



The Malcolm Richards Column

A formidable force, who left a legacy

Richmond May Fair, the biggest fundraising event in the borough, has come around again and promises to be as vibrant as ever – thanks to the organising ability of Liz Carson, affectionately known as Queen of the Green, whose graceful Georgian house overlooks the festivities.

The annual gala dates back to the seventies and was the brainchild of Sylvia Oates, wife of the then Richmond vicar Canon John Oates. It was originally conceived as a way of bringing together three disparate parishes – St Mary's, St John's and St Matthias.

Sylvia, a teacher at the time at King House School was – and indeed still is – the kind of wife every vicar dreams of: handsome, blessed with boundless energy and social graces, a born organiser and capable of coping with everyone from archbishops to homeless delinquents.

They arrived in Richmond hot from Hackney and with their four children moved into the large vicarage in Oronsay

Road in 1970, using it for the purpose for which it was originally conceived, as a centre for parish planning.

The family lived mainly in the basement and slept on the first floor, utilising the ground floor for meeting offices and administration.

John's major task was to bring together the three churches who were suffering from declining congregations and falling income – and to somehow save and restore the structures and find an individual role for each – for all stand within a short walk of the green.

That he succeeded in getting St Matthias refurbished as a community centre, with a place of worship still intact in its midst and St John's and its decaying hall back to prime condition, was a modern miracle – but he tackled his property development mission with imagination and gusto.

Harder though was to get the three distinct congregations to merge socially and the

original idea of the fair was to give the parish a shop window and a feeling of unity – as an event on the green cannot be missed by residents, passers-by or shoppers.

Originally the stalls and attractions were provided exclusively by the three churches to boost church funds, but it became apparent that they did not have the resources to fill so huge a space and other voluntary organisations and charities were invited to take part and pay a proportion of their profits into a central church fund.

Like Topsy it proliferated and by the eighties it was the biggest fundraising event in Richmond upon Thames, generating much needed income. The whole thing was masterminded by Sylvia in the vicarage lounge and for a period I served on an ad hoc committee that met to plot the strategy.

My main contribution was the addition of a May Queen contest – and when it was launched at Richmond Theatre with Bonnie Langford handing out the honours, long

queues of parents with offspring in hand formed for the auditions.

We also created a Palace of Wonders – based on the Victorian freak show concept and a feature at local fairs when I was a child in the forties. Among the attractions we had a fat lady, a snake boy, a sleeping beauty in a glass coffin (made from my mother's old grand piano and sheets of Perspex from Wicks).

Many of those working on this newspaper were involved – the lady in the transparent casket was an Ann Spier, ad rep and one of the partners John Beaton played the spoons and sang Edwardian songs.

Fancy dress parades, solibrows, another set of stalls around St Mary's church, craft fairs, folk dancing, and all kind of displays and attractions made it a hugely popular event – and even if it rained the crowds still turned up as they do today.

Sylvia loved the May Fair and tackled the task with formidable gusto – even though at

the time she had a full time teaching job, four children to care for and other parish duties to carry out.

When they moved to St Bride's in 1984 they left a remarkable legacy and eventually Liz Carson took over the reins, ensuring it remained a highlight of the Richmond calendar.

The Oates are now retired and living over the Ham borders in Kingston. John still conducts and preaches at local churches and Sylvia is busy supporting many worthy projects including University of the Third Age and as a volunteer helper at Kingston Police Station.

They made their mark on Richmond in so many ways and now as proud grandparents are as influential and hardworking as ever.

Sylvia still visits Richmond May Fair – and is justly proud that the tradition she established is continued with such panache and efficiency and remains a highlight of the spring calendar.