

Life of Adrienne Hart-Davis

Adrienne (born Adrienne ALPIN in August 1944) grew up in West Yorkshire with one younger sister, Penny, at a time when there were of course no mobile phones or computers. There were however buses, and, Adrienne insisted, in those days children, on the grounds that they only paid half-fare, were expected to stand to let an adult (of any age) sit down. Money was in shillings and pence, and metric units were of course not common in everyday life – Adrienne calculated quantities for recipes in pounds and ounces throughout her life.

Foreign travel was much less affordable than it is now, and it would have been difficult for Adrienne to imagine travelling to Canada, America, Egypt or Japan, but she was during her life able to visit all these places.

TV had come into family homes in the 1950s, and Adrienne was able to see Clint Eastwood in “Rawhide”; later on she would be a great fan of Clint Eastwood e.g. in “Spaghetti Western” films.

Adrienne was a bright child, especially gifted for mathematics, and hard-working. She won a place to go to Oxford University to study physics.

At the time many girls did not choose to go or were actively discouraged from going to university. At Oxford University at the time, there were ten male students to one female student, female students only being admitted in a small group of women-only colleges, such as St. Hilda’s College, which Adrienne attended.

Somewhere around here, somewhere between St. Hilda’s College, the river and punting, and lectures and tutorials, was Adrienne’s period of greatest happiness. This was a happy time she looked back on all her life. For much of her life, she had photos of Oxford on the wall at home. Later in life, she wished to come back to live in Oxford. One of the few things that felt in place about Adrienne’s death was, indeed, the place. Although she did not get the chance to make the most of her retirement and see her grandson grow up, Oxford was certainly where she wanted to be at the end of her life.

Whilst at Oxford, Adrienne met Adam Hart-Davis, who was studying chemistry and had the considerable advantage of driving a 1934 Austin 7, which both Adam and Adrienne could happily pretend was an E-type Jaguar.

Amongst Adam and Adrienne’s happiest moments was a honeymoon on the Isle of Skye, where they camped near Uig on a road marked “no through road” at both ends; Adam recalls that the sun shone without interruption for nine days.

After completing degrees at Oxford, both Adam and Adrienne did Ph.D.’s at the (all new, concrete) York University. Adrienne worked at a distance with the Atlas computer at Harwell. She prepared programmes in the form of punched cards, which were sent off by post to Harwell. If there were any mistakes, there would be no result from the computer (which, though it may have taken up a big room all on its own, was no doubt no match for the lowliest of PCs of today).

In York, Adrienne and Adam lived initially in an awkwardly shaped triangular room above a shop at 4A School lane, Fulford, York, where their elder son Damon was born (at home) in August 1967. Much of Damon's earliest months were spent either in the chemistry or the physics department of York University. Afterwards, the family moved to the village of Naburn, in a 2-bedroom house, rented for 50 p (10 shillings) a week. Even at the time that was a low rent, thanks to a Commander Palms who rented out houses at very reasonable rates to students. They often ate cheap Vesta meals available at the local garage.

In 1968, Adam found a job in postdoctoral research in Canada. They went over on a boat from Liverpool, and Damon learnt to walk on the boat going over. Adam and Adrienne spent the crossing leaping out of their deckchairs as Damon staggered towards the railings on deck.

The quality of life was much higher in Canada than in England, at least in scientific research, and the family were able to enjoy ice skating and camping holidays. The winters were of course unlike anything one encounters in England – during one month of January the temperature never got above 0°F (-18°C).

They decided to come back to England whilst Adrienne was pregnant with her second son, Jason, who was born in Oxford in August 1971. At that time, the family lived in a tiny flat in Oxford, before later buying their first house in Botley, 10 Sycamore Road. They later moved to a house in 29 Eynsham Road, where they were able to enjoy the joy of a garden with a vegetable patch.

Unfortunately, Adrienne had to undergo major surgery in 1973 to remove a tumour; the operation damaged the nerves on one side of her face and left her without hearing and balance in one ear.

In 1977, Adam, who had worked for some time in the Oxford University Press, took a job in Yorkshire Television, which enabled the family to move back to the area where Adrienne had grown up. Although Adrienne had not been able to pursue a career in scientific research, she took up writing and finished several novels, including three published detective stories (under the pseudonym Jo Heys, Heys being Adrienne's mother's maiden name, and Jo being derived from her father's name Joseph). There are probably not many people who have published both detective stories and an undergraduate textbook on solid state physics! Sadly, a number of historical novels Adrienne wrote (set in the middle ages, biblical or pre-biblical times), the writing of which involved a considerable amount of research, never found a willing publisher.

Although Adrienne had various jobs for periods of her life in Yorkshire, often involving computer technology, including a stint in a firm of architects in Huddersfield, she always missed scientific research and the academic world.

When Adrienne's marriage with Adam came to an end, Adrienne wanted to come back to Oxford and happily was able to find a job in the university. At the end of her working life, she was able to find a job as a copy editor of a mathematics journal, working from the Maths Institute in Oxford, which was about as close to the actual world of academic research as one can come without actually being an academic.

Adrienne was not a confident person with an easy telephone style; a very private person, she had a tendency to worry too much and make mountains out of molehills. However, she was very principled and honest and was held in high regard and affection by her colleagues in the Maths Institute where she worked. She became something of a ‘mother hen’ in the department, always willing to listen, always able to offer wise advice if asked.

Intellectually gifted, Adrienne also had a strong creative streak and her artistic talents included writing, painting, embroidery, and in particular she was a talented photographer, working with the Science Photo Library, on and off for many years. Examples of her work decorate the corridors of the Mathematical Institute.

Adrienne had some carefully laid plans for her retirement. She had worked out a series of walks in Kidlington that she was going to do to make sure she didn’t get too sedentary and put on weight. She had also joined the Gardening Society and Bonsai Club and was planning on going on organised group holidays, as she had done in previous years to Yellowstone Park in America, to the gardens of Italy, to medieval towns in Spain, and to the desert in Egypt. She was planning to spend more time with her grandson, Louis, during his school holidays, now that she was no longer limited by holidays from work. Adrienne had said how she was looking forward to “gloating”, from the depths of her bed, thinking of people who were going into work now that she no longer had to.

Unfortunately, the “gloating” did not even last out a single winter, since Adrienne died of meningitis less than two months after retiring. Her grandson, Louis, will not know what he missed, though he will fortunately be old enough to remember the bacon and eggs that Adrienne always got up early to make for him when he visited Kidlington (although she would never dream of eating the stuff herself) and the wonderful holiday that Adrienne (“Grand-Maman” for Louis) organized on Jersey the summer before she died.

The following prayer was read out at the end of Adrienne’s cremation service, which took place on Tuesday 29 March, 2005 at Oxford Crematorium. There was pouring rain outside, as befits funerals.

Indian Prayer

(anon)

When I am dead
Cry for me a little
Think of me sometimes
But not too much
Think of me now and again
As I was in life
At some moments it’s pleasant to recall
But not for long.
Leave me in peace
And I shall leave you in peace
And while you live
Let your thoughts be with the living.