craft all under one almost paramilitary organisation. In the UK, the Coastguards watch and coordinate rescue attempts, but it was always the RNLI who went out to do the rescue and recovery of survivors with their volunteer crew of locals who respond to the flares and guns that sound the alert. Very often, families would crew their local Lifeboat through many generations as is the case with the Blooms. Dad's great uncle, father, and younger brother were all coxswains (Captain) of the boat, and many other relatives, including Reg, have also been lifeboatmen. Hence, the Blooms are a Lifeboat family.