

Tribute: Sheila Ann Sowter

Born: 7 August 1936

Died: 6 April 2018

So then, let us look back on Sheila's life and think about the kind of person that she was. And she had a life so full of experiences and interests that it would probably be easier to talk about all the things that she wasn't interested in, or didn't do - because that list of things might be somewhat shorter than everything that she did do!

Now, before we begin there's a friend of Sheila's who has travelled from Devon to be here today and he'd very much like to say a few words. So I'd like to ask Dave to speak for a minute or two about his memories of Sheila.

Dave's words.

But let's start at the beginning.

Sheila was born in Derby on the 7th August 1936 to parents Percy and Lillian – who was known by her middle name, Connie. Sheila was an only child – very sadly, her parents had lost a baby in very early infancy some years before. Her mother was a teacher, and her father was a research chemist – and one of some renown. Here then we see the seeds of what was to become two of Sheila's abiding passions – research and teaching.

In the 1950s the family moved from Derby to Shenfield in Essex, and Percy worked for the photographic film company, Ilford.

Before the move, Sheila attended a girls' grammar school in Derby, and ultimately went on to study at Newnham College Cambridge – where she completed a degree in natural sciences. This covered chemistry, biology and physics – but it was always chemistry that Sheila was most interested in. In fact, she would have loved to have been a research chemist – but she had a real fear of examinations, so that didn't come to pass. But it is quite remarkable that she overcame her fear to achieve her degree from Cambridge.

To carry on with the academic theme, it really was a lifetime of continuous study and learning for Sheila. She had an insatiable appetite for knowledge, not only accumulating knowledge but also developing and sharing it.

After Cambridge, Sheila did some work experience at a school where one of her uncles was headmaster. From a very young age it was always her ambition to be an academic – and that is just what she did.

Sheila achieved a diploma in further education, and a mathematics degree with the Open University; she went on to become a lecturer in teacher training at Avery Hill College – where she must have taken much delight in teaching other teachers how to teach science to their pupils; Avery Hill College went on to become a university, where she also taught geology, Earth sciences and maths; and she was a part time lecturer and teacher with the Open University.

In amongst all this, in the early 70s Sheila spent a year in New York on a placement in a hospital laboratory conducting research – what an experience that must have been for her and, given Sheila's unique character, I daresay them.

That's quite a track record of education and learning – and when we reflect on the entirety of Sheila's life it's important that we remember how fulfilling and meaningful this was for her. It is I hope a comfort to know that here was a woman who spent her life doing what she'd always wanted to do.

In terms of her family, Sheila was, as I mentioned earlier, an only child. She was loved and cherished by her parents – and she perhaps inherited from them her passion for teaching and the sciences. Her father Percy was also somewhat of an eccentric – and it must be said that Sheila also inherited some of those traits; traits that made her who she was and helped shape her own individual character.

Although she had no siblings, Sheila was close to her cousins Celia and Mike. They were not geographically close – as youngsters they were in Pinner whilst she was in Derby – but there was a bond between them. So it is very good to see Mike here today – and I'd like now to invite him to say a few words about his memories of his cousin Sheila.

Mike's words.

In August 1976, Sheila gave birth to her only daughter Connie. She was a single mum, which back then was not quite so acceptable as it is today. Attitudes were different, as we can tell from a note Sheila herself made in her diary which said words to the effect: "Day nurseries give priority to married women – there are no places for single mothers."

So let's not beat about the bush – this period of Sheila's life must have been challenging. But she was an independent and determined woman and she got on with things. She found a very good child minder to look after Connie during the day so that she could get back to work; and as they were living in New Eltham – on the same road as Avery Hill College as it happens – she was able to come home every lunch time to feed Connie. All the while she held down two jobs – at the College, and as a part time lecturer for the Open University.

So we've heard something of Sheila's upbringing, her education, her work and her family. But there was a lot more to Sheila, so let's now think about all the other things she enjoyed – and there is much ground to cover.

Sheila was very well travelled. On her return from her placement in New York, she saw a lot of the world – including Singapore and parts of the Far East. There were holidays in Germany, where Sheila and her mother would go to the opera. Later – with the young Connie in tow – there were trips to France and Germany, where trains would be taken and cathedrals and museums visited. They would stay in youth hostels whilst they traipsed round the various locations – something I'm not sure that Connie, then aged about six or seven, was entirely impressed with!

Her travels were not without incident. Sheila was in Czechoslovakia in 1968 when the Russians invaded, which must have been quite frightening. But redoubtable as ever, she apparently hid for a while in a castle and at some point made her way to a railway line where a train was stopped especially to allow her to board and flee the country.

Sheila's other interests were many and varied – in fact she was something of a polymath, a person of expertise and skill in so many areas.

She was multilingual – fluent in German, and able to speak French, Russian and a number of other languages. In fact, Connie can remember a trip to Moscow when she was about 17, where her mother had very little trouble reading the language and picked up speaking it in a short space of time.

Sheila had a deep love for opera – especially Wagner, and whenever she could she would attend the festival near Nuremberg that celebrated his music. Her's was not a passive interest though – Sheila was a trained opera singer, and enjoyed performing as much as she did listening. She belonged to the Chelsea Opera Group – which was of a very high standard indeed – and as well as giving her the opportunity to perform, she met many friends through this shared enthusiasm.

Sheila also enjoyed the ballet, and classical music generally. Pop music, though, was not among her favourite genres – but curiously she did like the Pet Shop Boys, a “synthpop” duo who had many hits in the 1980s. The Pet Shop Boys did perform at Covent Garden a couple of years ago, and they have a major concert at the Royal Opera House later this year – so there we have, albeit loosely, an operatic connection!

You won't, perhaps, be surprised to know that Sheila was a member of MENSA – an IQ society whose aim is to identify and foster human intelligence for the benefit of humanity. Members use the society to share their knowledge, enthusiasms and passions with like-minded people. This, I think, ticked a lot of boxes for Sheila. She was highly intelligent and liked the company of others of the same ilk; she loved acquiring and sharing knowledge for the betterment of humanity; and she loved to share her enthusiasms and passions.

Indeed, MENSA often held musical evenings – where as well as singing herself, Sheila would accompany Connie on the piano. Yes – she was a pianist too, and could sight read music; yet another of her great many talents.

As well as all this, Sheila took pleasure from steam trains – which she enjoyed travelling on; real ale – which she liked to drink from time to time; and watching the great French mime artists like Marcel Marceau and Jacques Tati. And she loved pretty much anything on Radio 4 – which was her default radio station.

The diversity of Sheila's interests was quite something. When she was 47 years old, she took up Judo and carried it on for many years. She reached the level of a blue belt – only two steps away from the highest level of black belt. And she was especially expert in strangle holds and arm locks. Here was a woman not to be messed with! And never was that more evident than when she was fighting a younger man once at her Judo club.

Sheila – by this time a grey haired “older” woman - had her opponent, a man in his early thirties, in a good headlock of some sort. He would not submit; she would not give way. It was a battle of wills as much as one of skill and strength - and you will only need one guess as to who prevailed. The contest went on for some minutes...until Sheila's opponent passed out! Thankfully, he was quickly revived – and I daresay that trying to hold out against Sheila was not something he repeated in a hurry!

When she retired Sheila went on to learn yet more new things by joining the University of the Third Age – where she was a key member of a hand bells group, and a number of others too. A fellow U3A member, Geoffrey Towler – who unavoidably can't be here today, has asked me to read out his personal tribute to Sheila. It is my honour to do so.

“Sheila was a member of my U3A astronomy group, but I also met her at a number of other U3A groups I attended. These were the science, history, and croquet groups. At croquet she always had some devilish strategy to try and defeat the opposition.

She was a very remarkable person and almost unique in her diverse range of interests. Here is a list of subjects that I know she had an interest in: astronomy, science, (physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, spectroscopy), mathematics, foreign languages, (French, Italian and Russian).

She also had a great love of opera, and her interest in genetics was applied to her love of rats. She also showed interest in aspects of engineering, and travelled some distance to see the Flying Scotsman.

If I included any mathematical analysis in my astronomy talks she would often question the basic assumptions behind the theory. She was a formidable debater, and would always make her point.

She was a one-off and will be deeply missed.”

Thank you to Geoffrey, for those memories.

What was perhaps very remarkable about Sheila was her skill and talent across both the arts and the sciences. It's rare to come across someone who is so proficient, so accomplished, in both. So we have all the teaching, the chemistry and the sciences alongside the opera singing and the musicianship – not to mention the passion for travel and the sheer interest in the natural world.

And that leads me onto something else that was a major part of Sheila's life – and that was rats.

To be honest, rats became something of an obsession for Sheila. She was always someone who championed what you might call the “unloved” – and let's face it, rats have never had a great reputation! So, in her own way, she loved them.

It all started in about 1988 when she had a single pet rat, but eventually this number grew to over a 100. They were kept in cages in the house, and whilst Sheila did some genetic investigations into them, she also really liked their company.

She wrote academic research papers on the creatures and she travelled the world judging competitions – the equivalent of Crufts for rats, if you like. She would re-home them where necessary – ensuring that new owners were suitable and transporting the rats on the train in cages to their new homes. She did all this out of the goodness of her heart and her fondness for these “unloved” rodents – she took no money from the endeavour.

A friend of Sheila’s, Lesley Mackness, who can’t be here today – but who said that Sheila’s life and personality touched her – has asked me to share with you her own tribute. It’s my pleasure to do so. This is what Lesley said:

“I knew Sheila primarily from the Midlands Rat Club and her reputation as a keen rat breeder preceded her. Sheila always enlivened Midlands Rat Club AGM’s, either in person, or with questions and comments sent in beforehand. Whether any other comments were received or not, the committee always knew they could rely on something from Sheila to keep them on their toes, and like it or not, every club needs someone like Sheila.

A piece in the MRC magazine as recently as October/November 2017 featured the Essex variety of rat and the debt we owe to Sheila for discovering the variety in a pet shop, as well as her sharing of the progeny of that first Essex rat, which she called Robert.

Not only do all UK rat club and rat society members know this variety, but her name, and her discovery of the Essex rat live on in an article on the American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association's website. Sheila has left her name and image on various internet sites in different spheres, but it is her commitment to the world of fancy rats for which I know her.

She became a Championship Judge and attended shows throughout the country, judging and also showing, winning many Best in Shows with her rats, under the stud name of Flaxholme.

Ever keen to promote rats, she appeared in a documentary about rats and the people who kept them, and later Sheila worked on a live event/performance lecture project in London looking at the complex relationships between rats and humans.

I have many happy memories of chatting to Sheila at the MRC shows she attended, putting the world to rights over a cup of tea and a slice of cake before she left to catch her train home.

Rest in peace, Sheila, reunited with Robert and all your other rats.”

At this point we were hoping to hear from Sheila's friend and fellow judge Ann Storey. Unfortunately the weather and travel problems have conspired to prevent Ann from being here, but I'm sure that she would have had some fond and thoughtful memories of Sheila.

And finally on the subject of rodents, as a result of her deep knowledge about rats, after she retired Sheila took part in a large research project into dormice – with a focus on investigating their history right back to Roman times, when such creatures were in fact an edible delicacy. Her experience in handling rats made her a really valuable part of the team that collected the dormice for investigation – and I bet she was in her element!

Let's now take a moment or two to reflect on Sheila's character – what kind of woman she was. And to start us off, I'd like to ask Sheila's good friend Jenny-Anne to say a few words. Sheila and Jenny-Anne met at the Chelsea Opera Group, and were close friends ever since. Sheila even stayed with Jenny-Anne a couple of times when she was recuperating from hip operations – so it will be lovely to hear some of her memories.

Jenny-Anne's words.

In terms of her character, Sheila was a one off – a complex and perhaps almost paradoxical individual.

She was highly intelligent – but if truth be told she found social interactions somewhat of a challenge. Small talk just wasn't her thing. And yet she had a wide circle of friends from the various parts of her life, and she so enjoyed the company of like-minded people. The list would be far too long to cover here - but we've heard a lovely tribute from Jenny-Anne and there were other friends like Howard, who she just happened to meet on a train one day and became a firm friend; Kelly – the boyfriend of a student who she had got to know; and Del – who she'd lost touch with but who happened to write to her last November and then visited regularly when Sheila was ill.

All of these friendships would, I'm sure, have meant a great deal to Sheila.

She was not one to bear fools gladly – she valued intelligence. And yet, Sheila was utterly non judgmental in her outlook and blind to the outward appearances of people. She could remember her own mother not even having the vote, so she supported the cause of feminism and the wider notion of equality.

She had an active, inquiring mind. And yet she was disorganised and, to be honest, the real world outside of academia was something of a mystery to her. For example, she struggled somewhat with the routine day-to-day stuff of life – which was often something that Connie looked after as soon as she was old enough to.

And Sheila found it difficult to part with possessions – she simply kept stuff. One treasured possession, however, was her beloved car – named “Belinda” it was an old Morris Minor that she’d inherited from her aunt and it was a constant presence throughout her life. So – as contradictory as it may seem for a woman rooted in science, logic and reason – there was perhaps room for a sentimental attachment to an old car.

Sheila was also very forthright – and...she was always right, and quite often you would be wrong (even when you were right). So she could be independent, strong willed and stubborn. And yet she was unconditionally kind and extremely generous. She’d do anything to help a friend – she wouldn’t give a second thought to, say, paying off a loan or helping out with a mortgage if she could.

And, so long as something was to her mind right, proper and useful she wouldn't hesitate in supporting it. So when Connie came home from school one day and said there was the possibility of a school skiing trip abroad, Sheila immediately said yes. She didn't need to know how much it would cost or anything like that – she just knew it would be a good thing to do.

So then – in Sheila we had an independent and highly intelligent woman who trod her own path in life. Once met, I doubt that she was ever forgotten. Her hallmarks were her strong personality and her kindness; and her interests were many and varied – and they fulfilled her.

She had many friends and acquaintances, and she was a mother and grandmother – of whom her grandchildren Ben and Laura were very fond; and who I hope will have some nice memories of their own about their eccentric, slightly odd, Grandma who would bring them books and teach them all sorts of things.

In short, Sheila had a long life – well lived. We shall not dwell on her final few months – suffice to say that following a stroke last November, she moved to the Evelyn May Care Home in Langdon Hills in January of this year, where she died peacefully in her sleep on 6th April. Sheila will be much missed, and the world will be that little bit less interesting without her.