

Record of Remembrance for Virginia Brookes

On 3 May 2017 a funeral service was held for Virginia Brookes in the chapel of the crematorium in Bath. Virginia was a member of Oxford Friends Meeting before moving to the West Country in 2013 to be closer to members of her family. She was 91 at the time of her death.

Virginia was an extremely modest, self-effacing person. Few people who knew her were aware of the full range of her many interests, passions, abilities and achievements. She was, for example, an excellent musician, specialising in the viol and the recorder. But she was also a distinguished musicologist: she published several collections of Renaissance music and was awarded an M Phil from Southampton University in 1984, a PhD from London University in 1990, and an MA from Oxford University in 2014.

After Virginia's husband died in 1996, Oxford became Virginia's adopted home. Here she immersed herself in music, growing vegetables on her allotment, and working for peace and social justice. Here she also found her spiritual home within Quakerism, serving as an Elder of our meeting for three years. She had a deep and practical commitment to the Quaker Peace Testimony. She was arrested several times for protest actions at the Faslane nuclear base for the UK nuclear-armed submarines. (With her typically dry sense of humour, she remarked after her release from prison that the macaroni cheese in the cells was excellent.) She still found time to play her viol and her recorder in local music groups.

Virginia also exemplified the Quaker testimony to simplicity. She lived a simple, unpretentious life, feeding herself largely on the vegetables which she grew on her allotment. She often joked that she never knew what she was going to have for dinner until she had paid a visit to her allotment to harvest whatever vegetables were in season.

Caroline Roaf, who knew Virginia well during her time in Oxford, writes: "I first met Virginia in 2001, when a group of Oxford residents, of all faiths and none, set up a small leafletting group, Oxford Peace and Justice. We met every Friday afternoon to distribute leaflets – originally against the war in Afghanistan - in the centre of Oxford. After an hour's leafletting, we warmed up in a local teashop, and decided on the next topic. This involved a lot of lively - often noisy - political discussion. We thought we'd be doing this for about a year, but we carried on for 11 years. The issues kept cropping up and the need to get out on the street never ended. Virginia was such a wonderful voice of calm and reason among us. She was always there whatever the weather, mittens on, bike nearby, and kept us warm with talk of wonderful vegetable stews. And we heard a lot about her much-loved grandchildren. It was a privilege to have known such a lifelong stalwart for peace and justice."

Virginia was loved by her four children and adored by her six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Her coffin, of 100% biodegradable material, was covered with messages of love from her grandchildren and by uncompromising CND slogans. She never lost the ability to surprise and even dumbfound friends, family members and total strangers. During the funeral service, one of her grandchildren, Grace Rowley, described how, at the age of 84, she and Virginia went into a bike shop in Oxford to get their tyres pumped up. The young man in the shop asked where they were heading for, to which Virginia replied, with her usual nonchalance: "Oh, we're cycling to Bath!"

Judith Atkinson from Oxford Friends adds: "Virginia was an unassuming person, yet even a very short time spent with her revealed a warmth and good humour which were truly engaging. I loved talking with her about Quakerism and music. I was thrilled when, after a period as an Attender at Oxford Meeting, she decided to apply for membership. I felt a particular link with her when I learned that she was moving to Bradford-on-Avon, as I was born there."

Klaus Huber, from Bradford-on-Avon Friends, writes: "Following her move to Bradford-on-Avon in 2013, Virginia became a very regular and much cherished worshipper at our local Friends Meeting. Despite increasing frailty, she continued to be very active. She was an avid user of the local bus services and the town library, and joined the weekly peace vigil in the town centre."

A woman of many talents and passions, Virginia retained, right up until the end of her life, the capacity to inspire all those who had the privilege of knowing her.

A booklet containing 18 photos from various phases of Virginia's life, and two newspaper cuttings, is available in the library of 43 St Giles.