

OBITUARY

# Bob Satchwell obituary

Journalist who brokered the media embargo on Prince Harry's deployment to Afghanistan

---

Saturday March 06 2021, 12.01am  
GMT, The Times

---



Bob Satchwell picked up several honours in his tenures on the Cambridge Evening News and the Lancashire Evening Post  
PA

During the winter of 2007-08, Bob Satchwell opened his computer every morning and typed into Google: “Prince Harry” and “Afghanistan”. For ten weeks the search engine threw back the same result: “Prince Harry is forbidden to fight alongside soldiers in Afghanistan”.

Satchwell, an experienced newspaper editor and executive director of the Society of Editors, was relieved. He had brokered a secret agreement between Buckingham Palace, the army and Britain’s fiercely competitive media that would enable the third in line to the throne to join the Household Cavalry Regiment Battle Group without making them prize targets for the Taliban.

In return for their silence, the media were granted unprecedented access to the first member of the royal family to go to war since Prince Andrew, Harry’s uncle, in the Falklands conflict of 1982. Their results, untarnished by Buckingham Palace or the Ministry of Defence, could be published when Harry returned home.

The British press and a few international news agencies were involved, but not the American newspapers, who failed to notice that Harry had vanished from public

view. There were a few tense moments, such as when an Australian magazine and a German newspaper carried brief reports of the deployment, but no one paid much attention.

That all changed on February 28, 2008. The Drudge Report, a widely read American website that a decade earlier had revealed President Clinton's affair with a 22-year-old White House intern, published a banner headline reading: "Prince Harry fights on frontlines in Afghanistan".

Satchwell immediately called his contact at the MoD to say that the blackout could no longer hold. "You've got a matter of minutes, not hours, to get a statement ready and look after the security issues," he told Colonel Ben Bathurst, the ministry's spokesman. Harry was immediately withdrawn from the field and flown back to Britain.

Although the prince and the army were disappointed, there was a sense of achievement that an entirely voluntary press embargo had held for almost three months. Meanwhile, the media had successfully obtained their interviews, photographs and footage. "We had to actually operate as a group if it was going to work," Satchwell later told *The New York Times*, adding that he had never expected the arrangement to survive more than a few days.

On Satchwell's watch the *Cambridge Evening News* had picked up several honours, while as news editor on the *Lancashire Evening Post* he had shared an award for an investigation into police corruption that led to the downfall in 1977 of Stanley Parr, the chief constable of Lancashire, who had intervened in criminal cases.

Robert Eric Satchwell was born in Birmingham in 1948, the son of Frederick Satchwell, a prison officer whose work took the family around the country, and his wife Rosamund (née Richards). He was educated at Lancaster Royal Grammar School, developing a passion for rugby that continued at the London School of Economics, where he was general secretary of the students' union rugby club and involved in the union newspaper, *The Beaver*.

He met Michele Coupe, a teacher, through friends in Lytham St Annes. They were married in 1969 and in 2000 Michele had one of the first live kidney transplants, from her sister Linda, at Addenbrooke's hospital, Cambridge. She died in 2013. He is survived by their daughters, Anna, who is a PA in Dubai, and Ellie, who is a stay-at-home mother, and by two stepsons, Matthew, who owns a construction company, and Andrew, who works in hospitality.

Satchwell joined the *Lancashire Evening Post* in 1970 and was still a trainee when he learnt that nine pupils from a village near Preston had passed their 11-plus exam but only three places were available at the local grammar school; six faced going to a secondary modern, from where they were unlikely to progress to university. The publicity generated by his story led to more places being found. Ten years later he received a letter from one of those students who had just graduated, saying: "My first-class degree is partly yours."

In 1981 Satchwell moved with his editor, Barry Askew, to the *News of the World* in London. He soon discovered that while politicians frequently bad-mouthed the title, they were keen to appear on its pages. "We kept a wedge of opinion pieces sent in by MPs on spec," he recalled. Askew's tenure was short-lived and in 1984 Satchwell also departed, to be editor of the *Cambridge Evening News*.

He was a member of the Editors' Code committee and, after the death of Princess Diana in 1997, was involved in revising its code of practice for journalists. The following year the Guild of Editors merged with the Association of the British Editors to form the Society of Editors, with Satchwell as the first executive director, representing 400 editors across the industry. After he had a stroke four years ago, the annual Satchwell Lecture was created in his honour.

Satchwell was an avid reader of biographies, enjoyed cowboy films and was devoted to Preston Grasshoppers rugby club. He was at his happiest on water and on weekends he would drive to Port Solent, near Portsmouth, to sail his yacht, Viane.

**Bob Satchwell, journalist, was born on August 30, 1948. He died of Covid-19 on March 2, 2021, aged 72**