

Marion Spencer (1920 – 2019)

Marion enjoyed a long life. But John was sure that you would not want a tediously detailed account of her life, nor (he thought) would you be looking for a fulsome tribute to Marion. Why ever not? Well, in your differing relationships with her you all know what an estimable and lovable woman she was.

So John asked me if I would read to you a short piece about Marion's career.

John's tribute

Marion was the middle, and last surviving, of the three daughters of Thomas Wilson Fox and Mabel Dalton, both from long lines of eminent Primitive Methodists. She was born, and lived for her first 18 years, in the London Borough of Harrow. Her father, having entered the Civil Service as a boy clerk, retired from the Ministry of Labour as Accountant General and decorated as a Companion of the Bath. Mabel was no less noteworthy as a devoted and dearly-loved mother.

Marion's education began at what was quaintly known as a Dames' School. Then she went on to Brondesbury & Kilburn High School, where she ended up as head girl. Bright as well as popular, she got into University College, London to do a general arts degree and, of course, she got a First.

This was war-time, and UCL had been evacuated to Aberystwyth, so Marion escaped from the first blitz. But she returned to London in 1941 and stayed there for the rest of the war.

Conscription took her into the Civil Service, specifically into the clothes-rationing department of the Board of Trade where she was responsible for keeping an especially firm grip on the supply of corsets and cotton socks!

In 1945, by virtue of her 1st-class degree, she was eligible to take the competitive re-construction exam (with its fearsome country-house weekend). Success in this gave her a permanent place in the Administrative Class of the Civil Service.

After promotion to the rank of Principal in 1949, Marion was selected to attend a three-month course at the Administrative Staff College in Henley-on-Thames. There she met John Spencer, a junior member of the staff, one of whose duties was to put out the chairs for College meetings. Enchanted by an after-dinner speech that Marion gave, John courted her for the rest of the course, and only nine years later asked her to be his wife.

That ends John's tribute. I shall continue with stories and memories from Marion's life.

Marion made and kept good friends all her life. This is a message to Marion's family after her death.

"What a gentle, kind, sweet and sensitive person she was, as well as being highly competent at all that she did. She had a career in the Board of Trade with my mother and they were very close friends, particularly after my parents moved to Oxford. Marion followed her career with a lifetime supporting your father and bringing up the two of you.....She was my parents' bridesmaid in 1948.....She is probably the last person who has known me all my life."

“I know that they and our parents continued to enjoy each other’s company when they all lived in Oxford.”

Marion befriended a wide range of people; in her 30s before she was married she supported a boy who lived in a children’s home. He faced many challenges in his life, but Marion was there to support him until his death. He was devoted to her and she was very committed to him.

Marion and John were married in 1958. John had proposed on a brief stop during a journey back to London from Dorset where they had been visiting John’s family. They had stopped at a pub. John described the event to Cathy. “I realised I’d been wasting my time for the past nine years and wanted to be with Marion forever. Marion wasn’t expecting it but was bold enough to say ‘yes’. I didn’t have a ring so Marion had to go and buy it herself.”

John remarked on their 60th Wedding Anniversary last September, “It could have been 70 years if I hadn’t messed about.”!

In an early act during a lifetime of making life easy for John, Marion agreed to buy her engagement ring. Cathy described it as a pretty ring with no sparkly stones. It suited Marion very well.

Marion gave up her prestigious Civil Service post on her marriage. She and John lived for a short time in Aylesbury before moving to London. They were living in Croydon by the time Cathy was born, followed by Richard two years later. The family home for ten years was a busy place, with two growing children, family and friends. Marion established a baby sitting circle and joined the Townswomen’s Guild. John was working at the Royal Marsden Hospital. During that time John wrote a book on management in hospitals, which Marion painstakingly typed and indexed.

Family mattered enormously to Marion, when Cathy and Richard were young she encouraged and supported them in a variety of activities, helping with homework and providing reassurance. Richard described her as a “wonderful mother”. Marion was close to her sisters Barbara and Shirley and their families. Her niece Liz and nephew Steve are here today. Cathy described her mother as “A very good listener, who knew the value of listening”.

Marion remained close to her sisters: Marion’s niece in Canada, Alison wrote: “I am so grateful to her for the support she gave to her little sister, and her many kindnesses to me.....I can hear her voice, so like our Grandma’s: measured and thoughtful, is how she spoke to me.”

Marion’s 1st cousin-once-removed, Jane wrote: “I have been thinking about my own mum’s love of yours today. She told me many tales of their exploits and laughter, and clearly adored Marion as much as Marion adored her. I got a picture of a highly intelligent, funny and deeply caring person, and I was delighted to be able to help them talk to one another when in their 90s, when my mum was bed bound and yours still in her house. Whenever she spoke of Marion, mum’s eyes would light up and she would be quick to laughter as she recounted whatever it was that tickled her.”

Marion told me that she had been “very very lucky to marry someone with the same interests” as her. This was in particular relation to their joint love of Opera. They relished going to Covent Garden and to Glyndebourne. Marion sang in a choir and particularly enjoyed an aria from Don Giovanni “My happiness depends on yours”. This sums up Marion’s selflessness, especially with John. They

had listened to this aria on one of their first dates. Marion was in love with John for more than 60 years. Their love for each other shone through when I met them.

Cathy described Marion as inviting “all and sundry” into their home. She was involved with a scheme to invite a young person from a Commonwealth country who was to be alone at Christmas time to join a family on Christmas Day. Marion participated in this for many years.

After ten years in Croydon the family moved to Oxford and lived just across the road from Westminster College. Marion took to life in Oxford and made the most of opportunities to go to the theatre and attend concerts. She swam, joined a choir and kept fit classes. She made new and kept up with old friends.

Marion kept very busy. She achieved a childhood ambition to be a librarian with a part time post in the library at Westminster College, where her organisational and people skills came to the fore. Marion worked at the college until she retired. She and John became involved with Vale House, a dementia care home. Into her 80s Marion sorted their archives and wrote their history.

Marion was a great organiser and for many years she planned and organised a family party at their home in Oxford. Cathy remembered lots of children running round the garden and plenty of food. Another message read:

“I can only imagine her in her prime, in your front room or kitchen at Southfield – always sunny of course – so that is how I will always remember her. She gave such a benevolent sense of authority, and like your Dad seemed completely positive, interested and encouraging about everything.”

This food would have been purchased with Marion’s principles to the fore. Shopping was a political act for Marion. She bought nothing from South Africa in the days of Apartheid. Marion was frugal in her shopping habits and wasted nothing; perhaps a hangover from her Methodist and war time upbringing. Cathy described Marion as a principled woman, a lifelong liberal with both a small and a large L. She wanted to be kind and fair to everyone.

As a child Marion’s family holiday involved three weeks in Filey on the Yorkshire coast. They played hopscotch on the beach and wore hand-knitted swimsuits. Marion and her sisters also played “acting games” pretending to be aristocratic families, on the beach. Holidays with Cathy and Richard were typical of the time; rented cottages or camping by the seaside. Marion did all the organising of course. Destinations included a variety of places in the UK, Ireland and France with Sark being particularly memorable.

Later Marion and John travelled to many places in Europe visiting cultural and historic places. These holidays were often with their friends Brian and Ann. Marion and John also visited her sister Shirley in Canada.

In time Marion became a devoted and much loved mother-in-law to Gill and John. She was delighted to become Grandma first to Tom then to Beth and Matthew. Marion loved having them come to visit and always got toys out ready for them to play with. She was close to her grandchildren and followed their progress with great interest.

In retirement Marion was as busy as ever. She was an active member of Oxford U3A and established its opera group. She volunteered for the League of Friends at the John Radcliffe Hospital where John had worked and continued with many other activities.

Marion was a great reader with wide ranging tastes, she enjoyed watching murder mysteries on TV, an interest not shared with John, but they both liked doing crosswords.

Marion's skill at organisation extended to her own 90th birthday party for family and friends, how delighted she would have been to have all the people who mattered most to her in one place.

Sadly failing eyesight marred Marion's last years, but true to her style of helping others she took part in a video on the subject of macular degeneration, the cause of her sight loss. She made good use of a magnifying glass to check details in the Radio Times of the programmes she and John enjoyed.

Counting her blessings was second nature to Marion, she and John appreciated what they had given and gained from each other during their marriage. They considered themselves very much equals. John's happiness came from Marion and his happiness made her content.

Hers was a life that mattered; she made sure that was the case.