

A life full of caring

Sylvia Vetta meets Gillian Cox - who helped set up Vale House - and discovers what she would take with her to the mythical island of Oxtopia



Gillian Cox with her binoculars, which she uses when taking walks in Bagley Wood

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When Gillian Cox's father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1979 there was little support for sufferers and their families in Oxfordshire.

But from her personal tragedy, great strides have been taken: she is a modest person and would not say it herself but I'm convinced that Vale House – founded in 1990 and thought to be the world's first hospice for people with terminal Alzheimer's disease – would not have happened without her.

Gillian was born in Odd Down, a suburb of Bath, at the beginning of the Second World War in the flat above her father Tom Palmer's chemist shop.

"When nearby Bristol was bombed, my father felt his family would be safer if he moved because the shop was near the railway station," said Gillian.

"My mother Frances was a teacher but in those days as soon as a woman married she had, by law, to leave teaching.

"She had met my father and their two best friends at school. Those friends were the parents of my future husband Keith Cox. Keith was six years older than me but because of our parents friendship we met often during childhood.

"On one occasion he was heard to say of me 'I wouldn't marry her if she was the last person on Earth'."

His opinion certainly changed.

After taking A-levels in physics, chemistry, botany and zoology, Gillian headed to Bedford College (London University) where she read biology and when she graduated the couple were married, in 1961.

Some years earlier Keith had taken a degree in geology at The Queens College, Oxford. The practice of geology in the late 1950s didn't involve health and safety regulation and Keith lost an eye while

Gillian Cox with her treasured memory chest



Gillian and Keith Cox with their children on a family trip in 1974



Keith and Gillian Cox in 1960

on a field trip in the Lake District... but he didn't let it affect his life.

"While I was a student, Keith would drive down from Leeds to take me out in his soft topped red sports car – well his Morris 8!" said Gillian. "It was cool. In fact it was absolutely freezing!"

After they married, Keith continued his research at Leeds University in the Institute of African Geology while Gillian taught biology and general science at Leeds Girls High School.

Keith's research involved several trips to southern Africa. "During those trips our only way of staying in touch was by air letter. Given the earlier accident, I had to try not to worry," said Gillian.

An idyllic time followed with Keith's appointment as lecturer in petrology at Edinburgh University in 1963.

"All three of our children, James, Emma and William, were born in Scotland where they enjoyed a lot of freedom to roam," she said.

There was a dearth of childcare facilities in the 1960s and 1970s and women began to work together to form the Pre-school Playgroups Association: in Edinburgh, Gillian was one of those women.

"I approached a local church to see if we could use their hall but they threw up their hands in horror at the idea of paint, sand and water," she said.

"I met Mary Ward, a colonel's wife, at the local barracks and she too wanted to set up a playgroup. We convened a local

PPA branch and established the first one in the area on the Milton Bridge Barracks"

Then, in 1972, Keith became a lecturer in geology at Oxford and was made a fellow of Jesus College the following year.

"We bought our house in Kennington where I have lived ever since," said Gillian.

"Keith was appointed a Reader in 1988 which was an exciting time because in the same year he became a Fellow of the Royal Society."

Sadly Keith, who had lived a life of adventure, tragically lost his life in a sailing accident off the Isle of Mull in August 1998.

In his obituary in *The Independent*, he was described as "one of the most influential geologists of his generation because of the range of interests and expertise which he combined with a powerful intellect."

The obituary also gives a sense of the person that Gillian had fallen in love with.



Vale House

“Cox was a warm, friendly man, respected by all and held in some awe, not only by students. His humour was delightfully spiced with light irony and he liked nothing better than to prick pompous balloons. He was widely read, a gifted musician, playing the piano, clarinet and guitar, and as something of a bon vivant enjoyed good food and wine and defiantly puffed his pipe at tea-time.”

It must have helped Gillian a great deal to have had such a genial companion because in 1979 she faced an unexpected and difficult situation.

Her teaching career in the area had already faced several challenges. A difficult term at Redfield School in Blackbird Leys had been followed by a period as acting head of science and maths at Donnington Middle School.

She then moved to Abingdon College of Further Education where she taught human biology for 20 years mostly on the Access Course which enabled mature students to study at Oxford Brookes University.

When her mother died from rheumatoid arthritis in 1974 her father moved to the Oxford area and the responsibility for his care, as well as the care of her children and the demands of a career in teaching, fell on Gillian.

Soon after he retired in 1979, Tom Palmer was diagnosed as having Alzheimer's.

“The word Alzheimer's was hardly used at that time but the reality of it was understood – and my father's behaviour was becoming difficult to manage. So, when Dr Gordon Wilcox held a meeting for carers and relatives, I was keen to attend,” said Gillian.

From that meeting, in 1980, the Oxfordshire branch of the Alzheimer's Disease Society was formed with Gillian as chair. She was followed as chairwoman by Joan King, who was to work closely with Gillian in founding Vale House.

“For many of us, that led to a desire to do something practical. In 1984 we opened a day centre, the Abingdon Alzheimer's Club.”

By the time Gillian's father died in 1984 she understood the need for special care in the advanced stages of the disease. Gillian had toured homes who would take in patients with terminal Alzheimer's but came away distressed. She had seen instances of patients tied to chairs or dosed with chemical restraints.

“Encouraged and supported by Steve Corea, the assistant director of mental health services, Joan King and I went to see how people elsewhere in the country were tackling the problem,” said Gillian.

“There were some homes with specialist wings but nowhere devoted to the sole care of patients with dementia. We felt there was an unmet need and set ourselves the target of raising £120,000.

“The three local patrons who supported our appeal were the Duke of Marlborough, Sir Patrick Nairn and John Patten MP. In 1990, we were awarded first prize of £20,000 by a telethon appeal on Central TV.

“Help from the Vale of White Horse District Council meant we eventually

reached £200,000. They also made part of Field House on the Botley Road available to us. That is why we named it Vale House as a way of saying thank you.”

So Gillian and her team succeeded in establishing Vale House: the first home of its kind in the country, which has since moved to new premises in Sandford-on-Thames. It was fully occupied and officially opened, on November 20, 1990 by Diana Princess of Wales.

One of the former residents was author Iris Murdoch. In the 2001 film *Iris*, about her descent into memory loss, the character of Tricia is based on Tricia O'Leary, the head of Vale House.

Gillian was chair of the governors when she was appointed in 1993.

“Vale House with Tricia at its head is regarded as an international model for the care of people with dementia,” said Gillian. “It is the only care home in Oxfordshire to be judged Outstanding by the Care Quality Commission.”

Gillian and her team of founders wanted to establish a philosophy of care.

“As well as involving the family in the patient's care, we wanted each resident to have a personal book. In effect that book was to contain a record of his/her life with photographs, memorabilia and stories,” she said.

“While attending a conference at Nottingham University I heard about Reminiscence Therapy. We felt that knowing who the patient was and stories about him/her could help deliver respectful individualised care and that it should be part of the ethos of Vale House.”

For practical reasons, and with respect for their residents, a recorded life history can have special meaning for those trying to help persons needing special care at the end of their lives (see panel).

So what would Gillian take to the mythical island of Oxtopia? Her love of music has helped raise her spirits during hard times: she sings with Oxford Harmonic and would like a piano and lots of music on the island.

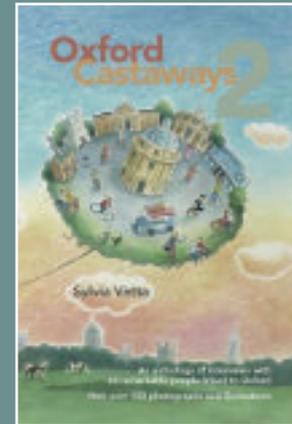
I admired a carved oriental chest in her hallway. Gillian said: “My parents married in Penang, Malaysia, in 1935. Having lost two babies, my mother was advised to return to England. Soon after they left, Malaya was invaded by the Japanese and many of their friends died in camps in Burma.”

That chest travelled with Gillian's parents from Asia. It looked to me like a symbol of survival. We agreed that she could take the chest filled with books as she wouldn't want to be without and lots of sheet music.

There would also be a brass pestle and mortar belonging to her father but the most precious object inside the chest would be one of Keith's paintings.

The family had a deep love of Scotland and that was where they liked to holiday.

“Keith enjoyed painting and planned to do more when he retired,” she said. “We also enjoyed bird watching. Maybe I could have a pair of binoculars around my neck when you send me to the island?”



CASTAWAYS OFFER

With the help of the now retired editor of *Oxfordshire Limited Edition* Tim Metcalfe and the artist Weimin He, Sylvia Vetta bought together the first 50 features she wrote for the magazine in a book called *Oxford Castaways*.

“This was followed by *Oxford Castaways 2* which was published thanks to James Harrison of *Oxfordfolio*,” says Sylvia.

“He was on a mission to create a book about Oxford people which could be used to raise the profile of a remarkable Oxford charity called Vale House.”

In an exclusive reader offer you can buy *Oxford Castaways 2* in support of Vale House for £6 including p&p from oxfordfolio.co.uk or from oxfordfolio@gmail.com (usual retail price £9.99).

A LIFE STORY

SYLVIA VETTA writes: When working on *Oxford Castaways 2* I asked if I could see one on the life histories of a Vale House resident.

Christopher Lethbridge became an active supporter of Vale House after his wife Jill became a resident.

He allowed me to read Jill's story. The importance of the staff being able to read it was clear in the opening line: “Phyllis Angela (always known as Jill)...” How upsetting it would be to be called by the name on your birth certificate and not the one you had responded to all your life.

It continued: “Jill lived an active, independent, even adventurous life. In the Second World War she joined the Army, serving in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), where she drove everything from staff cars to five-ton trucks. After marrying Christopher in 1954, they spent most of their life together abroad in Africa, USA, Switzerland and Luxembourg.”

Christopher remembers that at Vale House, Jill would suddenly start talking in French, sometimes even in Swahili. Because Jill's story had been written down, the staff understood why this was happening.