John Griffiths
1952–2010

Fellow of the RAS and inspirational teacher, dedicated to astronomy outreach.

Astronomy is increasingly viewed as a way to attract young people into the physical sciences. No-one was more committed to this than John Griffiths, who died unexpectedly at his home and observatory in Andalusia, Spain in April. He was 57.

John took a first class honours in astrophysics at University College London and continued with his PhD there. This involved pioneering mid-IR continuum and NeII 12.8 µm fine-structure mapping of the galactic centre and galactic HII regions. This resulted in three papers in MNRAS in 1976 and 1977. He argued that the neon spectra of Sgr A could only be accounted for if metallicity were three times that of the Sun, and if the ionizing stars were appreciably hotter than previously thought. He demonstrated that HII regions were very dusty-depleted compared to the ISM and that the dust was mostly heated by absorption of Lyα radiation from hot stars.

He worked for more than 20 years as curator of space collections at the Science Museum in London. This often took him in surprising directions: his last major project for the museum was acquiring and supervising the reconstruction of the Wood’s Printing Press at Wroughton. He also found time to run the museum cricket team for a number of years, as well as playing and refereeing museum football and rugby matches.

From 2003 John worked for the Royal Observatory Greenwich and for local schools in southeast London. Here he was in his element, teaching astronomy to people of all ages and from all backgrounds, and he had a remarkable ability to communicate with them all. He was always impressed with the openness of young children to new ideas, but was equally at home organizing summer schools to excite sixth formers. His teaching was inspirational; whether in the planetarium, the classroom, or with a small group around an amateur instrument, his enthusiasm was infectious and unflagging.

He was generous with his time. He ran his local community centre for years, where he set up observing sessions for local children and adults as part of the IYA. On realizing that many of his adult students wanted more astronomy after their GCSEs, he put together one-term courses, which he and invited speakers delivered, charging a nominal fee which certainly didn’t cover his time. This was the measure of the man.

His last venture was to set up, with his wife Kathy and astronomer Andy Burns, an impressively equipped observatory under the dark skies of rural Spain, for astronomy courses. It was during the first such course, for undergraduates at Glamorgan University, that he died.

John was an irrepressible optimist and a skilled negotiator, a powerful combination that enabled him to steer difficult projects through to successful completion. It was also one of the reasons why it was great to work with him. But there was much more: his love of life and great kindness meant that time spent in his company was cherished. He made a difference, and will be hugely missed by very many.

Alan Longstaff