

## News

### Obituary: Robert Thomas Kirby, 1947–2024

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# Obituary: Robert Thomas Kirby, 1947–2024

*Katie Meheux, Eleanor Kirby and Isabelle Kirby*

Robert Kirby (see Figure 1), who died on 27 June 2024, was the Institute of Archaeology librarian and a long-standing member of UCL Library Services, occupying many roles throughout his career. Robert was born in Rugby in 1947. His father, who had been in the Fleet Air Arm during the Second World War, on demobilisation was offered a job with the General Electric Company based in Rugby. His mother's family were Londoners, and he visited London regularly. The family later relocated to Stafford, where Robert attended the local grammar school. His tutors were quick to recognise Robert's talent for ancient languages, beginning with Latin and ancient Greek. Robert attended Sydney Sussex College in Cambridge between 1966 and 1969, reading Classics. He made life-long friends there, including his personal tutor, historian Derek Beales. He attended Cambridge at the same time as most of Tony Blair's 'New Labour' cabinet, which gave him an amusing perspective on their political adventures.



**Figure 1** Robert Kirby at home (Source: Eleanor and Isabelle Kirby)

Robert began working for UCL Library, as it then was, in September 1973. He joined as a graduate trainee, the usual route into the profession. After qualifying, Robert moved between different roles, taking on responsibility for Egyptology, and subsequently Hebrew and Jewish studies. He was also involved in Rare Books, and in 1981 flew to New York to identify 377 books, valued at £1.5 million, stolen by an ex-student. Their recovery – Robert’s only brush with the law – was dubbed ‘The Big Book Job’ by officers at Holborn police station. He later worked as chief cataloguer and remained insistent on maintaining exacting standards of cataloguing thereafter.

In 1996, Robert moved to the role of librarian of the Institute of Archaeology. He took over the library during a period of upheaval and expansion, as it moved from the first floor to the fifth floor and merged with UCL’s medieval archaeology, classical archaeology and Egyptology collections. Robert remained as Institute librarian until his retirement in February 2018. He always enjoyed interacting with students and wanted the Institute library to provide a calm, scholarly refuge from the louder, larger UCL libraries.

Robert’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the ancient world made him a brilliant archaeology librarian and he became a much-valued adviser to academics within the Institute, UCL and the wider archaeology and ancient history communities. He also remained librarian for comparative philology; his knowledge of languages was unsurpassed among library colleagues. He found the missing books that no one else could find, knew the classification of all collections by heart and remembered every book that he ever ordered. Robert was never ill; when younger, junior members of the team dropped around him, he continued, blaming illness on our habit of ‘always opening windows and always going to the gym’. He was at the heart of the Institute of Archaeology library team; a kindly, encouraging, albeit sometimes irascible, leader.

Robert met his wife, Stephanie, through UCL Library and they were married in 1981. Eleanor and Isabelle came along in 1984 and 1987, and the family made their home in Woodford. UCL Library was a close community, and Robert’s daughters remember visiting him at work and were proudly shown off as babies. Robert was a much-loved, devoted father and husband. Eleanor remembers her father washing up in the kitchen listening to Radio 4 or 3, his only relief from his womenfolk. Isabelle recalls, as a teenager, that he enjoyed referring to his ‘perverse and foolish daughters’ in the long-suffering manner of a latter-day Mr Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice*. Stephanie sadly predeceased Robert in August 2011.

Robert was an intellectual and cultured man. He was a brilliant linguist, speaking many languages, including Mandarin Chinese; as he put it, ‘yes, but I’ve never mastered Hungarian.’ He particularly enjoyed ancient languages, and after his retirement he took pleasure in studying Greek, Hebrew and Coptic. He loved travelling and using his language skills to chat with local people. He was an avid opera fan and enjoyed concerts. When he retired, he relaxed by doing his Sudoku while watching the garden birds dip into the fresh pot of water he had put out for them.

Robert’s love for his family and his strong Roman Catholic faith lay at the heart and centre of his life. He was a dedicated and active parishioner of his church, St Anne Line, in South Woodford, taking on many roles from organist – he was a talented musician – to managing funds. He would sit quietly reading the New Testament in Ancient Greek and psalms in Hebrew during Sunday Mass.

Robert was kind, patient and thoughtful, with a love of Portuguese custard tarts; shy, but warm, and devoted to those he cared for. He will be much missed by his family, friends, colleagues in UCL, St Anne Line parish and his local community, who loved him dearly for his dry humour, kindness and humanity. He is survived by his daughters Eleanor and Isabelle Kirby.

## **Acknowledgements**

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