

Sir John Houghton

Memorial Service in Aberdyfi 14 May 2022

Thank you Sheila for inviting me to speak today. What a great way to start this memorial service by singing a hymn celebrating how great is the God that John worshipped. As we have just sung God is:

- A God whose power is displayed throughout the universe.
- And yet a God who cares about every one of his children.
- A God who has now taken John home to be with him.

John was born the middle of three boys. He grew up in North Wales and always loved Wales. Among his many awards were a dozen Honorary Degrees – and I know that the one he treasured most was from the University of Wales.

Although much of his professional life was spent between Oxford and London, he loved returning to his roots. In 1976 he bought a holiday cottage in Snowdonia National Park with his first wife Margaret. Sadly she died of cancer in 1986.

After his retirement John bought a farmhouse with Sheila high on a hill overlooking the Dovey Estuary. It had the mountains behind and the sea below – both of which John loved.

One of John's pleasures as a child while out cycling or walking was picking fruit from wild bushes. It lasted throughout his life.

Though Sheila tells me that sometimes when his memory was failing he came back with strange collections of different fruits. With varying ripeness because he had forgotten what he went out to pick.

At school John's Physics teacher inspired him to a love of Physics which lasted a lifetime. By the Sixth form the teacher let John and a friend have the run of the new laboratory. They learnt their Physics from a textbook and did whatever experiments they wanted. Can you imagine that today?

But it served John well. He got the highest mark in the whole of Wales in the national exams. Unbeknown to him, that qualified him for a special scholarship at Jesus College Oxford. Since he was still only 16, the college suggested he wait for a year. Well, John said in that case, he would rather follow his father and brother to Manchester University immediately.

The college relented and let him start straight away. Many of the other undergraduates were much older than John, having returned from the war. But John was self-sufficient, made friends in the college and the Christian Union, and soon fitted in. He loved Jesus College, eventually spending 3 decades there.

Again, John only bothered going to lectures that really interested him. The rest he learned from textbooks, just as at school. But still in his final exams he got the highest mark in Physics in the whole of Oxford university. He was extremely clever!

For his DPhil he joined the atmospheric research group. He built an instrument to measure the temperature of the upper atmosphere. It was designed for a decommissioned Mosquito aircraft from Farnborough which flew to 40,000 feet.

But when they turned up to fit the new instrument into the aircraft they found that the hole for it was too small. Undaunted, his supervisor climbed onto the aircraft with a brace and bit and drilled a bigger hole in the plywood skin. Can you imagine what Health and Safety rules would say about that nowadays?

John was now aged 23 with a DPhil. And had to do National Service. His links with the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough got him a 4-year research position there. He built better instruments to measure the atmospheric temperature, this time using Canberra aircraft. The only space for the scientist was lying down in the bomb-aimer's position in the nose.

He also made a friend in Des Smith, and they had a long and fruitful research collaboration. Shortly before they left Farnborough the Russians launched the Sputnik 1 satellite. Immediately John and Des thought wouldn't it be good if they could view the atmosphere from space and measure round the whole world rather than being restricted to single aircraft tracks.

So in 1958 John returned to his old department at Oxford where he spent the next twenty years. He rose rapidly to become a Professor and Head of Department.

Although by nature John was modest and retiring he was a natural leader. He inspired everyone by his intellectual power and his scientific energy.

His group now went all-out to develop instruments for satellites. Of course you had to work with NASA and he convinced the Americans to back him. His first instrument flew in the Nimbus 4 satellite in 1970.

But before that had even launched they had thought of improvements for the next satellite, Nimbus 5 So they applied to the Space Research Fund in the UK for money to build it. They needed half a million pounds. That's a lot of money even today, but in 1970 it was equivalent to over £8 million in today's money.

Not surprisingly the committee wanted to wait until the first instrument had worked before paying for another. But John was not easily deflected. He appealed right to the top and got the decision reversed. It's a mark of the way John got his teeth into things he really cared about.

His group's measurements of the earth's atmospheric temperature through the series of Nimbus satellites, and even on a Venus orbiter, were pivotal in our understanding of atmospheric circulation. And it paved the way for understanding global warming.

In 1979 John moved from Oxford University to become a science administrator. He successfully moved the Appleton Research Laboratories from radio research to satellite work. Then he integrated them with the Rutherford Laboratories where they remain today. Job done, after 4 years he moved on to head up the Met Office.

He then built the Met Office up to the world-leading institution it remains today. He emphasised the importance of research, as well as forecasting the weather. He also put it on a

commercial footing and his older brother David, a paid-up meteorologist all his career (who sadly died in 2015) became head of the business arm.

Perhaps the most memorable event during his tenure was the great storm of 16 October 1987, which many of us remember. It was the worse since 1703. It made the weather forecaster Michael Fish famous, but it meant a lot of paperwork and inquiries for John.

Towards the end of his time at the Met Office in 1988 he helped set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

We will hear more about the IPCC from Bruce Callander shortly. But I want to say that the integrity and energy with which John led the assessment reports of the IPCC for well over a decade have had a truly global significance.

He insisted always on absolute adherence to scientific truth in the reports and would not allow them to be swayed by political self-interest. It has made the IPCC reports authoritative landmarks documenting the changes that humans are making to global climate. It is entirely fitting that the sixth IPCC report published this last year was dedicated to John.

John's Christian faith was always integral to his life. He wrote several books explaining it, and spoke at many, many conferences and meetings about the importance of environmental care and stewardship from a Christian perspective.

Although he helped many charities, the one closest to his heart was the John Ray Initiative which he set up in 1997. His vision was to bring together scientific and Christian understandings of the environment. It is still going strong.

In conclusion, I want to say to everyone here, but especially perhaps to John's children, Janet and Peter and to his 7 grandchildren Hannah, Daniel, Jemima, Johnny, Esther, Max and Sam that your father and grandfather's contribution to making the entire global community aware of global climate change was immense.

He was both humble and an intellectual giant and was prophetic in his warnings about climate change. His work has set the agenda for the whole world for years to come. I am so grateful to have known him.

We will now sing our next song, which is on the service sheet. You will see that it picks up the truth that was so precious to John, that the same God who created the stars and the universe, himself came down to earth so that on the cross he could restore and cleanse the greed, conflict and waste of humans.

Bob White
14 May 2022