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## Mary Caroe, formidable custodian of a notable Gertrude Jekyll garden in Surrey – obituary

As well as restoring the Vann garden near Godalming, she was a GP and police surgeon and founded a rape and sexual abuse support centre

By Telegraph Obituaries

17 April 2020 • 12:22pm

Premium



Mary Caroe, who has died of Covid-19 aged 81, was, at various times, a family doctor, the founder of a rape and sexual abuse support centre and a police surgeon.

But she became better known to garden lovers and readers of The Daily Telegraph as the fiery custodian of Vann, a rambling home of many architectural periods, near Godalming, Surrey, surrounded by a magical five-acre garden partly designed by Gertrude Jekyll.

Her husband Martin Caroe, an ecclesiastical architect, had inherited the 1542 house, extended by his grandfather, William “WD” Caroe [Martin dropped the umlaut], also an architect and a major figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement, in 1969.

The house had been subdivided and tenanted since the war and was in some disrepair. Meanwhile the garden, laid out in the early 1900s by William Caroe and his wife Grace in collaboration with their neighbour and friend Gertrude Jekyll, retained its “bones” but was over-run by weeds, dying shrubs and trees infected with Dutch elm disease.

Vann became the centre of Mary’s life, providing a setting for gatherings of friends and relatives, musical events, Turkish carpet fairs and garden parties. In particular she developed a passion for gardening. “I think my husband married me because I am a good weeder,” she told the Telegraph Magazine’s Stephen Lacey in 2014.



The Yew Walk at Vann | CREDIT: GAP Photos//Abigail Rex

Before the Caroes’ arrival much of the garden had been used by a market gardener: “I spent my life removing his daffodils. And there was a mass of bindweed and ground elder which had to be dug out – glyphosate hadn’t been invented then,” she recalled. Together Mary and her husband restored the garden and created modern plantings around the WD Caroe pergola, field pond and yew walk rhill garden. They abandoned the formal rose garden, (“I think rose gardens are boring anyway”) and replanted with foliage plants.

But they always kept to the spirit of Gertrude Jekyll’s plantings : “When we put in new things, like better varieties of daylily or astilbe – which I am sure she would have done – I try to choose ones she would have liked,” Mary Caroe explained. She researched original plant purchase lists for Vann and was able to recreate the original effect in the rambling series of water garden ponds.

The Caroes had very little help in maintaining the garden, and even after Martin’s death in 1999 Mary resisted any temptation to take things easy. “I have a mowing man, and a gardener three days a week, but I do the rest”, she

told Stephen Lacey.

### Vann Garden April 2020



In the early 1970s the Caroes had opened the garden to the public under the National Garden Scheme, and for more than 50 years, in spring and early summer, visitors came to admire the early snowdrops in the “white woodland garden”, the rare snakes head fritillaries and to buy potted cowslips, helping to “put petrol in the motor mower”, as Mary put it. For most of that time she made all the cakes and biscuits for the open days herself.

“Having a Gertrude Jekyll garden doesn’t weigh on me at all”, she explained. “I think we are terribly lucky to have such a magical place, and I love sharing it.”

She was born Mary Elizabeth Roskill in London on August 18 1938, the elder twin and fourth child of Stephen and Elizabeth Roskill, and brought up in South Warnborough, Hampshire.

### Mary of Vann Garden: Earthbound Expeditions



From St Mary’s School, Wantage, she undertook medical training at the Westminster Hospital. She worked in London, and after her marriage in 1962 to Martin Caroe, Guildford, as a GP and in family planning. She also cared for military wives and families at Pirbright Barracks, founded the Guildford Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre and was a police surgeon with the Surrey Constabulary for 15 years.

It was not unusual for Mary Caroe to spend part of the night at the police cells assessing those suffering from an excess of drink or drugs, yet be home in time to get her children ready for school.

Mary Caroe was a founder member, in 1991, of the Surrey Gardens Trust, an educational charity, and played an active role in shaping its work, including becoming an expert on Gertrude Jekyll’s work, style and methods.

Mary Caroe photographed for the Sunday Telegraph in 2008 in the billiard and music room at Vann, where she reportedly was having problems with 'long-eared bats, wood bats and pipistrelles which damage furnishings with bat droppings and pee' | CREDIT: Eleanor Bentall

She was active in a fundraising effort in 2018-9 to create high quality digital reproductions of Jekyll's 140 Surrey garden designs sourced from Jekyll's archive held by Godalming Museum and the Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. Mary Caroe's personalised letter-writing campaign netted substantial donations from private individuals and trusts.

Mary Caroe would entertain family and friends with a fund of oft-retold anecdotes. She was a formidable writer of hard-hitting letters to utilities, local councils and organisations who attempted to overcharge or under-deliver, and her no-nonsense volunteering at the Hambledon village shop earned her the nickname "Scary Mary".

At the time she succumbed to Covid-19 she had been planning a full year of travel with her regular "three musketeer" companions, and a host of social events – all lined up in her illegible diary.

She is survived by three daughters and a son. Another son died in 1973.

**Mary Caroe, born August 18 1938, died April 5 2020**

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