

A celebration of life

ROBERT ANDREW WILSON

31st May 1943 – 5th April 2020

Spring Road Cemetery, Abingdon

on 5th May 2020

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

So let's remember...

TRIBUTE

...starting with his older brother, Neal Wilson and his younger sister, Jan Kilham who emailed their tribute from New Zealand. Here's what they say:

Bob was born in Hamilton on the North Island of New Zealand during World War Two. He was said to have been a happy and loving baby. He would have brightened those times for his family.

The family lived on a big section which ran from the street to the shores of Lake Rotoroa.

Bob and his sibling were able to get right down to the freshwater lake, one of the many old peat lakes in the Waikato.

There were acres of land. Huts were built, boats of different sorts were launched and the children swam during the hot months. Bob fished and lit fires to cook his catch on.

One day, he noticed a dead *pukeko* (swamp bird) which had been shot by an irate neighbour for eating vegetables from his garden. Bob did his first dissection to see what the bones looked like!

He dissected fish and an eel to learn about their bones, too.

He took a strong interest in the variety of plants in his surroundings. As a small schoolboy, he would take a meandering walk through the trees by the drive to the house instead of always coming directly along the drive itself, so he could look at the plants, the birds and insects.

Bob's father had a glass cabinet to display his collection of geological finds and purchases – Bob took a good interest in these and collected things like fossils.

Bob enjoyed reading, music, and painting watercolours ... he entered some pictures in competitions and won prizes. His musical tastes ranged from classical to modern. Listening to radio broadcasts of cricket matches or going to actual matches, or playing this sport with others was something he really enjoyed.

By High School days, he had found that he was very good at running – not on athletic tracks but steeplechases for which he won trophies. He represented his high school at running and cricket, and was part of the University teams for running. As he got older, he found that he preferred walking and would do so for long distances.

Jan remembers him teaching her to ride a bike, how to grow strawberries and how to play chess. This trait of kindness endeared Bob to family, friends and colleagues for the rest of his life.

It was a farming life. The children fed the lambs with bottles of milk, fed out hay in the winter, learnt how to shift sheep etc.

Being able to move sheep by himself meant that years later, Bob was very useful as a sheep helper when Gill Jones was doing research at the Cotswold Farm Park.

By “moving this way and that, he was able to quietly get about 20 sheep from a yard into a loose box”, ready for Gill to examine the back teeth of the sheep to gain a reference point for archaeological remains.

Bob earned money for university expenses by helping with the hay harvest.

By the time Bob left school to go to university, he knew what he wanted to work at – anything involving zoology and botany, and he went to Auckland University. Bob finished his B.Sc. Degree at Victoria University and taught for a year at Methven High School.

Jan had just come home from two years Overseas Experience and it seemed to Bob that he was ready for the same. He left for Japan by sea and then travelled by Trans-Siberian train to Europe. Over the years, he explored a lot of Britain and Europe. On trips between Britain and New Zealand he would take different routes so he could see new places.

In England, he became involved in archaeology, and came to work in Abingdon – his home for the rest of his life - in 1973. So much of his learning, thinking and application of ideas to do with bones came together here. From then on they were to provide a satisfying career. He worked with wonderful people.

Bob was very proud of a large 1983 photo of many of them, and himself, taken at Oxford University. When he finished his book “Spatial Patterning among Animal Bones in Settlement Archaeology” he was quietly and justifiably proud of it.

Mark Robinson told me that when Bob got his University of Oxford job his salary went up. Which meant he was able to set up an annual subscription to ‘This England’ for his elderly parents.

Bob’s parents visited two or three times in the 1970s and 80s, Neal and Jill spent time with him in 2007, and Jan likewise did so in 2008. Whenever any of them were with Bob, he would show his family the places he loved, and introduced his friends.

Bob’s brother and sister experienced Mike and Anne Green's wonderful hospitality and they are really grateful for the way the Green Family became Bob's Abingdon family.

Jan and Neal specifically wanted to finish with some thanks. They say:

Thanks to Mike who broke the news about Bob to us in such a kind way. The Thames Valley Police have supported us and kept us informed in a compassionate way.

We wish to express our grateful thanks also to Bob's colleagues for their messages which showed respect and praise for his work, and appreciation of his gentle nature.

We have particular thanks to give to Roger Thomas and Ian Willox for the thoughtful ways in which they are fulfilling Bob's final wishes.

All of the messages have been so helpful to us in our loss of Bob. His name is carried on by the eldest of his great-nephews - Kerry Robert Wilson, and he is a fine young man.

We will be remembering Bob in our own ways on May 5. In New Zealand it will be 9 p.m. when his funeral starts but we will be there in spirit with you all as you farewell Bob. Our cousin, Barbara Harrison, will be "tuning in" from London.

Blessings upon all of you.

Jan and Neal's tribute to their brother.

Now it's the turn of former work colleague Mark Robinson.

He says:

I worked with Bob for about ten years, starting in 1974 at the Oxford Archaeological Unit and continuing at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History until his retirement on grounds of ill health.

In his work, he was a particularly innovative archaeozoologist, asking the sort of questions archaeologists were interested in rather than simply identifying the animal bones found on archaeological excavations.

As a pioneer in the subject, he prepared his own reference collection of skeletons by rotting down de-fleshed animal corpses in the back garden of the archaeological unit. The horse was particularly memorable.

He was keen on an experimental approach. For example, investigating scavenging by leaving the body of a fox on some waste ground in Abingdon and monitoring how the bones became dispersed.

He set up a series of meetings and edited a volume on the sexing and ageing of domestic animals from their bones which is still an important reference work for archaeozoologists.

Bob was very frugal and shamed the University into paying full work traveling expenses by hitching lifts to the excavations he was required to visit. Even as his illness began to develop he showed his resourcefulness.

After becoming stranded in Turkey with very little money, he managed to obtain a visa to enter Bulgaria by bribery and made his way home as far as Germany on a migrant workers' bus.

Mark's memories of Bob.

Ellie Hambleton, who reviewed Bob's Upper Thames work as part of her PhD tweeted that Bob's archive was "a filing cabinet of pure gold".

Richard Thomas says that Bob's work was a big influence on him when he was starting out.

Even today, young researchers, who probably never met Bob, still find his work and contribution valuable.

Roger Thomas, who grew up in Abingdon, says that as well as Bob's careful contributions to animal bone studies, he was active in local archaeology, directing and publishing several excavations in Abingdon for the local archaeological society, as well as helping on others.

He says Bob was a very kind, gentle, intelligent and thoughtful person, quiet but gently humorous, and liked by pretty well everyone who met him.

He says that after Bob retired he lived quietly – and seemingly contentedly – with daily walks around Abingdon, reading and writing, occasional trips to Oxford, listening to sport (mainly football and cricket) on the radio – and seeing friends.

He says that Bob retained his interest in archaeology and in the archaeological study of animal bones even into retirement – and that he remained active in the field – even as recently as last winter.

He says that Bob read widely. He was especially interested in ideas, philosophy and religion.

Something that I hope Mike will be able to pick up on:

MIKE GREEN:

Anne and I had known Bob for about 35 years, since soon after we arrived in Abingdon. He lived alone and regularly joined Anne, our children and me and for a meal.

It was in April 2014 that Bob was diagnosed with a slowly progressing form of leukaemia and four years later, May 2018, he had gone, alone, for a meeting with a Consultant at the Churchill Hospital, who suggested that he might have to have Chemotherapy.

I accompanied him for his next appointment with the Consultant. There was such a lot to take in: he had to find transport to and from the hospital every week or two for blood transfusions and then start Chemotherapy; and since he lived alone, with no one to make a daily check on him, it was necessary for him to have a telephone installed in case he had an adverse reaction to the Chemotherapy. At that time Bob didn't have a phone and did not want one. He also took no interest in TV; he set aside using a computer in favour of a pen and ink for the drafting his letters and reports and he cooked all his meals with only the simplest of ingredients and with no help from a microwave oven.

Shortly after this issue of Chemotherapy came up Bob wrote me a letter setting out his views on what had occurred. It included the words "My independence, my existence and the immediate prospect of chemotherapy are all getting too complicated. I need lots of time to myself and for this I need to keep things simple."

As well as Archaeology and Zoology, Bob was an avid reader of non-religious beliefs and philosophies from around the world and he became an avid reader and writer of essays on the meaning of life and of poetry. His flat resembles a library, filled with esoteric books on all manner of subjects. As a practicing but relatively new Buddhist myself I have learned much from Bob during these last two years. He provided me with a model of a life driven by a desire for simplicity. However he did take a daily paper, the Guardian, and took particular interest in rugby and football, especially Liverpool.

He eventually conceded the need for installing a landline, the simplest possible; one he could unplug whenever he wanted to be undisturbed. During this period of blood transfusions and Chemotherapy, from May 2018 to early September 2019, he overcame his concerns and adopted a peaceful relaxed behaviour and easy smile during the procedures and he became well liked and a favourite with the nurses.

At the end of the Chemotherapy course there was no further need for blood transfusions and his lymph glands had returned to normal size and softness. I had never him looking so happy and I was delighted when he took the initiative of inviting some friends and neighbours into his home for wine and snacks. His body had returned to good health and he could recover the simple lifestyle that he craved.

The party took place on a Friday evening, 15 November 2019

Sadly, it was destined not to last for long. Only 2 months later, on 15/01/20, at a routine check up, the consultant prescribed a new medicine: this requiring self-injection to deal with a white blood cell imbalance. Bob was a little concerned about this but dealt with the self-injections well.

The following visit to the Consultant on (05/02/20), which we thought would be Bobs last, he was asked to continue with the self injections for the white blood cell imbalance plus the consultant wanted him to take two new sets of tablets to

clear up the build up of Iron in his body resulting from the previous blood transfusions. I don't know how well he took this return to complexity in his life.

Shortly after this he developed a bad cold and a sore throat and bad chest and Anne and I became concerned that he was not improving and in early March (02/03/20) he called to say that he was having difficulty eating. I called to see him the following day Tuesday (03/03/20) I presumed it was a simple stomach upset but the meal we shared on Wednesday (04/03/20) proved to be our last meal together. He barely managed a bowl of soup.

He had an appointment with his GP in Abingdon for the following day. This resulted in an emergency trip to the John Radcliffe A&E on the Thursday for tests and he had only got back home late Friday night. He said he was feeling OK. We arranged to get together the following week, on the Thursday (12/03/20) for a meal. I phoned him on the Tuesday morning to check and he sounded fine.

He endured the heavy cold and the difficulties eating all without complaint and was often going for walks, and it was only when Thursday arrived and he hadn't arrived for dinner that we became concerned. Anne and I drove over and found two days of mail behind the door He had been missing for two days.

I had the unique privilege of sharing some of the key moments with Bob during his last two years of life. I admired Bob was the simplicity with which he led his life and his ceaseless effort to find truth. He was also a poet. Trips to the bookshops in Oxford to buy catalogues of recent art exhibition and books of poetry was his passion. He was mild-mannered man with an easy smile, who strived for a simple life in an increasingly busy world; living alone but content. Our children, who had known him from childhood as a frequent dinner guest, were most upset when they heard the recent news that he had drowned.

As a Buddhist I reflect on Bob's life as being lived without harming other sentient beings, human or otherwise; and not an acquirer of wealth. He lived a simple lifestyle, he was truthful and, in his striving for truth; he was mindful. These statements encompass the five precepts of the Buddhist life. I rejoice in this! Some Buddhists believe in rebirth, that in some way, the goodness we show in the way we live our life will prepare us for a good like next time around. In this regard I think Bob deserves such a life.

If I had to choose one thing about Bob's life to admire and remember it would be this: "My main aim is to simplify the rest of my life".