

David Bilby (1943 – 2026)

It is with immense sadness that I announce the death of David Bilby, a wonderful man who devoted his life to jewellery and the quiet art of doing things well.

David gave almost seven decades to the world of fine jewellery. From the moment he entered the trade as a teenager, work became one of the great passions of his life, and he continued working for us until the very end. His knowledge, eye, integrity and instinct for people made him not only an exceptional jeweller, but a trusted adviser and friend to generations of clients and colleagues.

David's story began in 1958, when, aged just 15, he answered a newspaper advertisement seeking a "bright young lad to learn the jewellery trade". The advertisement was placed by Attenborough of Fleet Street, the prestigious pawnbroker where he began his gemmology training. By the age of 18, he had become the youngest person to qualify as a Fellow of the Gemmology Association, and he later completed the Diamond Diploma in its inaugural year.

Yet David's education was never only about stones, settings or hallmarks. He learned, early on, how to understand people: how to listen carefully, assess a situation, and build relationships founded on trust. Those qualities would stay with him for the rest of his career.

After Attenborough, David joined Garrard, then home of the Crown Jeweller. Born to a working-class family in south London, he entered a rarefied world on the strength of his expertise and quiet confidence. The story of his interview became part of his legend:

"During my interview, the boss pulled out a piece of antique silver and said, 'tell me about this'," David recalled. "I said 'it's by Samuel Watson, 1732, rather nice'. He said, 'you're wrong, it's 1731'. I said, 'with the greatest respect sir, it's 1732'. He looked back at his hallmark book and said, 'you've got the job'."

David quickly rose through the ranks, becoming sales and showrooms director, travelling the world to introduce wealthy clients to fabulous jewels. Photographs of him aboard yachts and in the company of royals attest to the glamour of those days, but David never allowed it to define him. He was modest, practical and understated. As he once said of himself, "I don't say much, I just get on with it."

In 1989, David established his own jewellery company in Mayfair. He went on to manage Hunt & Roskell, part of the Asprey group, before rejoining Garrard, moving the company to Bond Street and becoming General Manager at Asprey & Garrard. In 2000, he established his own venture again, bringing together clients and exceptional goods from all over the world.

A move to the Cotswolds eventually brought David to Pragnell. He found there a company rooted in the values he cared about most: relationships, quality, rarity and trust. He worked alongside Jeremy, Tom, Richard and I and became a much-loved presence within the business, sharing his wisdom generously and continuing to delight clients with the kind of rare and beautiful pieces that only he could fully bring to life. Those who worked with David knew that his gift was not simply knowledge, though his knowledge was immense. It was his way with people. He sent handwritten letters, often stamped with his personal seal. He believed in listening more than speaking. He understood that a jewel was never only an object, but part of a story, a celebration, a family memory or an act of love.

David once described himself not as a salesperson, but as a facilitator. "I've learnt to observe silence and listen," he said, "and get to know what people want. The most important thing is that everyone walks out of the door feeling ten feet tall." It was a philosophy that captured him perfectly: generous, attentive, dignified and deeply human. For many of us, David was also a teacher. He taught by example, through patience, instinct and the standards he set for himself. I learnt a great deal from him, not only about jewellery, but about judgement, loyalty and the importance of doing things properly. He was a good man, and his influence will remain with all those who had the privilege of working alongside him.

David would often join Tom and I on trips, and those journeys will be remembered with great affection. His presence brought reassurance, perspective and often a quiet humour. He carried with him a lifetime of experience but never wore it heavily. He was generous with his time, clear in his opinions and unfailingly committed to the work and people he cared about.

Across 68 years in the trade, David saw fashions change, businesses evolve and the pace of communication transform beyond recognition. But the things he valued most remained constant: honesty, discretion, craftsmanship, beauty and trust. These were the principles by which he worked, and the qualities by which he will be remembered.

David's loss will be felt deeply by his family, friends, colleagues and clients. We remember him with gratitude and affection: a gentleman of rare knowledge and quiet strength, whose life's work was built not only around exceptional jewels, but around exceptional relationships.