



Sylvia

Sylvia Kenyon

Her life in pictures and words

Introduction

Sylvia died quite suddenly in October 2020, during the covid lockdown. Instead of a thanksgiving service for her amazing life which would have been held in her beloved Wesley Memorial Church, here in Oxford, we had a short service at the crematorium chapel, with limited numbers able to attend. We were joined by family and friends from across the city and country through on-line transmission.

This little booklet which marks almost three years since her death, contains some of the many loving tributes we received at the time, and stories about Sylvia which we might have shared had we been able to join in refreshments after the service.

We hope you enjoy these memories of a very special person.

John and Freda Cammack

October 2023

Family

Family was very important to Sylvia, and although she was an only child, she had lots of cousins. Her father was one of 9 children, and her mother had 2 sisters. Sylvia said: "Cousins became very important to her growing up" and one recently told us about going to stay with her and her family in Chandler's Ford every Summer. Sylvia kept in touch with them and their children until very recently.

Sylvia was a much-loved member of the family, and her strong character, determination and kindness was an inspiration to all. Sylvia was the daughter of Cyril Kenyon and Vi (Violet) Griffiths, and was born in Leeds in 1936, growing up against the backdrop of the Second World War. In 1945 the family moved to Chandler's Ford, where Sylvia lived until moving to London to study - Sylvia was the first in the family to go to university, and it was a source of family pride and huge admiration that she obtained a degree in Sociology from London School of Economics, before striking out on her own again, first to Winchester and then to Oxford where she took up a post in the mid 1960's. Oxford, and the people in it, was a place she loved and where she was happy.

Sylvia's dedicated work within social care seemed connected and guided by her faith, and the Church was a hugely important part of her life. Her small stature (something she shared with her mother, Vi, and aunts Kathleen and Rosina!) belied an incredible force of character, and she could certainly hold her own with her rather taller cousins! Sylvia had a keen sense of humour and a twinkle in her eye, and always a very great interest, kindness and compassion towards others. She will be deeply missed, and always remembered.

Jill (family member)

I was very sorry to hear the news that Sylvia had died. She was my second cousin on my mother's side. Sylvia continued to keep in touch and to always send me cards. I will miss that card this year. I'm sorry I didn't get to know her better.

Cousin



At Chandler's Ford

Sylvia was 16 years older than I, so I don't have many memories of her when I was growing up as she was already at university and then almoner at the John Radcliffe Hospital, but I do remember how she loved to travel and went all over the world with my Auntie Kath and Sylvia's friend Evelyn. On one trip to South Africa with Evelyn we managed to meet for dinner in Johannesburg on the only evening they were in the city.

I also remember my mother telling me that during the war Sylvia and her mother returned to Manchester to stay with my grandparents and Sylvia was excited because she was going to stay in Uncle Cliff's room (my father who was away in Africa).

Norma (niece)

Friends



I have known Sylvia for about 74 years when we met in the Girl Guides (we were called "the long and short of it" because of her height). Sylvia was a lifelong Methodist. Although we lived some distance apart, we kept in touch especially at birthdays and Christmas. I am left with long and happy distant memories. Thank you, Sylvia, for your friendship.

Shirley (friend)



Sylvia's parents, Cyril and Vi Kenyon, were neighbours of ours (in Chandler's Ford) for well over twenty years. Sylvia would visit them most weekends, and often called in to find out how our children were progressing or to bring 'a little something'. We often went round for a cup of tea or coffee and were always made welcome.

I remember there was an incident involving broken glass. I needed somewhere to take the children (then under five) whilst I cleared up the mess. I took them to Cyril and Vi, knowing that Sylvia was there to help, and of course they were spoilt whilst I wielded my dustpan and brush at home. When I went to collect them, I discovered that Sylvia had found a minute sliver of glass in my daughter's hair which she had extracted very skilfully and with the minimum of fuss. It was so kind of her, although all thanks were brushed aside - typical Sylvia!"

Ann (former neighbour and friend)

She was a marvellous, mischievous spirit.

Paul and Wendy (friends)

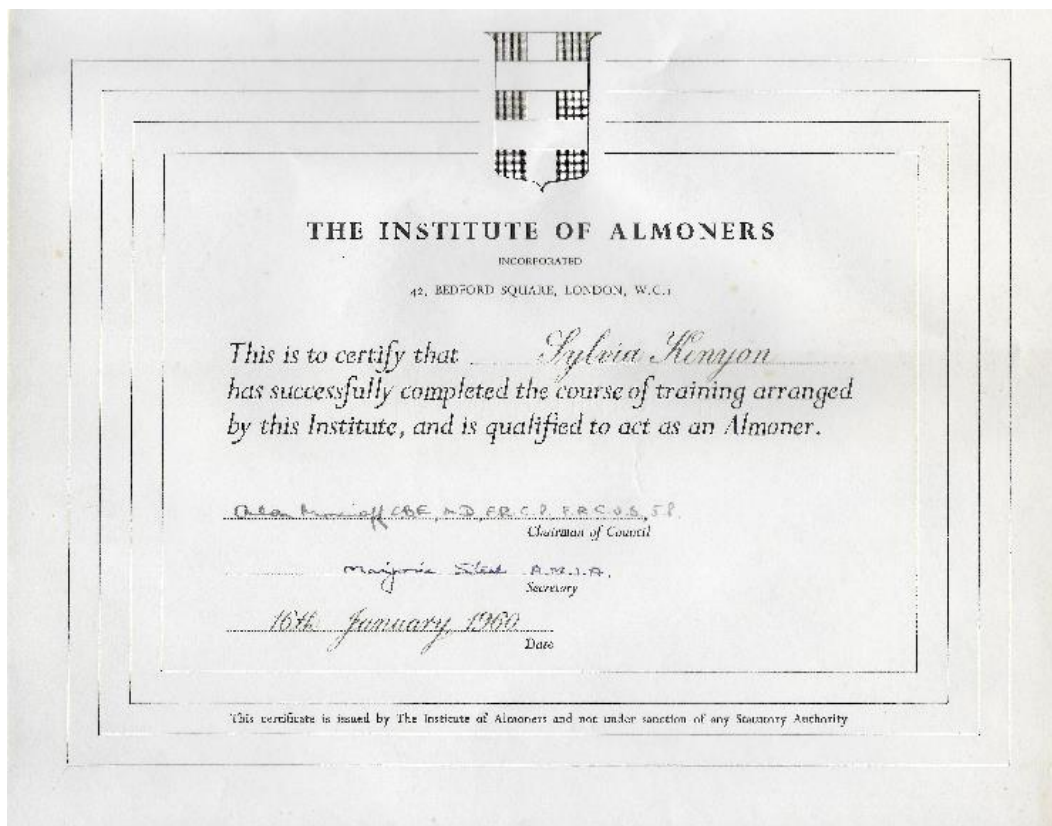


Kenyon family group at Alice Crosoer's (Nana) 90th birthday in 1980

Student years



Sylvia was a student at The LSE in the 1950's and followed through its co-founders' emphasis on social policy and social reform in her life, working in the East End and then as a social worker in Oxford at The Churchill Hospital. To be a female university student at this time was indeed to be a trail blazer.
Patricia (friend)



Working life



I got to know Sylvia when I was a social worker at the Churchill Hospital before I moved to America thirty years ago. Since then, we have exchanged birthday and Christmas cards. As always when I hear people speak at funerals, I realised how little I knew about Sylvia's life. I was also interested to hear the recording she made for the church records.

Janet (colleague)

Sylvia was my supervisor when as a student social worker, I did a placement at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford in the early 1980's. She was so kind, and I learnt a lot from her, and it was her example that made me become a hospital based social worker in Harrogate and Birmingham after qualifying. We used to write to each other and send Christmas cards.

Jenny (colleague)

I first met Sylvia in 1993/4. I was working as a social worker in Wiltshire, and we had moved to Marsh Baldon in Oxfordshire. I told Sylvia I was 59 and thought I might not find it easy to get a local job. Sylvia laughed warmly and said she was old too. I got the job and we worked closely together at the Churchill hospital until she retired. She became a close friend and later came on several interfaith trips with us to India, China, Turkey and Israel. She was a model traveller, quiet, happy, always cooperative and on time and with her lovely smile.

She was a very good professional social worker and supervised a number of students. We had our Christian faith together. Labels are not important, but faith is.

Mary (colleague and friend)



Sylvia with Mary and Denise.



I am very sorry to hear about Sylvia's death. Sylvia was a good friend and colleague of my mother when she was a senior medical social worker in Oxfordshire NHS from 1982 to 1995, and they remained good friends after my mother retired.

Mum had not managed to notify her of her move to a care home, but Sylvia tracked her down about three years ago, and after that she stayed in touch, sending cards.

David (son of a colleague and friend)

Faith and church



Helping at the church fair trade/Traidcraft stall

Such a gentle soul. How merciful of the Almighty to take her back to Him without any lingering pain or suffering. We shall miss her gentle imprint on our lives.

Oscar (friend)

When I first came to Wesley Memorial Sylvia was one of the first people to chat to me and I came to value her friendship and respect her for her commitment, and to admire her independence.

When my mother, then 96 years old, moved to the Homestead, a new Methodist home in Carterton, I became aware of another aspect of Sylvia's work - as the church's long-term representative for MHA (Methodist Homes). She came with me to the Homestead to meet my mother and enjoyed a good conversation with the manager and her staff.

In 2015 on MHA Sunday, Sylvia and I wanted to highlight the importance of music therapy, and this is where Keith Lambert, our church organist, came on board. To the strains of 'I could have danced all night' from Keith at the piano, I described the effects of the Tuesday music sessions. This also gave us the opportunity to thank Sylvia for all her work, giving her a plant for her balcony from the congregation.

After I moved away, we kept in touch. I shall really miss her; may she rest in peace.

Anne (friend)



Wesley Memorial Church house group gatherings

Syliva has been a very good friend to me since the Central Oxford House group started around 1994. Sylvia's always took an enthusiastic part in everything the group did. Sylvia was always so kind and encouraging and interested in hearing what I had been doing. I learned a great deal from Sylvia's common-sense, grateful outlook and the way she focused on helping others.

The most memorable moment I have of Sylvia was one evening when Sylvia had invited some of us round for dinner at her flat (Angela was there and maybe Rachel too). Sylvia had left her kitchen window open just a little while we were eating. Suddenly there was a crash in the kitchen. A squirrel had jumped in and was darting round the kitchen. We all looked at each other in panic wondering what to do but Sylvia jumped up, grabbed the oven gloves, and rushed around after the squirrel. She quickly caught it and let it out of the window. We were amazed by Sylvia's quick action and agility. We used to enjoy a yearly punting trip together from college. In later years I used to be a bit concerned when Sylvia didn't seem so steady on her feet whether she would get into the punt, but she always managed very well with that same agility as she had on the squirrel incident.

What an inspiring lady Sylvia was in so many different ways. I feel so thankful that I had her as a friend for many years.

Lorna (friend)



Sylvia and a group of church friends

Esther and I were in the Central Oxford house group with Sylvia and others - particularly Janet and Betty, both also no longer with us. I fondly remember all their loving concern for us young people.

Tom (friend)

Sylvia, my pastoral visitor, I miss you. I saw something of God's glory and beauty reflected in Sylvia's life, I will miss her smile and tenderness as she so faithfully and efficiently handed me the Wesley newsletter. I cherish vivid and pleasant memories of meeting and chatting with her over a cup of tea at home, reminding me of the kindness of modesty.

Almighty God, we entrust Sylvia who is dear to us to your unfailing care and knowing that you are doing better things for her than we can even desire or pray for. Although I am saddened by her physical departure, I am comforted to know God is bringing her nearer to himself. In the words of Jude:

"...Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you eternal life (Jude 1:20-21)

Miriam (friend)

She had a small body and a great soul. I will really miss her kindness and her wisdom.

Sally (friend)

Sylvia was kind, caring and gentle and she loved to be useful. That made her a perfect helper at the Wednesday Coffee mornings as well as a valued member of Wesley Memorial's Lunchbreak team. Sometimes it has been difficult to find helpers but Sylvia, even when she was becoming less able, would frequently remind me to let her know if she could be of any help. She was expert at the dishwasher duty. After she 'retired' from helping, she was a regular supporter and enjoyed meeting friends.

During one session, we talked about the TV programme 'Call the Midwife'. She told me how much that reminded her of her social work placement in the East End of London and of the hardship she saw there. She subsequently talked of that time to the Monday Evening Group. A great supporter of church activities, Sylvia was an encourager and someone who would put the needs of others before her own.

Lindsay (friend)

Messages from other Church friends:

There were many others who said a few words either in a message or in a phone call who talked, for example, of her dedication, her calm presence, how interested she was in all aspects of church life. Her affirming words to all those doing different tasks at church. And her amazing, beaming smile.

Endless interests

I first met Sylvia in late 2013 through Oxford Headington U3A. The lecture topics were many and varied and Sylvia was interested in them all. She was a member of the Walking and Local History Groups, and, on one occasion, we jointly presented a profile entitled "The Methodists in Headington". A few years ago, we again coincided as members of The Lime Walk Fellowship – a bible study group. Sylvia always listened intently to others' contributions, then made her pertinent comments.



Sylvia showed remarkable resilience after breaking her hip in her 80's. With the help of friends, she was soon on her feet again and once more joined a local walking group. I found her unfailingly pleasant and courteous, never seeing her out of sorts regardless of how she was feeling inwardly. I will long remember her ready smile.

Sylvia was a lifelong staunch Christian. The words of the hymn "*Rooted and grounded in Thy love*" call her instantly to mind. Hers was a life well lived.
Patricia (friend)

Sylvia was endlessly interested in life, here and across the world. She was very politically and socially aware; an avid radio listener and reader of the 'Oxford Times' right up until her death.

She was completely accepting of human fallibility and endlessly understanding. Over the last few years we spent many a happy morning, 'sorting out the world' over a cup of coffee (extra strong in Sylvia's case). She nearly always won the argument about whose turn it was to pay! We would visit exhibitions in Oxford together always extending her knowledge and love of history. But she was equally happy to explore the new Westgate Centre or the new Waitrose.

We miss her, a much-loved friend who has taught us so much.
Freda (friend)

Words sent by a friend that were special to Sylvia

"It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage, to pay the price. One has to abandon altogether the search for security, and search out the risk of living, with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying."

From 'The Shoes of the Fisherman' by Morris L West (found amongst Sylvia's papers).

Sylvia by Joanna Tulloch

She might have been small, but her stature was great. From childhood she attended all the services and remained faithful all her long life. As a social worker and teacher she was loved, and also, as an attentive pastoral visitor. I remember her in the Headington Group,	often quiet, but when she spoke she always had something wise to say. She had a strong compassion for others and was always ready to help in a crisis. Dear Sylvia, we shall all miss you, a small woman whose stature was indeed great.
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Eulogy for Sylvia – 30th October 2020

I want to say a few words about our dear friend Sylvia. Many friends and family members have been in touch with Freda and I, and shared their memories, some of which I have included in this tribute. And it is really good to know that so many of Sylvia's family and friends are joining us online, together with those of us here in Oxford.

Sylvia was born in Leeds in 1936 and her earliest memories were of being in Manchester where both sets of her grandparents lived. She and her mother moved there again during the Second World War. She always kept in touch with her family and would regularly visit them.

In 1945 Sylvia's parents Cyril and Violet Kenyon moved back to Chandler's Ford in Hampshire. She and her mother had started attending the Methodist Chapel there and soon many of Sylvia's friendships and social life centred around church activities, which continued throughout her life. It was around this time she became a Queen's Guide and a Guide leader.

She went to Winchester High School for Girls and on to the London School of Economics (LSE). It was quite something in the 1950s for a woman to be there, and Sylvia was certainly a trailblazer. I remember Sylvia recalling concerts that she went to at this time, including one with singers Pete and Peggy Seeger. She graduated in Sociology, and trained to be an Almoner, her chosen career. Sylvia's first job was in Winchester, then at the Royal Free Hospital in London, but in 1966 she successfully applied for a post at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford and moved here.

Sylvia had many friends, and some close friendships remained since School and university days, particularly with Grace and Shirley, and until the last few years they would regularly visit each other. I want to briefly look at 3 aspects of Sylvia:

The first is her faith – Sylvia's faith was central to who she was. She had always been a part of the Church, and for most of her adult life was part of a house group, which is where Freda and I first met her. In the house group Sylvia would mostly listen, but when she did speak, it was with wise words. She had a quiet and deep faith. She was always ready to help at church activities, often in the background. She would read the bible passage in services right up until lockdown, with her strong and clear voice. She was our local representative for the charity, Methodist Homes – now MHA. For many years Sylvia helped with Friday lunchbreak, which provided meals for people in the city centre. At that time, we had a rather temperamental dishwasher, which had to be loaded correctly otherwise it simply refused to work. Sylvia

was one of the few people who could get it to work, and she would load heavy trays of crockery, which others couldn't do, and put it in the dishwasher. The machine always behaved for her. It had definitely met its match! Although small in size, Sylvia had a large heart, a sharp mind and a giant spirit.

The second aspect is her capacity for caring – Caring was something that seemed to be in Sylvia's DNA. Whenever you met Sylvia, you were greeted by her lovely smile. You might ask how she was, but very quickly she would say 'but how are *you*' with the emphasis on the you. This was not just polite conversation; she really wanted to know and would remember what you had told her, often asking about it later. Friends have told us how they would observe Sylvia when she was listening to someone – concentrating intently, not saying much, but always willing to give someone time and, if needed, support and practical help.

Her chosen career as an Almoner, later called a Medical Social Worker, gave her plenty of opportunity for caring. One friend has described Sylvia at work as 'cutting through all the nonsense, being down to earth, and practical'. When Sylvia was young an uncle gave her the nickname 'Tiger' because she was always so busy doing things at breakneck speed. Another colleague described Sylvia as 'the best social worker the Churchill Hospital ever had'. She loved having social work students with her, and from what I have heard, students loved being with Sylvia too. It is great that some of her former students and colleagues are with us today.

When she retired, Sylvia carried on looking after people. She cared for many through Wesley Memorial Church as a 'pastoral visitor', often going to see people in her car, the famous white mini. One person described her as an 'inspirational' pastoral visitor'. She liked being with young people too, always interested, always encouraging. Until stopped by the lockdown in March, she was still shopping for a neighbour.

The third aspect is her intrepid spirit – Sylvia loved travelling and went on holidays to many parts of the world – including India, China, and several interfaith tours to the Mediterranean with Mary and Marcus Braybrook.

But her adventurous spirit did not stop there. There's a lovely story when Sylvia invited some friends round for dinner at her flat. Sylvia had left her kitchen window open just a little, while they were eating. Suddenly there was a loud crash. A squirrel had jumped in and was darting round the kitchen. They all looked at each other in panic wondering what to do, but Sylvia jumped up, grabbed the oven gloves and rushed around after the squirrel. She quickly caught it and let it out of the window. The dinner guests were amazed by Sylvia's quick action and agility!

Another word that has been used to describe Sylvia is mischievous. She sometimes had that twinkle in her eye ... whether it was in the open air, with the University of the Third Age walking group in her sturdy shoes, or on her way to a concert, tripping along in her high heels. And her twinkle would definitely be there if you gave her some chocolate, which she loved! One recent Christmas, after she had started to wear more sensible flat shoes, Freda and I found Sylvia a perfect present – it was a high heeled shoe, made entirely of chocolate.

Two months ago, Sylvia went on another adventure moving, just across the road, from her Latimer Grange flat where she had lived for many years, to McMaster House. It allowed her to carry on being independent. Sadly, this adventure didn't last long, but long *enough* for us to recognise how kind the McMaster staff and residents are, and we are very grateful to them. We all miss Sylvia deeply but have been so privileged that our lives have crossed.

A couple of years ago, a small group of us at Wesley Memorial Church started an Oral History project, where one of us would interview a member of the congregation and record them for use both now, and to put in the archives. When an appeal was made for anyone willing to be recorded, Sylvia said to me 'Well I suppose I could be involved, but I really don't think I've got anything interesting to say.' The recording is, of course, one of the most fascinating and precious that we have.

John (friend)



Sylvia in Venice, June 1966

From the Wesley Memorial Church Website

Towards the end of her time at school, Sylvia became interested in social work and believes that she was guided towards a career in this direction. She went on to read Sociology at the London School of Economics. In this extract, she explains why she felt guided towards her career and how her faith developed during her time as a student in London.

Sylvia's first job was in Winchester but in 1966 she successfully applied for a post at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford and moved to the city. She was 30, on her own and didn't know anyone in Oxford but on her first weekend, she found Wesley Memorial and has been busy ever since!

Over time, Sylvia served on many other committees and became a pastoral visitor. In the early 70s she was part of a committee looking at disabled access to the church – she was able to use her specialist knowledge from working in rehabilitation at the Churchill.

Over the years Sylvia has seen many changes to the way Wesley Mem looks and the way it's run. Here (in the recordings) she talks about those developments, how her faith has matured and what the friends she's made through Wesley Mem have meant to her.

To listen to extracts of Sylvia's recording go to:

www.wesleysoxford.org.uk/people/personal-stories/sylvia-kenyon-2