

The final castaway



As the Castaway series, in which prominent people with a connection to Oxfordshire are asked what they would take with them to the mythical island of Oxtopia, comes to an end, we turn the tables on its author Sylvia Vetta. Words and portrait: **Philip Hind**

I'm meeting Sylvia Vetta in the dining room of her Kennington home; two chipped, vaguely Chinese-looking vases stand on the table, and a serious young boy dressed in an Indian costume gazes from a faded photograph on the wall. I have to be honest, I expected the former antique dealer to have come up with something a bit more exciting.

When I was sentenced to the mythical island of Oxtopia a couple of years ago, I prepared by reading the profiles of my predecessors. But while I couldn't see myself living in harmony with the politicians, musicians, film producers, museum curators, artists, sculptors, doctors and writers Sylvia had gathered, I knew we would all have one thing in common: we had all been subject to her powers of persuasion!

Over the past eight years Sylvia has treated us to 118 Castaway features. Each one neatly encapsulates the life of someone with a strong connection to Oxford, told in part through the choice of items the subject would take with them to Oxtopia. It is probably quite fortunate that this island exists only in the imagination since most of the objects were ill suited to the task of building shelters or propagating crops. New arrivals will find little food or shelter, but an eclectic and fascinating museum.

"It has been such a privilege to interview such inspirational people. I can't think of any other project where the subjects have come from such diverse backgrounds be they 'town', 'gown' or 'county'. Some were born here or elsewhere in the UK but others have come from USA, other European countries, China and Africa and many have global connections," says Sylvia.

"Oxford is a small city but it has added

a rich ingredient to the lives of everyone I interviewed and its influence ripples around the world. The media seem to be obsessed with the idea of 'celebrity'. What I love about the castaways is that even the famous ones would prefer not to be called 'celebrities'. What I think unites them is their positive and creative attitude to life. They are doers."

Sylvia is a doer extraordinaire! As Castaway Dai Richards explains, "She is irrepressible. She just goes for it. She seems always to search out the most worthwhile causes and put her all into them."

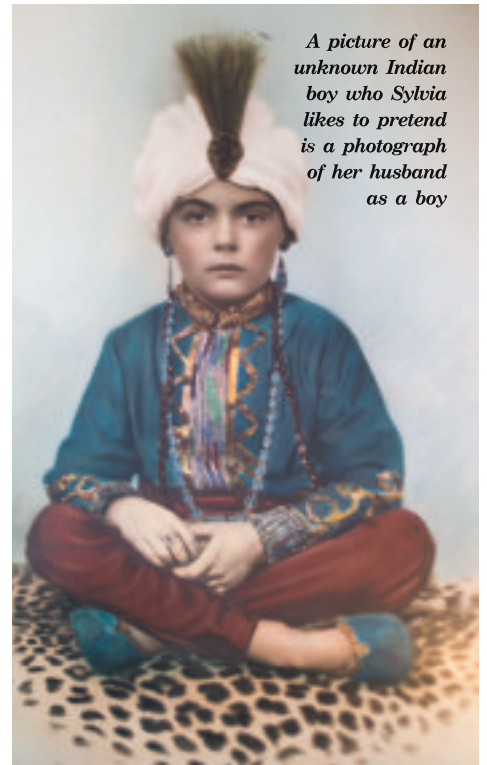
Sylvia was born in Luton just after the Second World War, the daughter of Charles, an engineer and Doris who, with her sisters, worked in a corset factory. Her parents' house was newly built and, although she was very young at the time, Sylvia remembered how her mother was chastised by her neighbours

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Sylvia Vetta with the books she has written



Sylvia Vetta manning the desk at the Old Jam Factory



A picture of an unknown Indian boy who Sylvia likes to pretend is a photograph of her husband as a boy

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for befriending the Italian prisoners-of-war working on nearby roads.

Every Saturday, from the age of seven Sylvia would make a three-mile round trip to Luton Central Library where she developed a love of language and literature that has stayed with her ever since. "I had no guidance about what to read so I just read anything!"

After O-levels and A-levels at Luton High School Sylvia wanted to join Voluntary Service Overseas but Alec Dickson, the founder, said, at 17, she was too young. Instead he suggested she consider joining UK-based Community Service Volunteers. So, in 1963 Sylvia went to Smethwick in the West Midlands to teach English to immigrant children. "Money was very tight, and the accommodation wasn't

good... and the books for teaching the children – mainly from India and Pakistan, Poland and Cyprus – were intended for teaching English to new Australians. The book had a map of Australia and was full of kangaroos."

"As I got to know some of the pupils who could speak English, I would visit their homes, they introduced me to the Sikh temple and they tried to teach me to cook Indian food."

In the summer of 1964, the country was entering a general election: the Conservatives had been in power for thirteen years and Macmillan had famously declared "most of our people have never had it so good". But not all! Immigration from the Commonwealth, housing shortages and rising unemployment, combined with cynical political opportunism made Smethwick the epicentre of a race debate. The 1964 campaign in Smethwick was called

"the most racist election in British history".

"Every week there was a scare-story," says Sylvia. "There was a rent strike in one of the new tower blocks when the first immigrant moved in, similarly a bus drivers' strike when a black conductor was going to be made a driver... it was absolutely visceral."

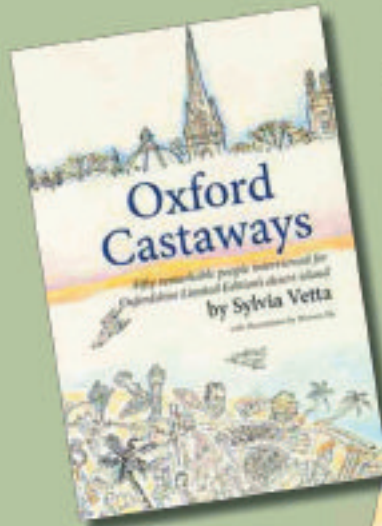
Amidst this atmosphere Sylvia met her Indian-born husband. She had been invited to help form a multi-racial youth club and it was there that she met Atam Vetta, who had escaped from India at the time of partition.

"He was a Hindu caught on the wrong side of the border. He escaped to Ethiopia where

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Sylvia and Atam's wedding day

he taught for a while and later settled in Nuneaton where he worked to save money to pay the fees for his PhD," Sylvia recalls.

"We'd arranged to meet at the Sikh temple at two o'clock one Sunday to talk about this youth club. I had never met Atam before, and he came on a Vespa. In 1963 the coolest thing was to turn up on an Italian motorbike... he hasn't lived up to it since mind you. Our relationship had to become serious quickly."

The racist views of the Tory challenger, Peter Griffiths, were widely condemned but the Labour candidate was ineffective. "Atam and I joined the Labour party and we went

out with the Labour candidate Patrick Gordon Walker and tried to help him attract the Asian vote. Atam could speak Hindu, Urdu and Punjabi and so he could translate, but Walker was very weak when challenged."

Walker's ability to challenge his opponent's racist views was blunted by his political past. As Secretary for the Commonwealth in 1948 he had been responsible for the tribal leader Seretse Khama's exile from his homeland of Botswana for marrying an English woman.

Griffiths won the seat, a result that was unique in a general election where every other seat passed from Conservative to Labour. Labour came to power under Harold Wilson with a weak majority. "Eighteen months later the seat was won back for Labour by Andrew Faulds, the former actor. He was huge and wonderful. There had been a colour bar at the Labour club, but he refused to cross the threshold unless it was dropped."

"After we got married in 1966 we bought a house in Handsworth; a beautiful area but totally neglected. I taught for a year in a class of 40. About half the kids were black and half were white and they played together, no

problems. We were there when Enoch Powell made his infamous Rivers of Blood speech and within a couple of days you had the black kids on one side of the playground and the white kids on the other; it was heartbreaking."

Atam's new job as a lecturer at Oxford Polytechnic brought the family to the city. But despite his expertise in mathematics and experience Atam found it difficult to progress in his career. As Sylvia puts it: "While outwardly Oxford can seem a lot more civilized, there is still an underlying prejudice."

Sylvia had given up work when her first child, Justin was born, and the family settled in Kennington. Two more boys, Adrian and Paul, followed in quick succession and Sylvia concentrated on making their tumbledown house livable. As the children grew up Sylvia became more involved in village life. She co-founded the first Mother and Toddler Group in Oxfordshire, meeting in the old wooden village hall in Kennington; was one of the founding members of the Kennington Amateur Dramatic Society, and as chair of Friend of Kennington Library fought a long

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and successful campaign to save that vital local resource from closure.

For 16 of its 48 years of activity Sylvia has been chair of Kennington Overseas Aid which every year raises funds for overseas development projects. Marilyn Farr, the co-chair of KOA, describes Sylvia as “a force of nature, full of hugely imaginative ideas and the dynamism with which to carry them through – always on the lookout for people who have something useful to offer her various projects and once you’re drawn into her net it’s difficult to struggle free again. But it’s always in a good cause.”

She returned to teaching but had an urge to be her own boss and start a business.

This nearly resulted in Oxford’s first Mexican fast food restaurant. “I thought tacos would go down great with the students” she says.

Ultimately though the banks were less impressed with the idea and instead she and her business partner Gill Hedge began to run a regular flea market out of the Clarendon Press centre on Walton Street. Gradually the business expanded to include venues in Witney and Didcot.

When they lost the Walton Street venue they moved to a basement in George Street where they opened Oxford Antiques Omnibus and later to the Old Jam Factory where Sylvia managed several dealers and a café.

As she became better known in the trade she was elected chair of the Thames Valley Art and Antiques Dealers Association. It was then that Tim Metcalf, then deputy editor of *Oxfordshire Limited Edition*, approached her to write a regular column about antiques.

“I’d dabbled in writing, but I had never taken it seriously. I understand the hurdles

disadvantaged kids have to face. If things are not quite in your experience, you don’t think they are for you. So, even though I loved writing I couldn’t envisage someone from my background being a professional writer,” says Sylvia.

Other series on the theme of antiques followed before Sylvia came up with the idea for Oxford Castaways.

“It really started as a continuation of the antiques page but gradually it became more about the castaways themselves,” she says.

This is very much due to Sylvia’s skill as an interviewer.

“Sylvia is irrepressibly optimistic, generous but determined with a great knack for getting interviewees to ‘open up’ naturally,” says James Harrison, publisher at Oxfolio Books.

Back to Sylvia’s choices for being castaway.

“It must seem strange, pathetic even, that I have chosen a pair of damaged vases to take to Oxtopia. But they bring together important elements in my life,” she says.

“I was never interested in what something was worth, but much more in what it tells you about the time and society it comes from.

“It helps you understand what life was like. One of my series for *Oxfordshire Limited Edition* before the castaway series was *Every Antique Tells a Story* and I began with the tale behind my vases. It is a tale of intrigue, alchemy and kidnapping.

“Porcelain was the most desirable commodity of the seventeenth century. All over Europe attempts were made to copy the amazing Chinese invention. My vases were a failed attempt by a Dutchman who named himself Petrus Van Marum. But his ‘soft paste’ version copied a Chinese design.”

These vases connect the dots in Sylvia’s story: “I

love art, history and story-telling and for me these vases represent all of them.”

The broken vases, while not Chinese, are trying to be. But the real China and the injustices many of its citizens experience inspired her to write the novel *Brushstrokes in Time* which was published this year. It’s a haunting love story breaching a silence between a mother and daughter and told against a background of real events during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s.

“*Brushstrokes in Time* was inspired by an exhibition by the Chinese artist Qu Leilei,” says Sylvia. “He told me the story of the Stars Arts Movement in China in the 1970s. I’d never heard of it but I found it so inspiring that I wanted to write about it. Originally I was going to write it as non-fiction but it was suggested I do a creative writing course, and that gave me the courage to think I could actually write fiction.”

She has one more item to show me. It is a coloured photograph on her wall of a young boy dressed in Indian clothes. “We don’t have a single picture of Atam as a child, the first one is of him teaching as an adult. But it was the fashion in the late 19th century to dress up your child and photograph him as a little rajah. Gill, my friend and business partner at the Jam Factory found it in an auction in Dorset and I must have told her I had never seen a picture of him as a little boy... so now this hangs on the walls and I pretend it’s Atam as a kid!”

As Sylvia departs for Oxtopia I leave the last word to Sylvia’s fellow Castaway Bill Heine, who she credits with helping transform the series from one about antiques, to one about people. He says: “Sylvia is the sort of person that gets things done. She will be the source of energy in Oxtopia, the sun around which it revolves. She’ll organise all the other castaways so cleverly they won’t even know what hit them.”



Sylvia and Atam Vetta with their family celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary at Center Parks