

Obituary

Valerie Ann White (1952–2010)

Members will remember Val as a BAA Council member and Editor of the *Handbook*, and as an enthusiastic traveller and solar eclipse chaser.

Val White was born Valerie Ann Heaton on 1952 December 3, the middle child and only daughter of Irene and Ernest Heaton, of Frecheville, Sheffield. She had an older brother, Trevor, and a younger brother, Richard. After passing the 11-plus examination Val chose not to go to the nearby Grammar School, but to Westfield Comprehensive, in the village of Mosborough, as her older brother was at that school. She did well academically and achieved nine O levels followed by five A levels while at Westfield. She graduated from Leicester University with a BSc Honours degree in maths and astronomy. Her final year project at University was a study of stellar structure, which was the start of her interest in solar astronomy.

At Leicester Val met fellow-student Andrew White, whom she married in 1975. They lived first in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, then in Warrington, Cheshire where Andrew took a position with the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA). Two years later Val obtained a job with British Nuclear Fuels



(BNFL), located on the same site as the UKAEA offices, just a few minutes walk from their new home. Her first job there was Executive Officer, supervising fifteen staff covering three departments, followed by a couple of years in planning, then a move to a more technical role involving the records of Sellafield's radioactive waste.

In Warrington, Val and Andrew attended the nearby United Reformed Church, where Val was persuaded to take a Sunday school class, which she continued to do for eighteen years. She also helped for sixteen years with leading the youngest Boys Brigade group. In 1985, Val became an Elder of the church and shortly after was asked to be Church Secretary, a role which she held for fifteen years. She was also on various committees for her church and others, and helped with the Warrington Christian Aid committee and events.

In the community, Val and Andrew made contact with the local park rangers and were made 'voluntary rangers' helping out at events in the parks. They became members of the local Carnival Committee, which organised both the annual carnival and the annual bonfire and firework display. Val also took on the role of Secretary of the Photographic Club at BNFL, organised their annual exhibition and had some photographs included in a calendar of Warrington.

In 1986, Halley's Comet made its appearance and people kept ask-

ing her about it, which rekindled her interest in astronomy. She bought an 8½-inch Newtonian reflector and did see a very faint Halley's Comet with it. Also in 1986 she joined the BAA.

Val loved to travel, especially to places that she would see in books or on TV, and in all she counted over seventy countries visited around the world. Having for a long time wanted to see a total eclipse of the Sun, the chance came in 1991 with a trip to Hawaii. This was followed by nine other total eclipse journeys in the next twenty years, with only one failure – Cornwall in 1999. Annular eclipses also beckoned, but from six trips undertaken, only three annulars were seen.

Val and Andrew were planning their next eclipse trips to see the annular in the Maldives and the total in French Polynesia when Val became ill.

In addition to being a member of the BAA, Val was a member of the Society for Popular Astronomy, the Astronomy Centre and Liverpool Astronomical Society. She was also a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Val was a member of the BAA Council from 2003–2006, and 2007–2009. She was Editor of the BAA *Handbook* from the 2006 edition, and persevered through her illness to complete the 2011 *Handbook*. Val's skills as editor were exceptional; she had an uncanny knack of spotting mathematical errors, and during her tenure the *Handbook* moved from manual typesetting to production in-house by electronic means, saving the Association substantial sums of money.

Val gave many talks and presentations on astronomy, particularly relating to her experiences observing solar eclipses. This was recognised by Liverpool Astronomical Society, who in 2007 conferred upon Val and Andrew 'The Martin Suggett Award for Achievement in Astronomy'.

Val was diagnosed as having a DVT in October 2009 and as pain increasing was eventually admitted to hospital and was diagnosed with bladder cancer in November of that year. The next ten months brought a catalogue of setbacks, and she died peacefully at home on the morning of 2010 September 23. She is survived by Andrew, to whom I am indebted for much of the information in this Obituary.

For those who were never privileged to know Val, it is enough to say that she was the nicest person you could ever meet.

Sheridan Williams



Val and Andrew at the solar eclipse observing site in the Libyan desert, 2006 March 29