

Sylvia Vetta meets the founders of The Story Museum, Tish Francis and Kim Pickin

This month's castaways are a dynamic duo who believe that even before a certain mathematics don at Christ Church wrote *Alice in Wonderland* our city has enriched the imagination not just of this country but of the world.

Tish Francis and Kim Pickin are the directors of The Story Museum which is just about to begin the next chapter of its development.

Tish Francis

Tish was born in Henley in 1954. Her father Hamish Francis, (who came up to Oxford a linguist and left, post-war, an agriculture MA), managed the Hambleden Estate farm.

The Chilterns, her unusual primary school and Christmas visits to ice, circus and theatre shows with her Scottish granny in London fuelled Tish's imagination.

"Neither of my parents were religious, but my two elder sisters and younger brother and all attended a Catholic convent school at Friar Park, an extraordinary gothic mansion in Henley," Tish explained.

"A daily uphill half-mile hike from took us through huge iron gates, past bluebell woods and strange way-markers. It was not just the mystery of religion and attendant pageantry that created the atmosphere in that school, it was the building with its secret panels, optical illusions, carved riddles, gargoyles, door knobs in the shape of monks' noses, hidden grottoes and fantastic grounds. What child's imagination could fail to be inspired!

"It was later bought by George Harrison – my favourite Beatle," Tish said.

"I think my compulsion for doing up buildings must come from my mother – an artist and farmer she channelled her creativity and ingenuity into transforming a succession of rundown houses into comfortable family homes."

In 1965 Tish and her family were living on a farm near Twyford and she followed her sisters, Jacqueline and Caroline, to board at St Helen's in Abingdon, then a direct grant-funded Church of England convent."

"It was not an easy time for the family," Tish explained. "In my late teens my father became ill and had to give up his job – and the home that came with it."

Tish sang and acted at St Helen's, something which helped her through her teenage years. She joined the Young Playhouse Association, not knowing what a huge part it would play in her life.

"I saw my first Pinter play on my seventeenth birthday. It was *Old Times* and starred Dorothy Tutin, Vivian Merchant and Colin Blakely. A lightbulb went on.

"Unlike now, my school did not know what to do with a girl wanting a career in theatre. There were few courses and little awareness of the different opportunities – besides acting – in the profession."



Neverending story

After A-Levels and a year working in London and Oxford, instead of heading for RADA Tish set off for York University to study social science.

"I was troubled by the iniquities of the world and for reasons closer to home I also wanted to understand more about mental illness, so did political sociology and social psychology papers. Drama took a back seat for a while, although I did play Big Nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* – not exactly typecasting!

"During my university years I did two big trips to the States and Canada – the second time hitchhiking 10,000 miles coast-to-coast and back with a girlfriend. Memories to last a lifetime."

Tish moved to London in 1977 and took up residence with a group of architects, lawyers and community artists in a 'licensed squat' in Vauxhall, where she joined the Vauxhall Community Theatre Company.

"We performed shows about Windscale, homelessness, joblessness and founded the Vauxhall City Farm – which is still flourishing I am pleased to say."

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Then Tish came across the Covent Garden Community Association – the organisation behind the fight to save the area from the planners' bulldozers.

Starting as a volunteer she became its co-ordinator for three years. She said: "It was a fascinating and vibrant time politically, on the cultural scene and in terms of neighbourhood renewal and community action. It was a baptism of fire and I learnt a lot. I moved into a Soho tenement and loved it."

It was around this time that Tish's sister Caroline moved to Australia. Planning to visit



In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

Kim Pickin and Tish Francis at The Story Museum. Inset, Tish's scrapbook from her time as director of The Oxford Playhouse

Photographs: Antony Moore

her for an extended stay, Tish left her Covent Garden job but, before heading Down Under, she worked on the founding of the Almeida Theatre in Islington, with three Oxford graduates who had acquired the lease.

One of them, Will Bowen is a close friend of Kim's and is now a Story Museum trustee.

Tish almost did not make it to Oz. She recalls: "I nearly missed my plane. I went to Heathrow when I should have been at Gatwick. I had used up all my savings buying a non-returnable ticket.

"Thanks to a quick-witted friend I was bundled onto a Gatwick-bound helicopter — they were closing the

cabin doors as I ran up the boarding tube!"

Returning from Australia nine months later, Tish became manager of GRAEAE Theatre — the UK's first professional company of actors with physical disabilities. "I moved them into

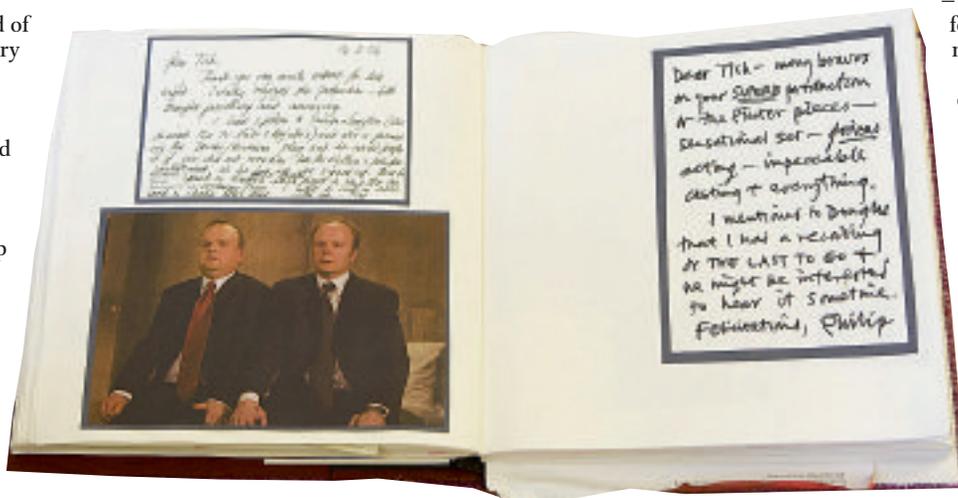
The Diorama in Regent's Park and produced seven shows including a tour to India — another huge learning curve," Tish said. "The highlight was Mrs Gandhi's attendance at our

Delhi performance — unusually she stayed for the whole show and met the company."

In 1985 the director of the Shared Experience Theatre Company asked Tish to find the group a home — this was the start of the Soho Laundry Project.

"I cut a deal with Westminster City Council. If I raised the money to refurbish an old municipal laundry they would give us a

Continued on page 11



From page 9

lease at a low rent," Tish said.

Soon after the Soho Laundry was up-and-running, Tish met two people who would be important in her life.

"In the 1980s I rekindled my love of swing music at a great London club called the 2 i's. After a *Time Out* jive contest there, I was invited to teach sessions at Hackney's Chats Palace.

"One of those I taught (reluctantly I suspect!) was my partner Douglas, now a defence aerospace analyst. Coincidentally, he worked next door at the Soho Laundry."

The Laundry also brought Tish together with Hedda Beeby who joined Shared Experience when the company needed someone to help run its new premises.

A couple of years later, with Tish now adding companies like Opera Factory and the Geoffrey Museum to her client list, Hedda joined her small enterprise. A new collaboration was about to begin.

Tish said: "We were originally approached for advice on the appointment of a director for Oxford Playhouse by Hedda's previous boss who was on the board. Then she suggested we together be put forward as a 'wildcard' for the position. The interviews took place on a depressing autumn day – leaves were blowing down St Giles and we were interviewed by a team of 12."

They impressed the panel and, in 1989, Tish was appointed joint director of the Oxford Playhouse with Hedda Beeby.

Their task was to mastermind a major fundraising campaign to reopen, programme and refurbish the Playhouse after a four-year closure.

"Looking back we lived on sheer adrenalin and everyone worked together fantastically," Tish said.

Tish became the sole director from 2001 before retiring from the post in 2008, making her the theatre's longest-serving director. Her original team of two grew to a staff of more than 40. Under her direction the theatre staged more than 80 shows annually and opened 50 out of 52 weeks of the year.

Her memories for her time at the Playhouse include a bomb scare on a first night; Judi Dench and Ian McKellen at the opening gala; seven plays starring Toby Jones and Jason Watkins; and "Harold Pinter writing me a personal note of thanks for the 'best ever production of *Dumb Waiter*'."

Tish was also the executive producer of Oxford's memorable Millennium festival OOMF! an event which exceeded all expectations.

"I set up OOMF! with festival manager Rosemary Richards, festival director, Jeremy James, and a fabulous team from the community, including Euton Daley from Pegasus and Nic Morbath from Zodiac."

A crowd of more than 40,000 people packed into Oxford's South Park for the stunning finale event which featured choreographed processions, breathtaking pyrotechnics, aerial artistry, and the construction of three new spires for Oxford.

Tish was made a Deputy Lieutenant of Oxfordshire and awarded an Honorary Degree of Arts by Oxford Brookes University and looked forward to a less hectic life with more time for her son James and family.

She said: "The last thing I expected was to be

Tish Francis and Kim Pickin with the museum's 'Story Loom'



involved in another building project – certainly not in Oxford. But my friend, children's playwright David Wood, linked me up with Kim, who explained her vision and what she needed to take it forward. She was so compelling it was one of those "has to happen" moments. That fateful meeting brought me here to Rochester House and The Story Museum.

"It is a big challenge. We need around £8m to complete the transformation of the whole building. The first phase is nearing completion and I am looking forward to opening the doors and welcoming people in."

Kim Pickin

Kim was born in Windsor in 1958 and attended a convent school from the age of four until she left aged 17. She said: "I learned how to wear white gloves and not to eat in the street. In contrast, at home, I lived a happy outdoor childhood. My father was from the fifth generation of a boat business on the Thames. Windsor Boats is rather like Salters in Oxford.

"I grew up helping on the steamers making and serving sandwiches, selling ice cream and dealing with customers. My brother Mark has gone on to run the family business.

"We did not have a lot of books in our house because my mother, Janet, was dyslexic. I discovered books at school and each Christmas when I was given a pound which I spent on eight Puffin paperbacks, which I eked out for as long as I could," Kim said.

When Kim saw a TV documentary about a small boy called Michael Cooper who ended up in juvenile detention for setting fire to things it sparked an interest in child psychology.

"No one in my family had been to university and my school did not push for us to apply. But I had read about Oxford and applied independently to St Anne's to read psychology and physiology. I was lucky to be given a place in 1976," she said.

"When looking for a career in the field I was disillusioned to discover that child psychology in those days seemed to be all about controlling children, often with drugs, rather than exploring more creative and positive options. I did not like what I saw and applied for a secretarial job at Blackwell Publishers while I thought what to do next.

"That was convenient because the man I went on to marry in 1987, Robert Faber, was completing his PhD here in Oxford."

Kim became a commissioning editor, specialising in philosophy and social science, a job she did for five years.

"One book I am particularly proud of was by Jonathan Porritt and this led to me joining the board of Friends of the Earth and developing a lifelong interest in sustainability and the environment," Kim said.

"But after five years I knew I did not want to work in academic publishing all my life, so I went to London Business School in 1986-88 to take an MBA. I then joined a famous branding

Continued on page 13

From page 11

company called Wolff Olins as a consultant and writer.

"For the next five years I was involved in exciting international projects, but by the time my first son Felix was two, I was finding the travel too much. At the same time, in 1993, Robert was given a post at Oxford University Press overseeing the huge *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. So I decided to go freelance and we moved back to Oxford."

This gave Kim a possible idea for her desert island choice.

"If I took the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* I would have 59,000 life stories to read. There is a lifetime of reading in there and I had the pleasure of watching it grow from a seed to winning the Queen's Anniversary award for OUP. It represents 14 years of my husband's life."

Robert and Kim had two more sons – Tom in 1993 and Jono in 1997.

"One of my branding jobs while I was at Wolff Olins was for British Telecom. This involved thinking about 'Britishness' and what Britain means to the world. It brought home to me how important literature and language are to our culture and that children's stories are among the most loved things Britain has given the world," said Kim.

"This was reinforced in my family life. I found that reading books at bedtime to my three sons was my favourite part of the day.

"I began to think there should be somewhere in this country which celebrates children's literature and the power of storytelling. I talked to people about the idea of a story museum, initially imagining that someone else would take it up and run with it."

Kim was introduced me to John Lange, then director of the Museum of Oxford, who had been thinking of creating an *Alice in Wonderland* gallery at the museum.

Kim said: "We started working together and, in 2005, we announced to the world our wish to create a story museum in Oxford. We began to exploring funding and look for a site. I knew Tish had lots of experience developing buildings and so I e-mailed her."

And so we arrive at that meeting – and Tish being ready to combine her story with Kim's.

In May 2009 the main task was to find a suitable site – not exactly easy in Oxford.

While Tish was doing this, Kim developed outreach projects and spoke to potential funders.

Rochester House was once part of the central post office and telephone exchange, and Tish got wind that it was not going to be part of a proposed development for the area.

"We were able to buy it with the help of a generous donor, but it was the Soho Laundry over again only more so. We had to make the building habitable," said Tish.

Kim added: "In 2010, on the day we moved in, we told a story to bring the building to life. Then I was handed a bunch of 183 keys and sent volunteers around the building to see what doors they would open. There are still two enormous safes we have not seen inside."

Kim and Tish describe the completion of part of the building with the help of an Arts Council grant as 'the end of chapter one'. The next chapter begins on Saturday, April 5, when the museum opens its doors to the public again.

The Story Museum is a place of dreams, so

Kim Pickin with her desert island choice of reading – Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy and, below, Tish Francis with her favourite Moomin novel



what are Tish and Kim's choices for the island?

Tish said "I love amber – full of legends, trapped time and memories of Suffolk beachcombing as a child, and now with Douglas. But perhaps I can be wearing my amber beads when you maroon me? One of my favourite books is Tove Jannsen's *Moominsummer Madness*. There's a great flood and the characters are set adrift on their own adventures until some of them come across a floating theatre and it draws them back together. Maybe I could take a theatre?"

"We could easily make one on the island but I would need music and to dance," mused Tish.



So she would like to find two pianos, a cello and a guitar on the island.

"In that case we need musical scores – *Carousel, Guys and Dolls*," she said. "The great thing about being castaway is that I'll have time to read the complete works of Shakespeare. I would also like to learn to draw. I still have some of my late mother's art pencils but would need some paper."

But Tish was not prepared to leave for Oxtopia without a picture of her son James, who is now 20.

Kim said: "I would not want to leave behind my copies of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. I read it myself and then aloud to each of my sons. It blew us away.

"The books would remind me of my sons and I love the way Philip makes Oxford the centre of the universe.

"They bring together, in the most beautiful language, many of the things I care about – young people exploring the different worlds of truth and imagination, fact and fiction, right and wrong, and discovering what it means to be human. And this is what lies at the heart of *The Story Museum*."

I suggested they get one of those unopened safes then put their books, artists' materials, scores and photographs in it and let that float off to the island.

■ Oxford Castaways Volume 2, the second collection of interviews from this series, will be launched at The Story Museum on April 28.