

Dr Alwyn Langsford and Mrs Margaret Langsford

Alwyn, will you tell me your full name, and the year you were bom?

Al: I am Alwyn Langsford. I was born in Burnley in Lancashire in 1934.

Thank you, and Margaret?

M: I am Margaret Langsford. I was born in Skipton, Yorkshire in 1935.

Thank you. So, you were bom outside Abingdon. When did you come to live in Abingdon? Were you married then?

Al: Yes.

M: We were married in 1958. I taught in Oxford at Milham Ford School and Alwyn you were ...

Al: I was a research student at Oxford University then, although in fact I was doing most of my research work at Harwell.

You lived at this house when you came here?

M: No, we lived in The Grove that was a house when Alwyn was finally working at Harwell proper. We were offered a flat in The Grove. We were there for two and a half years, had our first child up there, but it was an upstairs flat so when there was another one on the way we applied again to Harwell for another house and they offered us this one.

Al: I suppose we ought to say this one is 4 Aston Close, Abingdon; the other one was 31 The Grove.

What are your memories of first coming to Abingdon and why Abingdon particularly?

Al: Perhaps I ought to answer that one, Lesley, because obviously it was related to my work. But it was also in a way related to Margaret's work because in Oxford, we had chosen a very convenient spot where I could get on a bus to Harwell and Margaret could get on a bus, or cycle to Milham Ford School. Once in a Harwell place, it was important that Margaret could still easily get on a bus or go by car to Milham Ford School in Oxford because she was still teaching there. So that tended to suggest that Abingdon was the place we should come to. We had visited Abingdon of course because we had taken a boat trip down the river and I think we had also come on the bus to have a look at it. So it was a place we knew a little bit about and we rather liked the look of it, even though to us from the north it was rather flat round here.

M: We had also cycled from Oxford I remember at one time, and what struck me then, was the County Hall in the middle of the town and how beautiful it was.

So, what are your earlier memories of Abingdon?

M: Well, I think that living on the edge, as it then was in The Grove, my early memories are pushing the pram down the Abingdon-Oxford Road and then trekking back up again and all the traffic that was around there. When we came to move here in the centre of the town the traffic, I think was even worse. Because to get to the town at that time we had to run the danger of being squashed into the wall by the car transporters that were taking the cars from the MG Works to the old railway station. That was "dicing with death" pushing a pram on the narrow pavements.

At the bottom of The Vineyard?

M: Yes, and round by the old tractor yard.

At one time, that was actually two-way traffic, but I think by then it was one-way traffic.

Al & M: By then it was one-way traffic.

Al: Mercifully. Could I supplement Margaret's earlier memories of Abingdon and what we did when we first came because our daughter wasn't born until a year after we arrived. I remember going for walks - I remember we could walk along from The Grove across to St. Peter's Road and that general area of Radley Road past the concrete place which was in a small gravel pit. I think Mullards were the people that had it and the other thing I remember, which was a novelty for me, was being able to walk along the riverbank. Because we had hill streams rather than rivers, which was our background. That walk along the riverbank to Culham still really hasn't changed.

Shopping-wise. What was your opinion of shopping then?

M: There were lots of little grocers' shops in Abingdon and the Co-op on the corner where the multi-story carpark is now. There were about five or six grocers' shops in the middle of Abingdon I seem to remember. You could almost buy everything you needed. I think one of the joys, of course, was Mason's Haberdashery, which is still fortunately with us, and the joy for Alwyn was Beadle's.

There was one other joy besides from Beadle's and that was Fred Knight's Model Shop. Of course, Fred Knight has now gone up-market and dropped his modelling. But to be able to call in and get a length of [trike?] or kit from his little shop on Bath Street was always a nice way of spending those extra few minutes on a visit to town on a Saturday morning.

Some of these small shops we particularly miss, isn't it?

Al: Yes, I also remember there was also an enormous number of excellent butcher's shops up and down the town. There was very good meat on sale.

We are talking particularly about changes in Abingdon and those are one of things that people have found changed. So, you came here work-wise and that was a developing thing in those days?

Al: Yes, I came to do research in 1957 and I actually confirmed my post at Harwell; I had been offered that at university when I was an undergraduate, which I deferred for three years. So, when I took up that post in 1960 it was to work on very fundamental research. But I think the most glorious part of Harwell's research days was already coming to an end then. We used to hear lots of stories about what had happened in the past and the characters that were around. But sadly, apart from the good companionship of the colleagues I worked with I wouldn't say I came across any significant characters in my work. So, there are no exciting stories to tell there. But we did have our excitement because I used to work with large quantities of liquid hydrogen, which is always fun particularly if it catches fire in the middle of the night. Of course, working around a large - what in those days was a large - accelerator there were always quite a lot of interesting things to do. But I don't think your people will be wanting my reminiscences on particle physics, that is for another sort of publication.

Have you any particular stories or memories as a sideline?

Al: It was quite some time later, the one I particularly remember, there are a number of related incidences which concern snowfalls. Margaret will of course remember the snowfall in 1963 and maybe she will want to add her own remarks about it. But I had to make it to Harwell. We do remember stories of people who'd been driving up Gore Hill from Harwell to get home, got stuck in the snowdrift, and went back to Chilton to try to get help. Then couldn't find their cars by the time

they went back because they had been covered in snow. It was perhaps the last big snowstorm that held up traffic when the traffic couldn't get up the little road from the Rowstock Roundabout towards Harwell, because it was skidding. By this time the A34 had been built. The buses couldn't leave Harwell and two of us set off together, along with other people to walk back to Abingdon. We only needed to walk as far as Rowstock where we met an Oxford City bus driver who was desperate to get back and asked us if we were going in the general direction of Oxford and if so to jump on. But I remember the wind whipping the ice particles off the fields from the east and woke up the following morning to find the whole of the right-hand side of my face was rough where it had been scoured by the ice particles. So, I had some sympathy with Scott of the Antarctic. Do you want to say about that winter of 1963 Margaret?

M: That winter our daughter was not quite one so of course it was a pram pushing effort but I couldn't get the pram out. So, it was six weeks we were holed-up in our upstairs council flat. There were little pathways on the pavement that had been cut, but no way were they wide enough to take a pram so I just didn't get out until the weekend when Alwyn would take over the baby sitting. Then I would maybe go off to Northcourt Co-op for a weekly jaunt to do the shopping.

Al: I would do what shopping I could at Harwell, and that was one of the few times I blessed the fact that there was a Harwell Store and shops there.

M: It was even worse of course when the thaw came because then you were flopping about ankle deep in sloppy snow which again was not all that good for pram pushing. But we survived.

Al: Of course, in those days living on The Grove we were right on the edge of town,

Actually, it still is, isn't it?

Al: But there is that little bit of extra building now in Saddlers' field. Of course, whereas all around us from North Avenue were fields.

Certainly, you could walk across the fields and up Boars Hill, but now you have to make your way by rather strange paths all the way through housing estates all along Long Furlong.

Al: Yes, I used to do the washing up and look out of the kitchen window and watch the tractors ploughing the fields, the com growing, and then being harvested right from my kitchen. You felt you were really right in the country..

Where you are now you could almost be out in the country?

M: We are very fortunate that even in the middle of Abingdon with all the trees around it is still quite rural.

Al: When we moved to Aston Close, we are the bottom house of The Close - Withington Court hadn't been built it was orchards of Stratton House. Stratton House was no longer being lived in and the orchards were very much going to waste. There was a way through into what was the orchard that our children discovered. They had a lovely time as two-, three- and four-year-olds running wild in these orchards with their young friends. And I remember down the wall that divides us from what is now Withington Court that would have been the wall of the old Fitzharry's Manor There was a long row of elm trees, and though we used to worry about the elm trees in gales, it was sad to see them go when they decided to pull them all out and build Withington Court.

But yes, from where we are sitting at the moment, looking eastward down towards the River Stert there are a nice group of trees and you can almost think you are in the country, and you can hardly see another house.

Alwyn, apart from your work. Your other interests? You are very much involved with the Abingdon Musical Society. When did you first get in on that line of interest?

Al: We moved here in 1961 and in the start of the 1960/61 season, I of course said I was working for Harwell by then. My group leader, who was Basil Rose. was a tenor in the choir, the Abingdon Musical Society choir, said "Well come on Alwyn, you are going to be moving to Abingdon you might as well come and sing with us". Knowing that I was a tenor as well and I think he was feeling a little bit lonely, as there was probably only one other person beside him who was singing tenor in those days. So, I used to motor over from Oxford and join them, I think it was at Dunmore School in those days. I remember at our first concert that autumn involved Vaughan Williams, Benedicite, which I have never sung since sadly. and also Bach's Singet den Herren.

So, I have been a member of the Musical Society since 1960. And Hugo Langrish then a teacher of music at Radley College was our conductor. We'll have stayed with the Musical Society ever since and somewhere in the 1970's and can't remember the actual dates, the committee decided they needed a different chairman and invited me to become the Chairman of the Society. This was towards the end of the period that Don Burrows was our conductor.

Don had been our conductor for many years but during this period he was studying to get a PhD and his subject was Handel. So, it was very exciting in the Musical Society because we gave the second authentic performance of Handel's Messiah - the first authentic performance being given of course by Handel. Because Don had researched the original score, he tried to recapture the notes as Handel had originally put them down before all these editors had got to work on them.

Other things I can remember during that period with Don Burrows, was that while Don was studying he had a term's sabbatical leave from school and he spent it in Merton College, Oxford. At that time we were doing joint work with Wantage Choral Society, because Don was also the conductor at Wantage, he conceived the idea of doing some double choir works by Palestrina and Bach. Wantage was singing one of the choir parts and Abingdon was singing the other. We gave the first performance in a chapel in Wantage with Wantage being downstairs in the chapel and the Abingdon choir occupying the upstairs of the chapel. Of course, the audience were down stairs looking at the Wantage choir. I was told the effect was quite magical because Wantage choir sang their bit and then suddenly voices just appeared as it were from the heavens and singing to answer them.

The decision was made that perhaps we ought to do this as a repeat in Merton College chapel and now of course the two choirs were arranged side-by-side in the choir stalls so we could really have antiphonal singing. Don was particularly keen that everyone should turn up for rehearsal on the Saturday afternoon because he knew the acoustic would sound completely different and we really had to get used to it. But of course, some members of both choirs thought they knew better because they knew the works so well and didn't turn up. And suddenly things went a little bit astray. think everybody got carried away by the beautiful sound of their own voices in this chapel setting and gradually the pitch began to drop and drop and sad to say, some sopranos came in several notes too flat. I can remember we tenors looking at each other and thinking "we will never be able to sing the bit at the end in that key". Somehow and another we all chose a note, the same note, and lifted the pitch up to something that was more comfortable for us tenors. Talking to Don about it afterwards he said ' Yes, I was praying it would all come right in the end. When t got to the last chord f waited

for a proper chord, any chord he said would do, and when I got the chord I brought you ail off. Margaret said afterwards that it sounded wonderful. I don't think most of the audience realised what difficulties we got into. But that is a little story from the Musical Society.

We have had several conductors since then and names that come to mind are Mary Moore who was our most recent conductor. And then Neil Farrow who took over recently, I have spoken about the choir but over the years we have had a succession of conductors who have built up the qualities of the orchestra. So, I feel Abingdon is particularly fortunate not only in having a choir with about 90 voices but having a quite respectable symphony orchestra. Under Neil's direction we shall be giving the second performance the Society has ever done of Vaughan William's The Sea Symphony in the Town Hall in Oxford this coming November. We know that Oxford Choral Society, a very reputable Choral Society had also planned to do this work but they had to give up because they didn't have a resident orchestra. It would have cost them far too much to be able to hire an orchestra in to do the work. So, it just shows how fortunate we are in Abingdon to have this very active Musical Society.

For the record I ought to say that having escaped the committee shortly after Don Burrows left the Society, eventually I got wished back onto the Committee. In fact, I wished myself back in the first place, because when I decided to take early retirement from Harwell some nine years ago, I thought: "Maybe I shall be a little bit short of something to do". A foolish thought, but I volunteered myself as the Society's concert manager knowing that that is something the Society could have done with for several years. Of course, that put me on the committee and then gradually I was asked to be vice-chairman and on Sylvia Butterworth's retirement after many years they asked me to be chairman yet again. So, these things seem to come round in cycles whether it's being chairman or doing Vaughan William's The Sea Symphony. But I am particularly looking forward to that.

Have you had any difficult moments with soloists, or not being able to get the right musicians?

AI: We have always done very well. We have had some last-minute frights when people who have been scheduled to sing or play with us haven't been able to make it for many good reasons. But we have always taken a professional view about the soloists we have. Just as with our conductor and accompanist we always look for musical professional. We always look for musical professionals for our soloists. And of course, it goes without saying that they have a large network of people they know and they are expected to be able to call them in to stand in their stead. So, we have never really had any problems that t can really recall.

You have set me thinking now Lesley. I think we have had our exciting moments in the various voices and various orchestra! parts. There was a work that we commissioned on the 25th Jubilee of our Society; in fact, it was in the same concert that we did The Sea Symphony. A young composer who had been a pupil at Abingdon School wrote a work for us called Time and Tide and this turned out to be a little bit more difficult than we had anticipated. It probably reflected his lack of experience in writing for, what after all were amateur choirs and orchestras. The work had gone well in rehearsal, but something went wrong in the performance and the conductor had his work cut out holding the orchestra together. The choir realising that things were not going well, wisely kept quiet at one of the difficult bits in the middle. The beginning started well and it ended properly so I suppose everyone was very happy.

You are very lucky having the concert hall at Abingdon School.

AI: Well yes, but it has its restrictions does Abingdon School Hall. We can only use it at given times and we have had at times to move our dates and at fairly short notice because the school has suddenly realised it actually needed the School Hall. So, when the idea was put forward that if the

Old Goal site was going to become free it perhaps ought to be the basis for a Cultural and Heritage Centre with Theatres, I decided to become active and help push the idea along on the grounds that if it could have a Theatre, it could also have a Theatre that could double as a proper concert hall which didn't suffer from the restrictions that we are bound to have using Abingdon School. The other place where we perform is the Silk Hall at Radley College. This is quite a delightful place to perform in, but sadly, it only holds 250 audience and it is nice to think that we can fill a larger hall than that, certainly in Abingdon.

One of your hopes for the future is you would like to see Abingdon change in the sense of having a decent concert hall?

AI: I would like to see it have a better, integrated facility for the Arts. It has done splendid things for sports, has Abingdon; it has the excellent facilities on the north side of the town. It has recently opened the indoor sports facilities down Barton Lane [Audlett Drive]. I think culture deserves a fair crack of the whip now.

You were saying you enjoy the river in Abingdon?

AI: Yes, as I said it was a walk that we particularly enjoyed doing when we first came and still enjoy doing it in fact. Only just over a week ago we walked along the riverbank to Culham, I remember thinking how beautifully the buildings there had been restored, and yet the character has not been lost. The whole stretch from the Ock bridge up to the Thames bridge still has a nice character to it and whoever has been responsible for the planning of that deserves congratulations. In fact one of the things I always feel, when we have visitors, we take them along the river walking and down from the lock on the far side, the Rye Farm side, back towards the bridge. Apart from the fact the bridge has been rebuilt, the view from the lock looking towards St. Helen's Church can hardly have altered in hundreds of years.

OK maybe the riverbank has been stabilised a little bit but apart from that, things must not have changed for a long time. It is nice that that piece of history has been retained. Margaret, you have been very much involved/or the last few years, in fact for more than the last few years, with the Church-in-Abingdon and before that, the Council of Churches I think?

M: Well, that is right. The amalgamation of Trinity [Methodist] and the URC, Congregational Church and all that.

Yes. When did you first get involved?

M: When I first moved to Abingdon in 1961, I started attending the Congregational Church in the Square because as a Congregationalist that is where I naturally went to. I came across of course Eileen and Ron Anderson there who were some of the main people along with the Kitts and the Grossarts. And I began to be involved more ecumenically when one of the ministers asked me to organise a Christian Aid collection throughout the whole of Abingdon. Which we did and the cooperation between the churches shall we say, was spasmodic. They came together once or twice a year to help with it. One thing was the Caldecott House Bamado's Garden Party, I remember helping with that but that was a long, long time ago.

But gradually the Council of Churches took shape and there was a very vibrant secretary Leslie Smith, the minister of St. Nicolas' Church at that time. The churches very cautiously began to get to know one another. think that was the way it went. We had lots of interesting lectures and study groups and learning about each other. It was quite a long, long learning curve and then we wanted to work closer together so we investigated this strange phenomenon known as the Local Ecumenical

Project. It took us quite a number of years before we definitely took the plunge in 1988 and became an LEP and called ourselves The Church-in-Abingdon.

But before then the Congregational Church in The Square had decided it would close so that hopefully some funds would be made available for some development in the south of the river. Sadly, this didn't quite materialise in the way it was envisaged, but by that time we had moved in with the Trinity people. Since the South Abingdon project didn't really get underway, the Trinity people and the Congregationalists who by that time nationally had become the United Reform Church. We legally united in 1977 and so became Trinity and in brackets if you can see them Methodist/URC. That was in 1978 that has not altogether been too widely known. We still see adverts around the town that say 'such and such a society meeting in Trinity Methodist Church Hall' and I go. Since 1978 it has just been Trinity Church.

AI: Only 25 years ago.

M: But that is one of those things.

Things change gradually in Abingdon.

M: Yes indeed, but it is often some of the newcomers who manage to get it wrong. But I think one great measure of progress over those forty years has been the acceptance of the churches of each other's ministers and each other's members. When I first came, I could not take communion in for example St. Michael's Church, being a Free Church person myself. Now I am welcome in all the churches apart, of course, from St. Edmund's who do have their rules and regulations. I think that is one of the real steps forward, it has taken a long time but we do accept each other and we hope we are no longer rivals but are working towards mission in Abingdon itself.

But one of the things that have changed in those 40 years is the growth of estates on the edges of Abingdon. People no longer look to the centre of Abingdon for their shopping or their recreation or their churches. A lot of that now happens on the periphery, you have Tesco, the new sports centres and the churches on the housing estates. So, the real centre of Abingdon has a little bit of a hole there sometimes and, like a polo mint, a hole in the middle and everything is happening round the edges.

The development in Long Furlong?

M: That is right. Long Furlong, Peachcroft, and Christ Church itself, which is halfway to the edge. But the centre of town, St. Michael's and St. Nicolas' have one minister between them so that Long Furlong can have its own curate serving them. But I think that is just the way that Abingdon is developing.

You have been involved very much with the secretarial side of things?

M: Yes, that is true. was following a long line of secretaries. I was secretary in the mid-1990s thought I had retired from that job but then had to pick it up again at short notice because somebody was ill. I have stopped being secretary now but am still very much involved with the Church in Abingdon and in the Millennium year we organised the ADMM which was the Abingdon and District Millennium Miracle which raised nearly £250,000 for Water Aid. It was an idea that was put forward originally by Margaret Rickman, who in fact is not a church member, but she had the brilliant idea that instead of building a monument or doing something for the people in Abingdon, we already have so much going for us, it would be rather good to raise money for helping other people and so we formed a very small committee. This included Margaret and myself and (the then) one of the ministers at the

Baptist Church. He was excellent in going round and inspiring the schools to raise a lot of money. The schools did absolutely magnificently. The churches rallied round and quite a lot of other organisations as well. The Musical Society gave a concert and some of the Operatic Society and the St. James Singers, they all helped and all that money was raised for the ADMM.

We are talking about changes in Abingdon things that you remember have changed. Things that you did in the evenings. The Corn Exchange you probably remember. The Queen's Hotel?

M: We certainly remember the Queen's Hotel. We did have an evening meal there once or twice. The Corn Exchange we remember because we used to go and support the Operatic Society who gave their concerts there.

Al: So, did the Music Society to begin with.

M: When we first came, I was teaching in Oxford so our evenings were not very free and then we had a young family so again we didn't go out a great deal in the evenings. But walking in the daytimes, we did quite a lot of walking. I think the evening entertainment certainly for a young couple with small children was a bit limited, if I remember.

Al: Yes, apart from my interest with the Music Society and your work and interest with the church things, there was relatively little social life available, if you didn't want to go to the cinema and you certainly didn't want to go into several pubs in Abingdon, that wasn't your scene.

Only later on did we get a reasonable selection of good places where you could eat. I remember Lamberts Restaurant with fond affection and regret its passing but that was probably the first and now we seem to be inundated with restaurants. Good ones too which is good. But as I say we still lack a reasonable social and cultural centre in Abingdon. There are a lot of places for people to live but still not a lot for people to do.

One thing that there is for people to do in Abingdon, and we have noticed it as our children have grown up and their children have grown up, is the growing number of reasonably well-equipped play areas for children. The work that has gone on down at The Abbey Meadows that has been particularly good over the years. When we first came it was a quagmire, and it became a rubbish tip and gradually it has turned into a reasonable amenity for the town. Those things have improved, but yes, we are short of culture in the evenings in Abingdon.

M: I think the teenagers, especially must feel that. Our two were lucky in that our daughter got involved with the rowing club. We are very grateful to them for the support they gave her and the encouragement. So, she was busy weight lifting and training and rowing all the hours she possibly could. Our son got involved with the North Abingdon Cricket Club and so that sorted him out for the weekends and two or three evenings a week practising. But unless you were involved in a particular sports club as a teenager, then there wasn't too much to do apart from private parties and go to the pub. But I think now with the sports centre open and more things available it is a little bit easier for the young people to entertain themselves. But then young people will always want to be out of the way of adults and hang around on street corners. That is part of growing up.

One of the things that has changed in Abingdon is the number of eating places and restaurants and a decline in the number of pubs. I think we are getting a glut now; we have too many places to go eating.

Al: It seems so, but Abingdon has grown and therefore there are more people to eat and eating out has become much more part of the British way of life, whereas before it didn't used to be. And also,

Abingdon is a popular spot for holiday makers and therefore they want somewhere to go and eat of an evening.

What do you think has changed most in Abingdon? What would you like to be most changed and what would you like not to be changed?

M: I would like the river to be kept as it is, especially the walk towards Abingdon from the lock on the south side, as I said earlier "it seems to be timeless". So, I think the river amenities are good, the new fountains that the children play in I think is an excellent step forwards rather than the old paddling pool that used to get things thrown into it. We've been down there this summer and all ages from toddlers to grandfathers seem to be having great fun running in and out of the fountains. I think that is an excellent thing.

What saddens me is the number of shops that are closing. Practically every week someone is having a closing down sale. Perhaps people come and hopefully set up shop but only have one line so their specialities are perhaps not things that Abingdon people want to buy every day.

Like the china shop?

M: Yes, some shops only have one string to their bow and I do think they do need far more versatile shops. I think one of the things that we are now missing is a mini-Marks & Spencer's where you can buy children's clothes and underwear at reasonable prices and not just the fancy sort.

Al: I think perhaps Woolworth's may help out there but we don't have much to do with them.

M: Not with grown-up clothes. So, I think that people coming into Abingdon and wanting to set up shop need to find a niche that is selling everyday things that people want to go in for two or three times a week; rather than what you want once or twice a year when you are changing your whole household equipment.

Al: To some extent we should not be surprised that so many of the shops particularly on Stert Street are closing. It is not an easy street to shop on because there is so much traffic going through. Whereas shops looking onto a relatively quiet town road were alright in the 1920s and 1930s but it doesn't go well with the modern traffic. Either you have got to get the traffic out or rethink the organisation of the shops in the town. The present shopping precinct isn't quite ideal now for the present size of town. It was fine when Abingdon had 20,000 people but not now that Abingdon has nearly 35,000 people. So, what do you do about it? Well, I suppose you could knock down the shopping precinct and redesign it. It might be cheaper and simpler to re-organise the roads and put a decent ring road around Abingdon so that less traffic had to go through the centre. And generally get the traffic out of the centre in such a way that the people can come in.

M: But I think for that you will need more cheaper and easier parking. What we do miss is a cinema. Yes, that is an obvious one.

Al: Well, I would hope that if the proposed cultural centre does go ahead it will have its cinema as part of the facilities then.

Before we finally get to the end, are there any celebrations in Abingdon that you particularly remember?

M: I always enjoy the bun throwing.

Al: I was going to say that.

M: I think it is one of the unique things about Abingdon, we haven't heard of anywhere else in the world that throws buns from the top of a building onto the expectant and eager crowd below. That is a tradition that really should be kept. I do remember the visit of the Queen in 1970 or some time (three people talk simultaneously) ... I do remember her passing by.

One of the things we used to enjoy a lot was going up to the Air Shows at the old Abingdon Airfield. That was a great thrill watching the Red Arrows and seeing all the planes do their stuff. I do remember we had visitors one year and we had one little chap of two or three years old. How he managed it I do not know, but he slept all through the air display and even the Vulcan bomber overhead. But I think that was one of the highlights was the Abingdon Air Show, that was great. We had some very good Air Shows.

On the river one year I remember there was a firework display.

Al: There was an excellent company of American young musicians with a wind orchestra who came on a specially prepared barge, which would open out to make a concert platform, and they had some really splendid fireworks to finish with and the Firework Music by Handel. Yes, to be able to do those sorts of things a little more often would be very nice but of course it needs organising and it needs someone prepared to pay. We used to have ox roasts, but they were always special occasions.

Lesley, one of the things that comes to mind whilst we have been talking is that you are interested in change and some changes that happened in Abingdon almost by accident. One that I am reminded of and it must have been in the late 1960s, was being woken up in the small hours of the morning with a large explosion and drawing back the curtain and seeing flames coming up from the Vineyard. I of course immediately phoned the emergency services and said " you may have been told already, but there are flames coming from The Vineyard and you may need to call the Fire Brigade"; to be assured that of course that the Fire Brigade was already on the job. So being inquisitive, I got dressed and got out my camera and went down and discovered that the old Malshouses behind what used to be the Lion Pub were going up in flames. Indeed, there were thirteen fire engines there doing their best to keep the flames from spreading. There was a great flurry of activity when the fireman told everyone to keep well back, there was another refrigerator about to explode and sure enough it did and the whole roof collapsed in a great shower of sparks. It was very spectacular, some very good photographs I got and of course those malshouses were never available again and in due course the whole area got redeveloped. Now had they not gone up in flames, what might have happened to them, who knows? Perhaps they would have been converted into housing. So many of our old buildings seem to be doing.

It was only by mere chance the Abbey buildings were preserved, they were due for demolition and the Friends of Abingdon took it over and made it into a little theatre. It was touch and go, it could have disappeared altogether.

Al: That was excellent. We sadly miss the initiative that provided those first real performances of Handel's operas and of course there are some excellent things done in the Unicom theatre.

But those Handel operas were Abingdon's answer to Glyndbourne. Fifteen Handel operas, one after the other, I went to them all.

At: Yes, sadly we only saw the last one because we had a young family and it was difficult to get away, but we did get to the last one (inaudible [Alan Kitching?]) did some wonderful work on that and some of them had never been revived since Handel's day. Now they are entering the repertoire. All over Europe people are doing Handel operas but Abingdon, we were part of the revival.

M: Abingdon had a lot to be proud of. Abingdon got reviews in The Times and The Telegraph on those occasions. Soloists such as Felicity Lott and Ian Partridge I think were in one of them.

Al: Still Garsington carries on the tradition doesn't it now?

Yes, but it does big noisy Strauss!

Al: Perhaps we ought to draw a veil over this now Lesley. But it is a good note to end on. We have had an interesting discussion and chat with you.

Thank you very much Margaret and Alwyn, it has been an interesting afternoon. It has brought back some memories.

Al: Yes, it did, thank you Lesley.

M: Thank you, thank you very much.

Interviewer: Lesley Argyle

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Dr A and Mrs. M Langford.