

Gordon Douglas William Curtis 1936 - 2024



Gordon Curtis was born in Bath in 1936. He studied at the City of Bath Boys' School (now Beechen Cliff School), where he excelled at rugby and music, learning the piano and oboe. He was also a chorister and server at Ascension Church. On leaving school he was conscripted into the RAMC and trained at the Royal Army Medical College at Millbank; he played the organ at a church in Paddington, before being posted to Cyprus.

After National Service he trained in haematology and bacteriology at the United Bristol Hospitals, before moving back to Bath to work in the bacteriology laboratory at the Royal United Hospital. He continued his music-making, playing at Holy Trinity Church and assisting his organ teacher Ben Maslen at St Mary's, Bathwick. He played the oboe in Bath Symphony Orchestra from November 1959 to May 1963.

In 1962 he met Christine, a nurse and fellow music lover, and they were married in September 1963, living first in Bath and then at Winsley, near Bradford-in-Avon. When Gordon took up a position in 1966 at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, they moved to a house in Beckley, and their first daughter Helen was born soon after, followed in 1969 by Madeleine.

In 1974 the family moved to Horton-cum-Studley, where Gordon played at St Barnabas Church; the 1881 Bryceson organ had been built for a house in Eastbourne, and it was decided to replace this with a redundant organ of suitable size. The instrument at St Bartholomew Church, Nettlebed, fitted the bill, and in 1977 Gordon assembled an enthusiastic team of parishioners who dismantled and transported it to Horton-cum-Studley. He and Richard Vendome built an "Italianate" instrument in their spare time, incorporating new pipework by Denti of Crema in the style of Antegnati and a historic Bordone rank by Serassi, a gift from Giovanni Tamburini. The opening recital was given in September 1985 by James Dalton, Organist of the Queen's College, Oxford. Gordon also assisted with the installation of the organ at St George's Basilica, Gozo, Malta.

Gordon's musical skills were much in demand. He sang tenor in the Oxford Bach Choir and took over from Ted Ogden as conductor of the

Studley Singers. There were some joint ventures with the Islip Players, and local GP Julie Todd recalls a production of the Gondoliers which was her introduction to the world of Oxford Music Theatre; “Gordon brought local singers and players together to enjoy the best of classical music. I joined the Studley Singers in the last years of their active life and was very grateful for the friendships made”.

In the field of microbiology Gordon was highly respected, and he enjoyed travelling to international symposiums, sometimes accompanied by Christine. The “Handbook of Culture Media for Food and Water Microbiology”, which he edited with Janet Corry and Rosamund Baird, is the standard reference work on the subject, now in its 3rd edition.

Gordon was a member of the British Institute of Organ Studies council and meticulous editor of the BIOS reporter for nine years (2015-23). Before retiring from the John Radcliffe Hospital in 2001 he had already embarked on the MA course in organ historiography at Reading University, in which he combined his musical interests and his scientific research skills. He toured the south-west and further afield with his notebook and camera documenting the organs of William Sweetland; a trip to play and examine the splendid organ of Dursley Tabernacle in Gloucestershire was particularly memorable. His excellent book “A Provincial Organ Builder in Victorian England: William Sweetland of Bath” (Ashgate, 2011) is a significant contribution to the history of British music, as is his article “Old Bailey Records (1674-1913) as a source of information on organbuilders” (BIOS Journal vol.35, 2011).

Much of Gordon’s retirement was spent transcribing and type-setting music of the Pietà in Venice for the Schola Pietatis Antonio Vivaldi (Oxford), and his edition of Giovanni Porta’s substantial cantata “Il Ritratto dell’Eroe” (1726) is a triumph of scholarship.

Gordon was received into the Catholic Church in 1994 and his Requiem Mass took place on Tuesday 16 July 2024 at Our Lady of Light, Long Crendon. In the words of Sweetland’s great-granddaughter Angela Calvert-Jones, “Gordon was always extremely modest, a very good and reliable friend, who will be missed.”

Richard Vendome