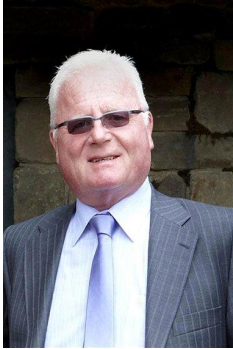


Segway owner dies after falling off river cliff

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 28 September 2010 13:07 - Last Updated Tuesday, 28 September 2010 13:14



LONDON (AP) -- All police found at the bottom of a cliff was a man's body in a frigid river and a Segway, the two-wheeled electric device that was supposed to revolutionize personal transport. It was Jimi Heselden, a one-time laid-off coal miner turned self-made millionaire who had bought the Segway company only 10 months earlier. He apparently fell to his death while riding one of the sleek black-and-silver scooters. Authorities said Monday his body was found in the River Wharfe at the base of a 30-foot cliff. Details remained sketchy - police say only that the death was not suspicious, meaning foul play is not suspected - but the incident seems certain to raise fresh questions about the safety of the Segway, which is banned on British motorways and in some U.S. cities because of safety concerns.

A witness reported seeing a man fall Sunday over a 30-foot drop into the river near the village of Boston Spa, 140 miles (225 kilometers) north of London. The remote, heavily forested area, not far from Heselden's country estate, is popular with hikers.

A family spokesman released a statement saying the "exact circumstances of the accident are still being clarified and will, of course, be the subject of an inquest." The family "has been left devastated by the sudden and tragic loss of a much-loved father and husband," the spokesman said.

Somber family members visited the accident site Monday - placing wreaths - but they asked for privacy.

Heselden, a high school dropout who went on to make a fortune developing a blast wall system used to protect troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, never abandoned his gritty roots. He used his money to help people in the working-class area around Leeds where he grew up, earning folk hero status there.

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The 62-year-old Heselden had bought control of the Bedford, N.H.-based Segway in December.

The company's unique two-wheeler was introduced with much fanfare in 1999 by its American founder, Dean Kamen, as a means of transport that was more protective of the environment than other scooters and automobiles. The company claims the Segway is 11 times more efficient than the average American car. It can be used indoors because it has no emissions, making it popular with some police departments and private security firms, who use it to patrol indoor malls.

But it has also been linked to some high-profile mishaps.

President George W. Bush famously tried one out in 2003 at his family's estate in Maine, but the machine toppled over when he tried to get on it. Celebrity journalist Piers Morgan also took a tumble on one - the video can be seen on YouTube, along with dozens of other Segway mishaps.

Heselden's death prompted new questions about the safety record of the battery-powered Segway, which is stabilized by gyroscopes and can travel at speeds up to 12.5 mph (20 kph).

The company recalled all its U.S. vehicles in 2006 because of a software problem that could make its wheels reverse direction, causing riders to fall off.

New Jersey lawyer Samuel Davis told The Associated Press he has represented about a dozen people hurt while riding Segways, including some who suffered serious injuries.

"The problem is the vehicles are just not that stable," he said. "You have to get used to leaning away from the turn. If you lean into it, you'll turn over. They don't do well on gravel or surfaces where there is a stone or a bump. It's difficult to control."

One U.S. businessman was quick to defend the Segway's safety record.

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Mobile Entertainment, which has offered Segway tours along the Mississippi River for the past seven years, has had more than 40,000 customers ride the device without any serious injuries, owner Bill Neuenschwander told the AP.

"Nobody's gone off a river. Nobody," he said, speaking Monday from Minneapolis. "This product is perfectly safe when people respect its limitations."

Heselden dropped out of school at 15 and worked as a coal miner before founding Hesco Bastion Ltd., based in Leeds, near the tough Halton Moor area where he grew up.

"Jimi was an amazing man who, apart from being a wonderful success story for Leeds due to his business acumen, was also remarkably selfless and generous, giving millions to local charities to help people in his home city," said Tom Riordan, the chief executive of Leeds City Council.

Heselden recently gave \$15.9 million (10 million pounds) to the Leeds Community Foundation and also supported the "Help for Heroes" charity that aids wounded Armed Forces veterans.

"Life turned out pretty well for me, but I still work in the same area where I grew up, and everyday I see people who for whatever reason are down on their luck," Heselden told the Yorkshire Post earlier this year. "When times are good I honestly believe people have a moral obligation to use their wealth to help others."

Heselden is credited with bringing hundreds of jobs to the Leeds area since the development of the Hesco barriers in 1990. The barriers consist of wire frames that are fitted with liners and filled with dirt, sand or rock and used to protect soldiers and also to fortify flood walls and to stop oil from fouling beaches and marshes.

The U.S. and its allies have used the barriers to protect their bases in various war zones, and they were also used in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and along the southern U.S. coast

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after the recent BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.