

REGINALD WILLIAM COOPER RN FRIN (G41-46)

The following is taken from an excellent obituary that appeared in The Times on 20 June 2016.

Bill Cooper - Investment manager who turned his back on the City and went to sea for a record-breaking 30 years

The captain of the Dutch liner heading in the opposite direction told Bill and Laurel Cooper, who were sailing towards Canada, that they were in for a pleasant voyage — "Gin and tonics all the way!" He was wrong.

A few hours later, 200 miles out of Bermuda, the Coopers received a warning that a tropical storm was developing into a hurricane, the first of the season. They had been at sea for six years in their 50ft ketch, *Fare Well*, mostly exploring the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. The couple prepared as best they could, "turning the *Fare Well* into a submarine," as Bill described it later. Hurricane Alberto swept in, and for 36 hours in that June of 1982 they were battered by the Atlantic.

When the wind died down, and they were putting the sails back up, they were hit by a thunderstorm and struck by lightning. "That was what dished us," Laurel Cooper recalled. "It blew the sails to shreds." A ball of light, St Elmo's Fire, wreathed the top of the mast. Much of their electrical equipment was useless. The compass was unusable. Some of their sails remained, however, and Bill, an expert navigator, used the swell and his instinct to guide the *Fare Well*. As they were limping up the eastern seaboard 11 days later, an aircraft flew overhead and made contact. They were posted overdue. Did they need help?

"No", they were fine, responded the Coopers on their radio — "But which way is America?" The pilot was impressed. "You're the only people in that hurricane who haven't needed assistance," he said. For their self-reliance they were awarded the Hammond Cup by the Royal Naval Sailing Association for outstanding seamanship.

The couple carried on sailing around the world until 2012. By then they were in their eighties and were recognised by the World Record Academy for the longest time spent at sea. They had sailed nearly 100,000 nautical miles and visited 45 countries. They also became bestselling authors. If he had not hated his comfortable job in the City, none of it might have happened.

One day, he decided not to go to his office. He never went back

Reginald William Binch Cooper was born in 1928 in Suffolk in a house without electricity or running water. His father, Reginald, was a fisherman working out of Lowestoft, while his mother, Nancy (née Binch), was a nurse until they married. His father had been in the Royal Naval Reserve and served as a skipper lieutenant in the First World War; he was sunk five times. Bill's uncle had a boatyard in Lowestoft. The boy caught the nautical bug when he stood on a box to steer his father's herring cruiser back into port. He was just eight years old.

He soon acquired his own racing dinghy, and became obsessed with boats — but not the sea. "He hated that John Masefield poem, *Sea Fever*," Laurel said. "He would tell people, 'I don't love the sea. I respect it. It's the boats I love.'"

He went to Framlingham College near the Suffolk coast and served in the Lowestoft lifeboat during his school holidays. He met Laurel when he was 16 — she was a year younger — at a birthday party. "Apparently, he looked across the room and said, 'That's the one', and never let go of me," she said.

Her father had a Broads cruiser, which they raced with considerable success. However, they were soon separated. Cooper went to Dartmouth Naval College, while Laurel went to Leeds School of Art. By the time they were married in 1952, Cooper had joined the navy. They had two children, Shelley and Benedick.

Cooper served served in the aircraft carrier HMS *Implacable* as assistant air-direction officer, then as navigator on the frigate HMS *Loch Arkaig*. His last ship was the heavy cruiser HMS *Cumberland*. He left the navy in 1959 as lieutenant-commander. He became an actuary with the Norwich Union insurance company, then an overseas investment manager, before he was headhunted for gilt-edged investments. A member of the Labour party, he became an informal adviser on business to Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, but neither leader impressed him. He was uncertain that Callaghan understood the nature of business, while Wilson, he felt, would just not listen.



At the same time, Cooper grew to hate his life in the City. "He pretty much had a breakdown," Laurel said. One morning in the early Seventies he rang her on his way to work. "I'm not going in," he said. He picked up a couple of hitchhikers and took them to Dover, then sat on the cliffs for a while, sizing up his life. He never went back to work. Instead, he began building a boat and set about persuading Laurel to join him in a life at sea. In 1976 they sailed out of Lowestoft on *Fare Well*, accompanied by Nelson, a one-eyed cat.

In 1985 they bought another boat, a Dutch seagoing barge, which they named *Hosanna*. They spent the next 20 years taking it to sea and on canals in Europe, winning an award from the Royal Cruising Club for a journey they made from France to the Black Sea via the Danube. One of their favourite ways of relaxing was doing *The Times* crossword.

Their characters dovetailed. Laurel was happy to cede command to Bill, a stickler for the rules who was highly organised. He could be "a rather rude sort of sailor", Laurel said. If he gave an order in the wrong way, she would reply, "Yes captaining," rather than "Yes, captain", to signify what she called "bossiness without leadership". He would take the hint.

Back at home, their son, Ben, who had been 18 when they set sail, studied drama at Rose Bruford College. His play, *The North Pole*, received a judges' commendation at the National Student Drama Festival. He later went on to write for *EastEnders*, *The Bill* and *Casualty*. Shelley worked for ITN as a researcher and reporter. After the sinking of the ferry the *Herald of Free Enterprise* in 1987, ITN needed a nautical expert. Shelley called her father.

Their books became unexpected hits, selling hundreds of thousands

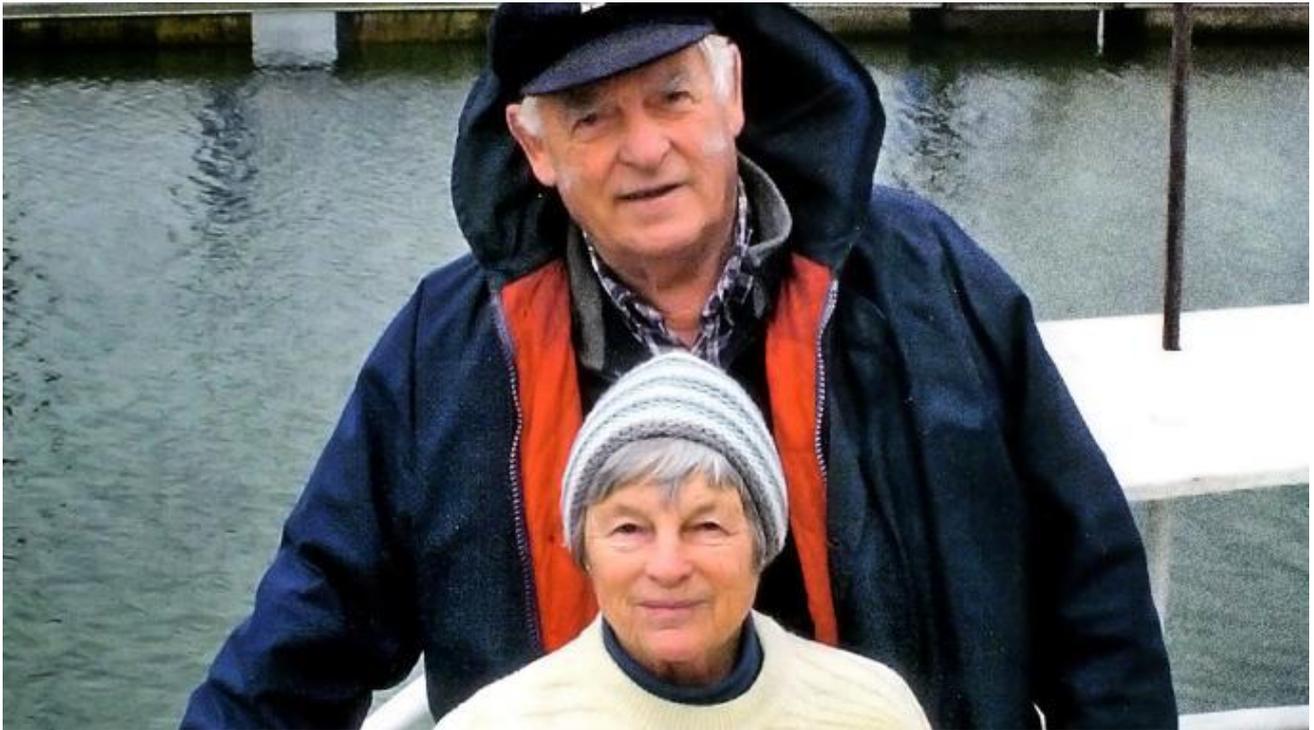
The Coopers shared their knowledge of the sea with a series of symposiums to cater for those who dreamt of following in their wake. In 1986 they published their first book, *Sell Up and Sail: Taking Up the Ulysses Option*, a practical guide that became an unexpected hit, selling hundreds of thousands of copies. More books followed, with titles like *Sell Up and Cruise the Inland Waterways* and *Watersteps Through France: To the Camargue by Canal*. Later, as they approached the conventional retirement age, they wrote *Sail Into the Sunset: a Handbook for Ancient Mariners*. In 2005 they sold *Hosanna* and built a shortened barge, the *Faraway*, which was suitable for elderly sailors.

Eventually, the realities of old age caught up. Macular degeneration, possibly caused by years of staring into sextants, began to afflict Cooper, who, from 2011, also suffered from pulmonary fibrosis. Encouraged by their children, the couple finally accepted the inevitable and, in 2012, they sailed into Rochester from Calais. For their final journey, Laurel had to take charge.

Their son, Ben, eventually gave up scriptwriting and now teaches excluded children; he has a son and a daughter of his own. With her husband, Shelley, who has a daughter, runs an air service in the Caribbean.

The Coopers moved into sheltered accommodation. They appeared on television and he wrote a novel, *Seago: A Sea Story*, about a fictional submarine disaster, which was published in 2014. For the barging magazine *Blue Flag* he began an A-Z series of sailing practicalities. The next issue will contain his last contribution: "G for generator".

Bill Cooper, investment manager, sailor and author, was born on November 5, 1928. He died on March 7, 2016, aged 87



Bill Cooper with his wife, Laurel, in 2008