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Former spy and top Lake District boss passes away, aged 79



A FORMER Lake District National Park Authority boss, ex-spy and 'role model' father has passed away, aged 79.

John Toothill, a 'proud Yorkshireman' was born in Bradford to parents George Willie and Gladys on May 9, 1938.

He secured a scholarship for both Bradford Grammar School and later for his place at the University of Oxford, originally intending to study French.

However, with National Service still in effect, Mr Toothill joined the Joint Services' School for Linguists in order to learn Russian in just two months.

In 1958 he was posted to Gatow Airfield in West Berlin, where he worked with the RAF to spy on Russian aircraft traffic for two years.

Upon returning from Berlin, he took up his place at Oxford, choosing to study Russian as well as French and graduating with a 2:1.

He went on to spend time working in industry, taking up managerial positions before deciding that it was time for a change of pace.

In his early thirties Mr Toothill decided to take a 'gap year', heading to his beloved Lake District to summit all of the Wainwright's and write a book.

And although he was not able to find a publisher for his novel, he had conquered all of the fells and was in no rush to leave the Lakes.

Having lived near Wray Castle during his year of walking, he then moved to Kendal, finding employment with Westmorland County Council as an administrative assistant in 1970.

It was here that he met his secretary and the woman who was later to become his wife, Sylvia Margaret Harris.

The pair often walked together and engaged at the Three Shire Stone on Wrynose Pass and married in 1971. In 1974 they had daughter Jane.

In 1985, aged 46, he reached the top of his career ladder and took up the dream role of National Park Officer for the Lake District.

Mr Toothill's work was far reaching, including time spent examining the country's National Parks for an influential government report.

An OBE came in 1995 for his services to the environment and he took his retirement in 1998, aged 60.

Since his school days, Mr Toothill had been a keen chess player and he continued to play throughout his retirement.

A strong correspondence player, Mr Toothill was part of the gold winning Great Britain team at the 1982 Correspondence Chess Olympiad.

In board chess, he became a British master in 1980, played Board 1 for Cumbria as match captain and captain of the county's Chess Association, was captain and chairman of Windermere Chess Club and became British Senior Champion in 2000.

In fact, Mr Toothill was playing chess right up until the end of his life. He was taken ill on November 21, while in the middle of a game at the Windermere club.

"The guy he was playing chess with offered him a draw in the ambulance," Dr Jane Toothill said. "But he was doing well and he said no."

Mr Toothill was also a bridge player, passionate about cricket, enthusiastic about architecture and he continued to walk into his retirement - in total, he did five full rounds of the Wainwright peaks.

"The thing that's been written more than anything else in the cards we've got is that he was a lovely man," Dr Toothill said. "He was very intelligent. He had a very good sense of humour. He was very warm hearted towards people."

Mr Toothill leaves behind an older brother Bob, who lives in Hull, younger brother Andrew in Derby, daughter Jane and wife Sylvia.

Mr Toothill passed away on November 22 and his funeral took place on Tuesday (December 5) at St. Oswald's Church, Burneside.