

Photographs: Helen Peacocke

# Castaways at the Ashmolean

## Sarah Mayhew Craddock

Sarah's choice of castaway object was a Pre-Raphaelite painting. There is, of course, a strong Oxford connection to the Pre-Raphaelite movement, but Live Friday organiser Sarah's choice of Holman Hunt's *A Converted British Family sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids* was intriguing — however the reason quickly became obvious.

Sarah, was born in a small village in rural North Yorkshire in 1981 and after graduating lived in Annecy in France for a spell before moving to Birmingham where she worked at Think Tank, Ikon Gallery, and Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

She explained: "I studied Fine Art and Painting at Winchester School of Art. I was not familiar with this painting until recently when I was approached by a theatre producer friend enquiring as to whether I could recommend someone who might be able to paint 'half a Hunt' for use in a play that he was working on about the Pre-Raphaelite muse Lizzie Siddal.

"As soon as I realised that the painting only needed to be a work in progress — an actor playing Hunt will be working on the painting in the play — I put myself forward for the job. I thought the discipline would be good for me and, as the painting hangs in the Ashmolean, I had direct access to it."



As an alternative to the usual full-length profiles featured on these pages, I wanted to see what the people who attended one of the Ashmolean Museum's Live Friday events, supported by *The Oxford Times*, would select as their castaway choices from the museum's vast collections. I was not disappointed by the range of people prepared to indulge me, writes Sylvia Vetta

**W**hen this series began seven years ago my choice for the first castaway was not difficult. The Ashmolean has always been a place where Town and Gown meet but, thanks to the museum's director Dr Christopher Brown, the Ashmolean has become far more welcoming and dynamic.

Dr Brown had the vision of opening up the museum to the community, local, national and international and amazingly he has achieved that ambition. If you need evidence of this just visit a Live Friday event.

I did just that last September, when the theme for the night was *What's The Story? A day in the life of The Oxford Times*.

Our award-winning newspaper was celebrating its 150th anniversary and entertainment writer Tim Hughes and Sarah Mayhew Craddock, a freelance organiser who has staged all the Live Friday events, got together to prepare an evening of entertainment which represented the dynamic cultural life of Oxford.

### Max Mason

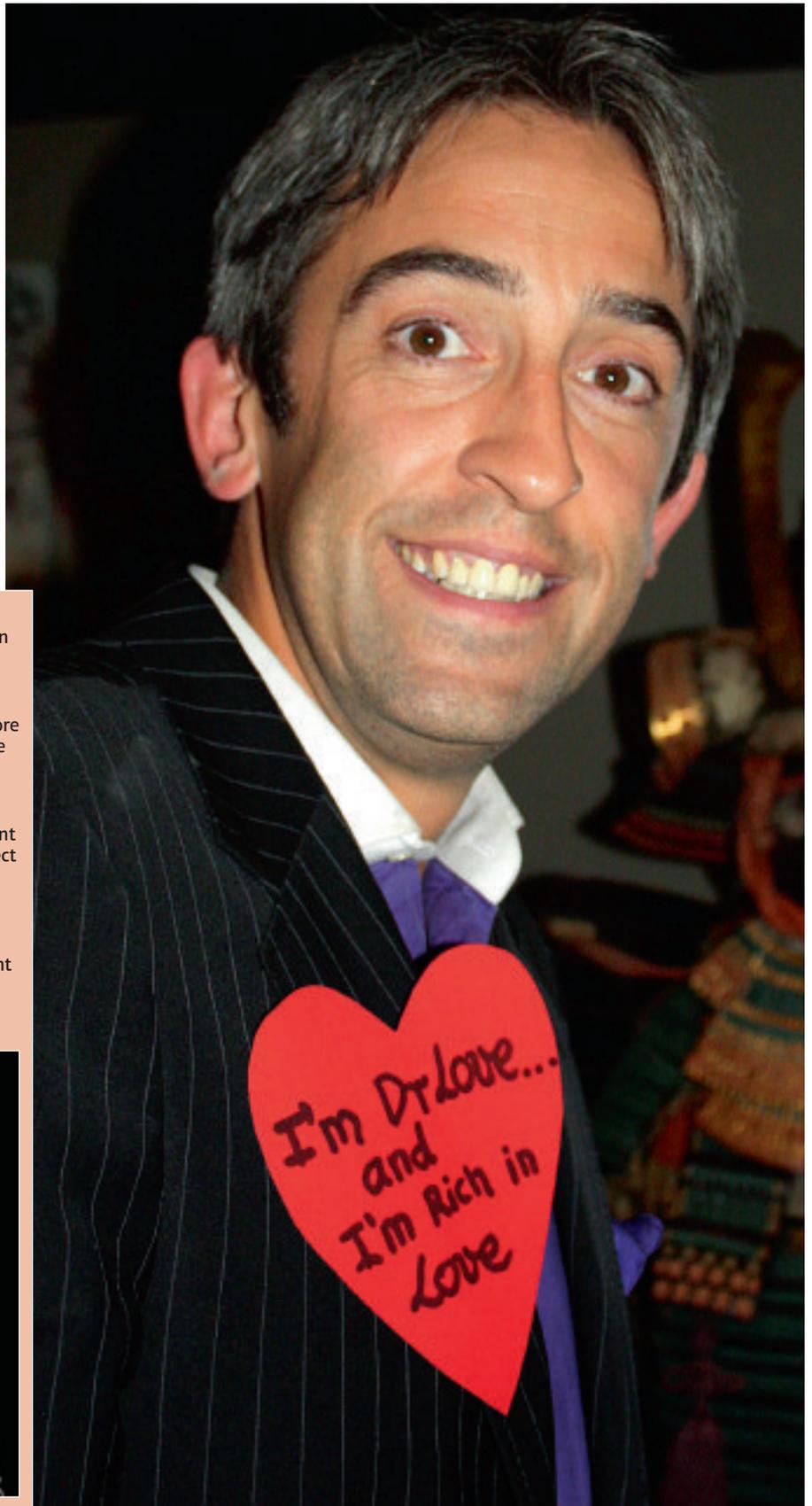
Owner of Oxford's Big Bang restaurant, Max Mason describes himself as a 'mischiever'.

Max said: "A mischiever is someone who wants to shake things up. I love Oxford but given the talented people who live here it could be even more exciting. Previous generations of students had the time to become involved in adventurous projects like The Dangerous Sports Club.

"Nowadays, students are usually heads-down working hard with a view to paying of huge student loans. I think Live Friday is just the place to connect with other people and spark new meetings and meetings across cultures."

Max's desert island object was the magnificent Samurai uniform from the Edo period.

"Before I started The Big Bang restaurants, eight years ago, I worked for ten years in the military — including eight years as a naval officer. So the uniform resonates with that military world."





### Beatrix Forbes

Composer Beatrix Forbes selected the beautiful virginal made by Adam Leveridge (1670) in the music and tapestry gallery as her desert island object.

Both her name and accent pointed to Beatrix's Dutch origins — so how did she end up in Oxford?

"In the early 1970s, I became a filmmaker in Leiden — and it was because of my interest in film and photography that I met my my husband Peter.

"Oxford is twinned with Leiden and Peter came on an exchange. I was not interested in a romantic attachment because I was focussed on my career but that all changed when I came to Oxford on the exchange visit and was lodged with Peter's mother."

Peter persuaded Beatrix to abandon her Leiden life and begin again in Oxford as his wife. Beatrix changed career too and, with Peter's mother, ran a family fashion business in Summertown.

Beatrix said: "I retired aged 59 and took up playing the piano again. I was regarded as a talented pianist as a child — my parents wanted me to become a concert pianist. But I am more interested in creating music than in performing it. After a refresher course I bought a Roland keyboard and after that there was no stopping me. My music is usually inspired by place and time."

Beatrix's CDs include *Oxford and Beyond* and *A Tudor Legacy*.



Les Hall

Les Hall is a regular visitor to the Ashmolean, especially the ceramics galleries. Les, a dealer at Antiques at Heritage of Woodstock chose the gorgeous William de Morgan tile panel of Iznik design as his castaway object as it has direct relevance to his life.

A William de Morgan vase launched his fascination with late-19th and early 20th-century design.

With his wife, Liz, Les had a stall at Finmere market. Part of their stock were two similar pots — but neither Liz or Les knew who had made them.

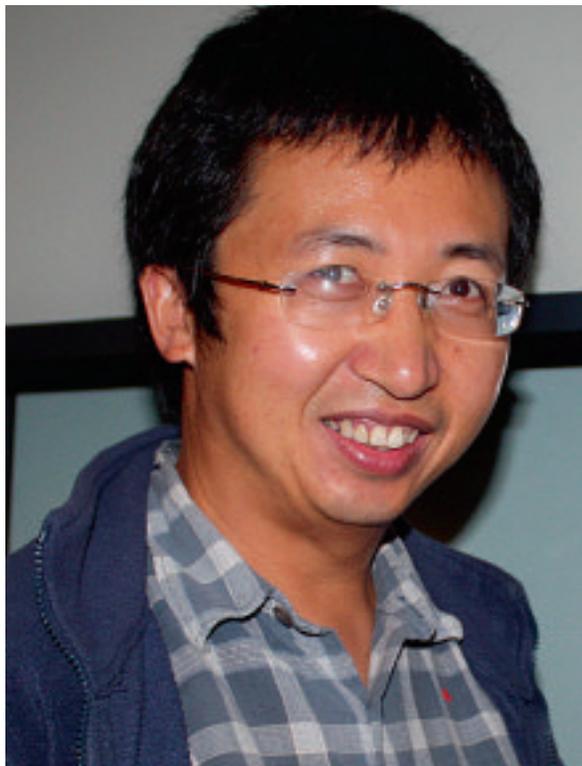
Then one pot was accidentally broken.

Les said: "We went to Sothebys with the two pots — the broken oriental piece and the unbroken pot. David Battie of *Antiques Roadshow* fame happened to be behind the counter.

"David dismissed the broken oriental pieces but, holding the other pot, said: "This is William de Morgan — £200-300?"

"In those days that was a lot of money. Liz and I went to the Sothebys sale which was mostly Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau.

"We loved it and started to learn about the period and to specialise in it. I still have the broken pot!"



### Dr Ji-Long Liu

Dr Ji-Long Liu, from Old Marston visited Live Friday with his family – and his choice was a jade pendant in the form of a coiled dragon in the China to AD 800 gallery.

The Ashmolean has one of the world's finest collections of 20th century Chinese art as well as artefacts which reflect 3,000 years of Chinese history.

Dr Liu, who is group leader of the MRC Functional Genomics Unit, said: "My office in the Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics is near the Ashmolean and since moving here six years ago it is one of my favourite places in Oxford.

"In the gallery China to AD 800 I saw a drawing by a famous artist from my home town – Jiujiang (meaning 'Nine Rivers' in Chinese). But my choice is the jade dragon made in the fourth to third century BC during the Warring States Period of the East Zhou Dynasty.

"That was a time when China had not yet been united – a fascinating stage in Chinese history. A lot of Chinese movies

and TV series are set in this period," Dr Liu said.

"If you visit China, you will not forget dragons. Dragons are legendary creatures in Chinese mythology, and have symbolic values for power, talent, capability, fortune and imperial authority. The jade dragon is beautiful. The scales on its body, whiskers, and eyes – all full of details and texture! I never get bored staring at this jade dragon. I love it.

"My research subject somehow resembles this jade dragon. I am a cell biologist and am interested in a structure inside a cell.

"Because this structure has a striking filamentous form – for this reason we named it the 'cytoophidium', which means a 'cell snake' in Greek. Defective cytoophidia might link to disease like cancer.

"My family loves Live Fridays," Dr Liu said. "My wife Yan appreciates the Pre-Raphaelites. She enjoyed the ballad reading and the solo dance. Our son Aaron likes the art with historical aspects. Our niece Queenie came to visit us from China and her favourites are the Chinese landscape paintings."

### Margaret Vaughan

Singer Margaret Vaughan is a member of the Oxford Arts Group which organises meetings at events in and around Oxford. All the Live Friday dates are on their calendar.

Margaret, who moved to Oxford from London in 2000, said: "I thoroughly enjoyed life in London throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It gave me wonderful opportunities to meet with some of the most accomplished and beautiful voices in Europe, all of whom played an important role in developing my semi-professional career as a mezzo soprano between 1985 and 2000.

"But at the crossroads of great change in my life, it was time to develop my knowledge of the creative arts and this ancient beautiful city of Oxford called to me. This exquisite museum houses some of the finest artefacts and ancient writings in the world dating back 10,000 years, each of them gracing an expression of the creativity we inherently share in a diverse, unique, and personal way."

Margaret chose the fabulous Coromandel screen from a Chinese stately home. "I love art of all types from all parts of the world and this screen represents creativity writ large," she said.



### Elisabeth Lovett

Events like Live Friday cannot happen without an army of volunteers like Elisabeth Lovett. She said: "I began working in the Ashmolean as a volunteer because I have loved museums since I was a child in Canterbury. The Ashmolean is an outstanding example of a good museum and I am now employed there as a visitor services assistant. I would certainly recommend volunteering to readers.

"Late in life, I am learning to be an archaeologist because of the Ashmolean, which is inspirational."

Elisabeth knows the collections well. Her castaway choice *The Skidding Goat Beaker* is located in the Ancient Near East Gallery.

She said "This cartoon-like depiction of an animal as it appears to stop abruptly at the edge of a cliff, painted on a drinking cup from ancient Iran, accurately conveys the artist's sense of humour and amuses me whenever I look at it, 5,000 years later."