Billy Noble

Belfast boy Billy Noble was born when Edward VII was on the throne. It was 1909, the year Woolworths opened its first UK store and rugby was first played at Twickenham. The Rt Rev John Crozier was Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore and Titanic had yet to make her maiden voyage,.

Billy, who celebrated his 105th birthday on January 5 this year, still lives in the Jordanstown home he set up with his wife Henriette when they married in 1938. He is cared for by his son Denis and daughter-in-law Pamela and although he is frail his memory is clear. And so is his voice as he revisits aspects of a long and happy life.

Born in Belfast’s Limestone Road, Billy was the second child of Elizabeth and Arthur Noble. His father worked in the shipyard, and Billy always held him in very high esteem. “He was a very cultured man, a wonderful man,” says Billy. “It was a hard life in the shop yard, up early every day and back late at night. I have never in my life come across anyone like my father and mother.” Arthur died in 1937.

Billy’s mother, a keen member of the Mothers’ Union, was active in politics in the Ulster Unionist party in Duncairn, which was represented for a time by Lord Carson. She was awarded an OBE for public services.

Billy too was honoured with a CBE. When he told her he was to receive this higher honour, Elizabeth took time to think and then put him in his place by reminding him that he had never been ‘Head of the Mothers’ Union!’

Arthur played the organ in St Michael’s in Shankill Road and the family also worshipped at St Peter’s. The family moved to Skegoneil Avenue and Billy attended Skegoneil Public Elementary School where the headmaster was a strict disciplinarian named Pa Magill.

“You had to do well for Pa or he would murder you!” Billy recalls. “He was very strict. At a few minutes to nine he would be standing at the door with his cane which he used if you were late. It didn’t do us a bit of harm but it taught us to be punctual!”

Billy was a member of the Choir of St Anne’s Cathedral, joining not only to sing, but to play football too! For choir practice he had to walk all the way from Skegoneil to Belfast Cathedral.

He was a member of the BB and later joined the Boy Scouts at St James’s Parish. “We loved going camping in Islandmagee,” Billy says. “As a boy scout I walked from home in Belfast to Islandmagee to camp, went to bed early, slept and got up the next morning in time to get the train home. It was long distance camping carrying our rucksacks and tents.”

Billy recalls how the family would spend its holidays at McGladdery’s Farm in Islandmagee. “Mr McGladdery was a dear old soul. He came from Donegal to join the Navy but his eyesight was not so good. He married a woman from the north of England. She was a lovely person but didn’t have her feet on the ground. Even in the hay season she would come out and ask him to come in for a wee dance and he would put his clogs on and go in and dance with her,” Billy smiles at the memory.

“One day we hired a kind of petrol caravan and all went in for a bathe but hardly anyone could swim. I had people try and teach me but I never did it.

“I was a good footballer. I would not have missed a football match for anything. I did see George Best play, but I think they thought too much of him.”

Billy obtained a scholarship to Inst and before sitting his Senior Exam he passed the Northern Ireland Civil Service examination, coming top in maths.

His abilities were recognised early on by those in charge who manoeuvred him into working as part of their staff. He was released to study law part-time at Queen’s and was one of just four students of a class of 30 to complete the course in the minimum period of time.

His studies instilled in him a love of Estate Duty Law and Billy rose to become Comptroller of Estate Duty in Northern Ireland.

He was a civil servant all his life, joining in 1926 and retiring in 1973. He was awarded his CBE the year he retired. “I loved my work in the civil service. It was very hard work but it was very rewarding,” Billy says.

Billy recalls the dark days of the First World War. “It was happening around us but it did not impinge on our life too much. My father was in the shipyard and did not have to go to war. He was a saint, a good man.”

Billy married Henriette Kernahan in 1938. He met her playing tennis at St Peter’s, and says he admired her ‘quiet disposition.’ “She sort of grew on me,” Billy adds. The couple had three sons, Desmond, Denis and Colin. Henriette died in 2003.

Billy was in the Home Guard during World War Two. “He was more of a danger to his colleagues than the German’s were,” his son Denis jokes.

Billy doesn’t disagree. “I was not very practical. I was in the Home Guard when the Civil Service office was moved to Lisburn. I was in the office when someone called in to view the Home Guard. I rushed downstairs having quickly put on my uniform trousers and hat, but when we started drill my trousers fell down further and further, then my hat fell off and the boys were kicking it up and down!”

Billy joined St Patrick’s Parish when he moved to Jordanstown. He was a church warden and as a parochial nominator was involved in the appointment of four ministers – WE McCappin; Eric Jones; Ken Smythe and Jim Moore. He was a member of the Select Vestry for 42 years.

Billy says the secret of his long and healthy life is that he has always loved to walk. “I was always a great walker. I walked up Alexander Park Avenue and up the Antrim Road to Skegoneil School. The children wouldn’t do it nowadays. I would walk in any kind of weather.” He used to take the family for Sunday afternoon walks up Carnmoney Hill, and took up golf after his retirement.

Billy first bought a car in 1956. “I didn’t want a car but the family talked me into it. I didn’t have to do a driving test, but I kept driving until I was 90.”

Billy is underwhelmed by the many changes in life over the years. “Not a lot has changed,” he says. “A whole lot of wee bits maybe.”

But prompted by Denis, he admits: “I am not too keen on aeroplanes!”

The oldest person in Ireland is a 107-year-old lady living in Ballynahinch. According to the website ‘Oldest in Britain,’ the oldest man in Northern Ireland is not known. Perhaps at 105 Billy is still a little young to be vying for the title!