

# Desert island dreamers

As the Castaway series – in which prominent people with an Oxfordshire connection are interviewed and asked what they would take with them to the mythical island of Oxtopia – draws to a close, **Sylvia Vetta** takes a look to see how some have been getting on



*Dr Christopher Brown: January 2008, chosen object Arthur's Jewel; and September 2014, chosen object Rembrandt's drawing of his father.*

As director of the world's first public museum, the Ashmolean, Christopher was an obvious choice to be the first castaway. When I began the series I was an art and antiques feature writer. In 2008, the question was: 'Which work of art, antique or book would you take to Oxtopia?'. He talked about intriguing objects from the

museum's Treasures Gallery. By 2009, 'antique' had become 'object' and the emphasis had moved from artefacts to the life of the castaway. When he was about to retire after transforming the building and culture of the venerable institution, I interviewed him again but this time focused on his life, so Christopher is the only person to have been castaway twice! He has since retired from the directorship but is active academically working towards a landmark exhibition entitled Young Rembrandt planned for 2020, in a collaboration between Leiden's Lakenhal Museum and the Ashmolean.

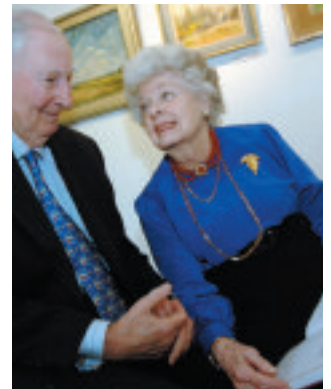
*Sir Roger and Lady Moyra Bannister: February 2011, chosen objects Roger, an antique phrenology head, and Moyra, a collection of English poetry which she illustrated for her children and grandchildren.*

When I interviewed them the main topic of conversation was Sir Roger's courageous career as a neurologist, for which he was awarded a lifetime achievement award by the US National Academy of Science. Courageous because in the 1950s he was prepared to use himself as a guinea pig in experiments. Moyra is an artist, as is her Oxford-based daughter Erin Townsend, and my interview

with them coincided with a retrospective of Moyra's work at the Dragon School.

In the following London Olympics year, Sir Roger – the first chairman of the executive Sports Council in 1971 with a life-long commitment to Sport for All – was not only much in demand for interviews but he carried the Olympic flame at the Iffley Road running track, in the stadium now named after him and took part in the inspirational opening ceremony.

His autobiography *Twin Tracks* was published in 2014, in which he tells of the years of enormous effort that went into ensuring that the first man to break the four-minute mile was British. His description of May 6, 1954 is full of tension and suspense.



*Bettany Hughes: December 2009, chosen object a 3,500-year-old votive offering in the shape of a baby, discovered by Arthur Evans in Crete and now in the Ashmolean.*

When I interviewed her in 2009, Bettany was about to be one of the speakers at the academic opening of the new Ashmolean. She described how it had played an inspirational role at the start of her career. Hers

was already a familiar face on our television screens. At that time her subjects were mostly from the Greco/Roman world but since then she has embraced a more global history. The BBC series *Socrates, The Buddha, Confucius and a Middle Path* was followed by *Genius of the Modern World* for BBC Four which looked at Fredrick Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. She has also been prolific in radio, two recent series being *Ancient Ways* and *The Ideas that Make Us*.



*Charlotte Bannister Parker: May 2012, chosen object a Leonard Cheshire portrait by Peter Greenham.*

Keeping pace with all the places and projects on which the persuasive Charlotte has left her imprint as film maker, charity director and priest is almost impossible and she has risked her life going into dark and dangerous situations. Her husband William Parker requested a pre-nuptial agreement that she never go back to the frontline but that didn't stop her taking her whole family to live for four months in a

township in South Africa.

In 2011, she launched the British branch of the Children's Radio Foundation (CRF). It has not only thrived but in 2015 Charlotte became the International President of CRF. CRF empowers disadvantaged young people across seven countries in Africa by training them to be radio reporters. The resulting empowerment is life changing and they broadcast to more than 8 million Africans. Charlotte persuaded another Castaway, Radiohead's Colin Greenwood, to be CRF's Global Ambassador. She also continues her work as a priest in Oxford.

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**Nancy Hunt: November 2014, chosen object a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper.**

Radio presenter Castaway Jo Thoenes told me about an inspirational charity called Nasio Trust. From humble beginnings in a shack it had gone on to build and run two day centres where it was supporting more than 300 orphans and vulnerable children in Kenya, many of whom were HIV positive. Its founder Nancy Hunt had persuaded Jo to climb Kilimanjaro to help raise money for the charity. The story of the Nasio Trust is bound up with the story of its Kenyan-born founder, who left her successful career in the Thames Valley Police to grow the charity.

Since she was castaway, the number of orphans Nasio supports within the community (not in orphanages) has risen to more than 400.

In 2015, The Children's Radio Foundation (CRF) led by Charlotte Bannister Parker and Nasio took 16 young people, mostly from Wallingford School, to Kenya. CRF trained most of them, along with young Kenyans, to be radio reporters to connect with each other and broadcast the results. Nancy said: "We partnered with the Red Cross and regional hospitals to run annual temporary medical

clinics reaching over 600 people a day over the last four years. The young people from Oxfordshire helped on one of those temporary clinics where they were filmed by the BBC treating children with painful jiggers (parasitic fleas which burrow deep) in their feet. In 2015 we started work on building a medical centre which is now running and benefiting the whole community."

With funding from Kennington Overseas Aid, in 2014, Nasio built 40 tanks in which to grow spirulina – an algae with the highest protein content of any natural food (50-70 per cent). When it is added to their diet, HIV children are much healthier, put on weight and develop normally.

Nasio aims to make the Nasio projects



in Kenya self-sufficient by 2020 through selling the excess spirulina not needed for the children. To help Nancy achieve her aim, another Castaway, writer Helen Peacocke created 25 recipes in which spirulina is an optional ingredient. *Green Power the Spirulina Cookbook* is on sale on the Nasio website (thenasiostrust.org).

For her work in Oxfordshire and Kenya, Nancy was given the 2014 NatWest Venus Award for inspirational person.

**George McGavin: February 2009, chosen object Fitzroy's storm barometer.**

The BBC's *Desert Island Discs* send their castaways alone to an island but my concept of Oxtopia was that all 118 castaways should be together on the island and create a new civilisation. There have been a few debates involving castaways where they have suggested what of Oxford they would like to recreate in Oxtopia and what they would like to leave behind. There was usually consensus on the latter: the A34 must be one of the

least-loved roads in the country.

When I interviewed the entomologist, naturalist and television personality George McGavin he had recently taken part in the series *The Lost Land of the Jaguar*. Since being castaway, he has been on the team involved in *The Lost Land of the Volcano*, *The Lost Land of the Tiger* and *The Dark*, about the nocturnal activities of animals.

In 2014, George presented the two-part series *Monkey Planet* for BBC Four. George said he would spend his time on the island cataloguing the wildlife.



**Dwina Gibb: October 2015, chosen object a large supply of paper and pencils (although she really wanted to take her house with its contents).**

Since I interviewed her, Dwina has been supporting live performances of her late husband Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees and her son Robin-John's composition, *The Titanic*

*Requiem*. Dwina has recently written poetry for several public events in Ireland for a special Druidic Conference in England launching The Mount Haemus Lectures. She said: "I am preparing my new Irish farcical play for production, *The Devil At The Fingerpost*. But close to my heart is the transcribing of some of my late husband Robin's private and poignant memoirs."

**Peggy Seeger: October 2012, chosen object a naturally polished stone.**

Peggy is folk royalty and the ups and downs of her long and adventurous career were riveting. Since we spoke, her famous brother Pete Seeger died, in January 2014. Barack Obama called him "America's tuning fork" because Pete believed in "the power of song" to bring social change. That was a belief Peggy shared. She was disappointed that a song she wrote, which was performed by supporters of the Temple Cowley Swimming Pool, didn't change the district council's determination to close it.

She said: "I've been getting older and trying to do it with grace and dignity. Getting ill and then getting better, helping a biographer, Jean Freedman, to write my biography. I lived it, she writes it. It's coming out in March 2017. The memoir I am writing will most likely be entitled *The First Time Ever* and at 81 it will be the last time ever that I write a memoir. I'm still touring – but I spend much time in my beloved Oxford, considering myself a native even though I have only been here for six years. The old buildings, the torrents of visitors from everywhere, the canals, the open skies, the surrounding lacework of old villages and age-old landscape... I'm home."



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*Dr Chris Wright: November 2012, chosen object the collection of Valentine's cards he and his wife Annie have made for each other every year since they met.*

Dr Chris Wright is a supporter of innovative business with science and engineering aspects. In 2010, as Faradion chairman, Chris Wright and his colleagues wondered why large batteries for electric cars and solar panels are so expensive. The problem lay in the materials used to make them – specifically, those that contain lithium, of which there is a scarcity that drives up price. Recently Faradion revealed what it claims to be one of the most advanced sodium-ion batteries on the market, costing about 30 per cent less than a lithium-ion equivalent. The company demonstrated the new technology in May at the headquarters of Williams Advanced Engineering in Oxfordshire using an electric bike. This is only one example of the enterprising businesses castaway Chris has supported since 2012.



*Ray Foulk: July 2011, chosen object Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map.*

Ray has enjoyed four successful careers but he is best known for being one of the Foulk brothers who founded the Isle of Wight Festivals. Our interview started Ray reminiscing about those years 1968, 1969 and 1970 and soon after I departed in 2011 he had a surprise visitor. An old family friend who had taken photographs at the Isle of Wight returned from Australia where he had gone in 1970. He handed Ray a box of undeveloped film. Our castaway didn't think they would develop after 40 years but most of them did and many were superb.

Ray with his daughter Caroline set about writing his memoir of the Festivals. He titled part one (1968/9) *Stealing Dylan From Woodstock*. The

Woodstock Festival was named Woodstock even though it took place 50 miles away because the organisers wanted the famous Woodstock resident to perform. Bob Dylan did perform that summer but not in the USA but on an island off the coast of Britain which most Americans had never heard of – the Isle of Wight. Even the Beatles flew in to watch and another castaway, Larry Smith, performed on the same stage and became best friends with George Harrison.

Ray and Caroline launched part one in 2015 at Blackwell's and a highlight was when Ray's granddaughter Bonnie sang *Mr Tambourine Man*. This year they had a launch for part two – *The Last Great Event* – in Mayfair in the Jimi Hendrix museum. Jimi died soon after performing at the Isle of Wight Festival.

*Helen Rappaport: February 2010, castaway object Edward Burne Jones' stained glass windows in Christchurch Cathedral.*

Helen is a passionate Victorianist and Russianist. Since being castaway she has written the international best seller *The Four Sisters* and



you appeared on TV talking about the Romanovs and Queen Victoria. In 2014 Helen appeared in an episode of Tony Robinson's *Walking Through History* talking about Queen Victoria's love of Scotland and in Channel 5 documentary, *The Last Days of Rasputin*. In 2016, she discussed the work of Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole for *The One Show*. *Caught in the Revolution: Petrograd 1917* has just been published and Helen was interviewed about it on *Woman's Hour* in September. She was also appointed historical consultant on the major new eight-part ITV drama series *Victoria*."

Coming soon will be Helen's latest book, *The Victoria Letters: The Heart and Mind of a Young Queen*, a companion to the series.

*'Legs' Larry Smith: January 2015, chosen object a type rule given to him at Time Life in 1964.*

Larry Smith was born and brought up in Oxford and went to Central Saint Martins School of Art before joining the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band.

Larry described how he first met the Beatles, partied with them and took part in their films. George wrote a song about him and gave him the name 'Legs'. When interviewing Larry I told him that Ray Foulk was writing his memoir of 1969, the Isle of Wight Festival at which the Bonzos performed. I learned that Ray and Larry had not met since then. So when we did Larry's photoshoot, I took him to meet Ray at the Eagle and Child.

The remaining Bonzos reformed and had a successful concert last year at the O2. Larry too is writing his memoir and I can guarantee some amusing stories.





**Maria Jaschok: February 2013, chosen objects her father's briefcase containing her mother's book 18 January 1945 and her brother Wolfram's illustration for the book.**

Castaway stories often took unexpected twists and turns. That was most true of German-born Dr Maria Jaschok, the director of International Gender Studies (ISG) at Lady Margaret Hall. Maria's story turned out to be one of flight, first her mother's dramatic story at the end of WWII (before Maria was born) which had affected her deeply.

Maria's own flights took her to surprising places including to China in 1980 where she lived until 1996 – a period when few Westerners lived in that country. Now her flight seems to have ended with Oxford as her home and IGS is helping its patron Aung San Suu Kyi with projects in Myanmar (Burma).



**Dr Diana Sanders: March 2010, chosen object the catalogue of A Thousand Years of Floral Art.**

I met Diana on a ramble looking athletic and healthy so I was surprised when I read her book *Will I Still Be Me: Life After A Heart/Lung Transplant*. Diana

was the 76th person in the world to have this double transplant. Before that she was in a wheelchair on oxygen 24 hours a day and not expected to live. That psychologist Diana Sanders is an empathetic counsellor for the terminally ill is not surprising: she knows what it feels like. In 2013 she had a party to celebrate living for 10 years post transplant.



**Icolyn Smith: August 2015, chosen object her watercolours of Oxford.**

Icolyn, known as 'Ma Smith', founded the Cowley Road soup kitchen and, in her 80s, still cooks for it. This year she was presented with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.



**Dai Richards: July 2012, chosen object the original painting for the cover of Primo Levi's *If Not Now, When?***

Since being castaway, the life of this talented TV documentary film maker has slowed down a little.

Dai is a self-confessed workaholic so his decision to retire was a tough one. Dai said: "Film making had filled so much of my last 35 years but there was much else I wanted to do and, at 63, if I didn't start soon... Now I have more time to indulge my curiosity.

"Nowhere is better to do that than Oxford, with its dozens of free talks, lectures, debates every week, usually

in the most elegant settings.

"The best decision I made was to follow my daughter Rhiannon's advice and volunteer at Asylum Welcome, a small charity in East Oxford. I meet many victims of conflicts and regimes I once made films about – Iraqis and Afghans, Iranians and Syrians; and those escaping the dreadful dictatorships in Sudan, where stoning and flogging are regular punishments; and Eritrea, where national service is compulsory for all and offers no exit date, and passports are unavailable."

Dai has made a film for Asylum Welcome's website about the clients and the charity's work. View it at [asylum-welcome.org](http://asylum-welcome.org)

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**Bill Heine: March 2008, chosen object John Buckley's sculpture Embrace.**

The veteran broadcaster has recently retired from BBC Radio Oxford. He has enjoyed compering the UK tour of Lesley

Garrett and, since 2008 he has ventured further afield with Castaway Nancy Hunt visiting Nasio's projects in West Kenya and, at the request of Castaway Charlotte Bannister Parker, is a volunteer consultant for the Children's Radio Foundation.

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**Lord Patten of Barnes: February 2014, chosen object Tang dynasty horse and rider.**

Chris Patten is Chancellor of the University of Oxford for life. In his interview the Chancellor talked about Oxford and China. He described his role as governor of Hong Kong as: "The best job I ever had. I was in effect an all-powerful mayor of one of the greatest cities in Asia, a city of 6.5m people which, when I left in 1997, responsible for 22 per cent of the whole China's GDP (gross domestic product)"

As well as being the last governor of Hong Kong, he is also one of a small group of Brits to have served as a commissioner on the EU.

**Victor Glynn: May 2013, chosen object a set of Russian dolls of rulers of Russia.**

A list of the films, TV, plays and radio produced by Victor could fill an entire edition of Oxfordshire Limited Edition. Since being castaway there have been some momentous events in his personal life. He married OUP's Sophie Goldsworthy in 2015 and has recently moved house. His most recent production as executive producer was working with his son Phin Glynn on *Mad to be Normal* starring David Tennant as the Scottish psychiatrist RD Laing.



**Shami Chakrabarti: May 2009, chosen object Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People.**

Shami Chakrabarti was a popular Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University when we cast her away. Her length of tenure was from 2008-2015. At that time the human rights lawyer was director of LIBERTY. She stepped down from that post in March this year. She said: "How do we keep up the fight for democratic values? With solidarity and storytelling."