

Reading a Blog about Spitalfields, "the gentle author, Spitalfields life", got me thinking about how we in Holy Trinity & St Mary's parish could become even more connected by knowing a little more about each other. I went on the Gentle Author's blog course and have begun interviewing people in the parish so their stories could be heard. 'Tricia McIntosh

Interview with Alexandra Stevenson

I met Alexandra at her current home, 6 Trinity Churchyard, just as her husband Tim was taking their 15-month-old son Henry outside in order to give us some interview time. Alexandra spoke with speed and enthusiasm.

'I was born in Manchester, where my father was university chaplain. I'm the youngest of four children and we moved to Holy Trinity when my father became rector, when I was 2½. I was quite a shy little girl but I was transfixed by music and jealous of the boys who were allowed in the choir. My mother made a mini choir outfit for my brother, and I loved dressing up in it too – we have a photo. One Sunday, when I was 5 or 6, we had visitors for lunch and I randomly burst into song, shocking everyone. It was the "Sanctus" from the setting by Darke that the choir had sung at the morning service. Later, when I was at university, I met people my age who had been the first girl choristers at Salisbury Cathedral.' Clearly, the girls' church choral tradition has been close to Alexandra's heart from an early age.

'Our whole family loved Holy Trinity. I remember handing round food at rectory parties and clearing away, and Andrew Jobson being one of the leaders in junior church. Practically every day I would go with my father to the Parish Office, which is the house I am now living in! I feel I have gone full circle!' Alexandra shows me a lovely sewn banner hanging on the stairs, saying: 'The Parish Office'. She confides that 'coming back here felt very right' and that her life seems full of synchronicity.

'We moved to Portsmouth when Daddy became bishop. I was 11. I attended Portsmouth Grammar School and did lots of music. I had been playing the piano since I was 3 and I continued with that but also did singing and bassoon. I did A-level Music but developed tendonitis in my hands so had to give up playing the piano and couldn't do Music at university. I decided to do History of Art at Edinburgh University (where her parents, Sarah and Kenneth, had met as students) and really enjoyed it, doing loads of singing and opera for pleasure. Then I moved to London, where I worked briefly at Saxton Bampfylde and then started freelancing with my singing and doing various opera courses.'

'In 2011, when my father died, I decided to move to Chichester to live with my mother temporarily. My singing teacher in London introduced me to Tim, another singing student, as he was moving to Chichester to be a lay clerk at the cathedral. I told Tim that I should introduce him to my brother-in-law, David Price, Director of Music at Portsmouth Cathedral, and he replied: "I know him already. In fact he and Kitty are family friends and I'm going to dinner with them at the weekend. Would you like to come along?"' – and that was their first date, another element of synchronicity. Much later, when a job came up at Guildford Cathedral for Tim, Alexandra received an invitation within a week from Martin Holford to become Director of Girl Choristers at Holy Trinity.

Alexandra muses on her job at Holy Trinity. 'Holy Trinity will be my only church choir and it has been so special. I had not conducted before but obviously knew about singing. One of the highlights was the choir tour when we sang Evensong in the chapel at Windsor Castle. I was 37 weeks pregnant and was conducting, as tradition expects, on Henry VIII's tomb. In the last six years they have learnt over 70 pieces, nine sets of canticles and three sets of responses. I planned the rehearsals minute by minute to ensure that they got everything learnt. I work them very hard but get so much back from seeing them develop and pass on the skills. Now there is a girl chorister tradition, the older ones can keep the line and the younger ones can join in. It's not just about singing but also about caring for each other – they call the choir a "family". The girls enjoy it; they turn up and sing with gusto. I am not their school mistress, I want them to enjoy it and develop confidence. I learnt from Stephen Bampfylde at his company about a part of the Benedictine

rule which says that the youngest monk is sometimes the wisest. I teach them that the oldest can learn from the youngest!’

This is not Alexandra’s only job. She sang at the Royal Opera House in 2019 for Classic FM and is in demand as a soloist all over the country. She also teaches singing at Charterhouse, which involves working with a huge variety of people, including those who go on to university choral scholarships or to study at a conservatoire.

Sometime after Easter the family will move to the parish of Cranleigh, where Tim is going to be the curate. ‘I am looking forward to becoming a curate’s wife. We have spent six years being in different churches so it will be great to be together in church as a family, but I will take Holy Trinity with me – I inherited a miniature copy of the Baptism of Christ icon from my father and I will take that with me wherever we go.’ The front door opens and Tim returns with a gurgling Henry.

‘Tricia McIntosh, December 2019