

VIVIEN MARGARET O'DONNELL 1943–2025



The collective memory of Viv O'Donnell is of a warm, vibrant, fun-loving member of her community, a Justice of the Peace, recognised artist, charity worker and mother of four. Viv bloomed with colour and life. Just as her husband, Dr Hugh O'Donnell, dispensed medicine and cared for the community, Viv dispensed love and laughter to all.

It seemed Viv was always a part of her beloved Deddington but in fact she came from much further away. In the late 1930s, as the war clouds darkened across the world, Viv's Bristolian father, Peter Rich, headed to Egypt to procure ingredients for the Fry's Chocolate factory. He met Hilda Paris, a sophisticated young Maltese woman, educated by Italians and part of Egyptian society. Hilda and Peter married. The storm finally broke in 1939 and war was declared. In Egypt, Peter joined the RAF providing logistical support for the North African campaign. He crash landed in the desert near Basra but survived and rose to the rank of Wing Commander.

In 1943, Vivien Margaret Rich was born in a military hospital on Gazira, an island in the middle of the Nile in the heart of Cairo. Later they lived in Port Said and Alexandria. The family moved regularly. One of her father's later posts was as Commanding Officer of a customs embarkation unit in Singapore. In 1947 their son, Alan, was born and survives Vivien.

Later the family lived in Hong Kong before settling back in the UK, in south west London, where Vivien attended a grammar school and passed the 11+. Aged 14, whilst performing in a collaborative school play, Vivien met a compelling 14 year-old called Hugh O'Donnell from a large London Irish family. He carried her books home, they chatted, he wooed her and later they kissed under the stage. A life-long love affair began. Fun and fire lasted decades until Hugh died three years ago. Viv missed him every day and said so every day.

Whilst living in Wimbledon, Vivien secured a place at RADA. The power of conventional post-war Britain was such that Viv did not take up her place at RADA and trained as a secretary instead. Such was her exuberant personality and quick wit, she became PA to the general manager of The Ritz hotel.

Hugh and Viv married in 1967 in Kingston Vale. Moving from hospital to hospital, Daniel (1969) and Matthew (1971) were born. In 1972 the family of four moved to Barford. Philippa (1974) was born at the John Radcliffe and, finally, in 1976 her youngest daughter Harriett arrived. All survive.

Mum naturally took her place as a much-loved member of the Oxfordshire community. There were good times making homes and friends in Barford, South Newington and, ultimately, Deddington where she will stay forever. Vivien's predominant talent was for art. In fact, not pursuing drama spurred her into painting, drawing, sculpting and her favourite medium, pastels. Vivien put on many exhibitions, from a multitude of shows around Oxfordshire to the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, and Edith Grove, Chelsea. Laughter filled the gallery at all her shows, flutes of fizz with her trademark lipstick stamped on the rim, and framed pictures by VOD were regularly dotted with the red 'sold' stickers. Dozens of walls in Deddington and beyond are adorned with Vivien's vibrant sense of colour and her unrestrained depictions of the movement, humour and energy she saw in everyday life.

Vivien played tennis competitively in ladies' tournaments at the West Ad-derbury Tennis Club. She later trained as a magistrate and served in the Oxford Court. Here she brought much valued empathy and compassion and her impish humour, to the serious role of listening to, and sanctioning, those most in need of the state's formal attention. Once this attention was offered in the opposite direction: a renowned car thief was temporarily released from his cell to use his skills to retrieve Vivien's car keys, which she accidentally locked inside her Morris Minor. Justice was served.

Vivien's compassionate nature compelled her to take up any work that would help others: Sue Ryder, Katharine House, Oxfam and many other good causes. The last picture Vivien created was a commission for 'Driving Ukraine' – a Deddington based support group spearheaded by the mighty Fynn Watt. The auction of this picture will be a posthumous act of compassion to help those less fortunate than herself. If you are interested in supporting Driving Ukraine by acquiring the picture (a beachscape that invokes the flag of Ukraine), contact Jenny Soddy.

Vivien was just as cosmopolitan as her mother and helped run the Deddington French Club but, more than this, Vivien could speak everybody's language. She listened to and understood everyone. She spoke to others as if it were they who were the most engaging person in the room; it was they who had made people laugh; it was they who widened everyone's outlook and it was their joie de vivre that lifted everyone when, in fact, it was always Vivien.

This is perhaps the abiding reason why Viv will be loved and remembered for as long as the living memory of her friends persists and in pictures and photographs thereafter. Her spirit lives on in her friends, her art and her family.

Dan O'Donnell