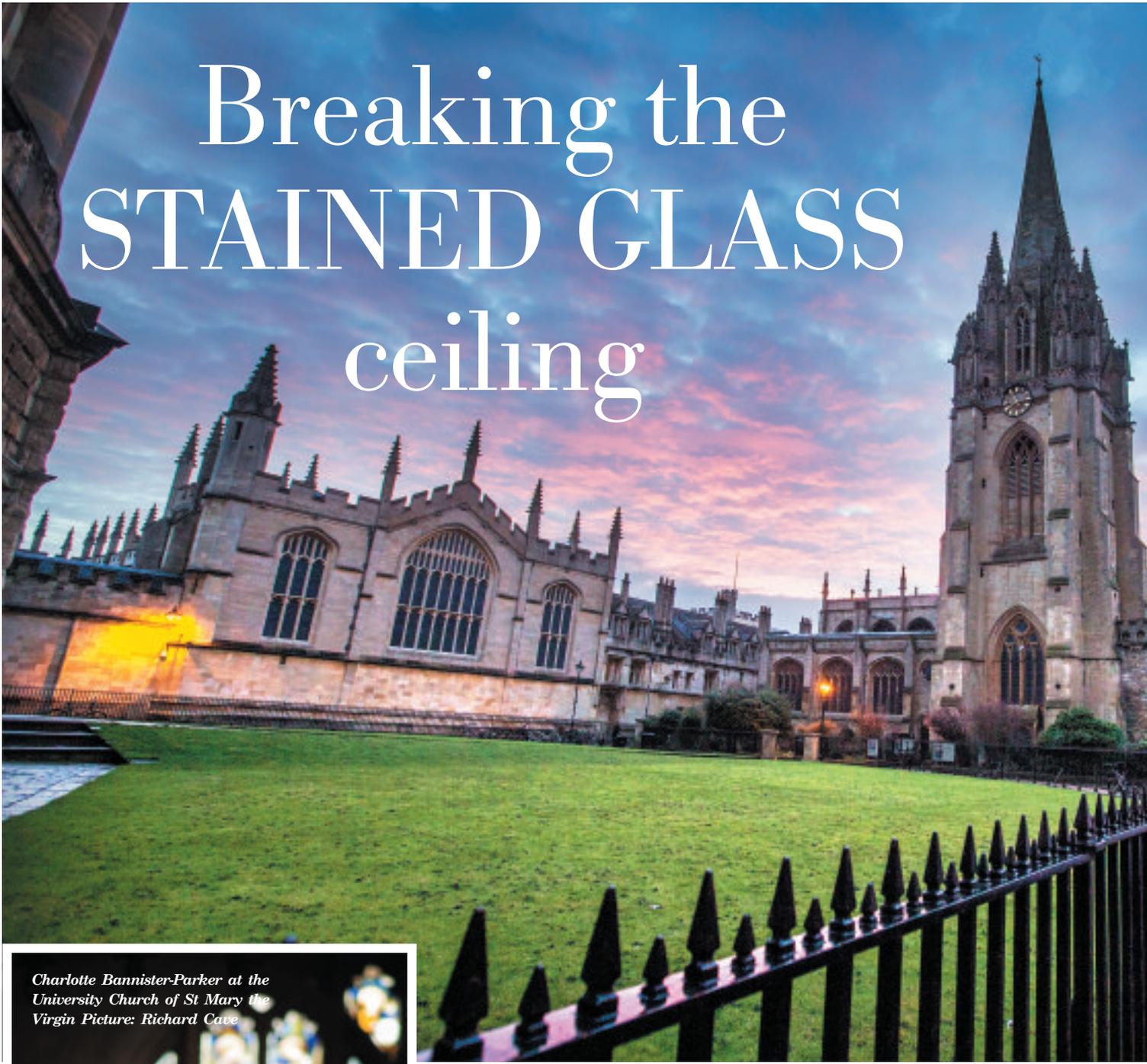


# Breaking the STAINED GLASS ceiling



*Charlotte Bannister-Parker at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin. Picture: Richard Cave*



**M**ost of the history of Oxford University over the past 1,000 years has been male.

Women were only allowed to become full members of the university in 1920 and it wasn't until 1974 that the first five all male colleges admitted women students.

Even then opportunities for female academics were limited: the big breakthrough came in 1993 when Marilyn Butler became the first female rector of an old college (Exeter).

And in December 2016, a stained glass ceiling was broken.

The Rev Charlotte Bannister-Parker, daughter of record-breaking runner Sir Roger Bannister, was made the interregnum priest in charge of the

Church of St Mary the Virgin – the first woman to hold the post since its foundation almost 1,000 years ago.

As well as being THE University Church, St Mary's has been at the heart of major events in the history of England and receives almost as many visitors as Blenheim Palace.

She has worked in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bosnia, Kenya and South Africa and is the president and chair of the Children's Radio Foundation (CRF) which gives disadvantaged children a voice.

And in 1994, she was one of the last two western journalists to remain in the Bihac district during the Balkan Wars.

"I was with the women who sheltered their children in the village hall when the village was being attacked," she said. "The children were very afraid and I'll

*Sunrise over University Church of St Mary The Virgin*



**About St Mary's**

St Mary the Virgin is not just any church. Each year, more than 450,000 people visit as tourists and pilgrims.

Many climb the tower to get the city's best view of the dreaming spires: others are drawn to it because of its historical associations. It was the site of the 1555 trial of the Oxford Martyrs, when the bishops Latimer and Ridley and the Archbishop Cranmer were tried for heresy. It played a role in the life of John Wesley the founder of Methodism and of John Henry Newman who founded the Oxford Movement.

Its library has a claim to be the oldest in Oxford. Founded in 1326, it predates the Bodleian and was where the students of the time gathered to discuss theology and the ideas of the time.

Less well known is a "first" that happened in the library in 1944.

Charlotte said: "Oxfam was founded there during the war to help with revealing the plight of famine which was affecting migrants. It's a timely reminder for us all that in 2017 we now have the biggest migrant crisis since the Second World War with so many suffering now."

**The Friendship Walk**

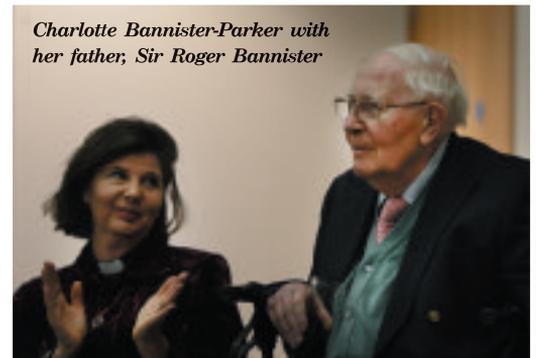
In 2004, Charlotte organised a Peace/Friendship walk.

"Distressed by the scenes of torture in Abu Ghraib following the 'liberation' of Iraq, I went to see the Imam of The Central Mosque and asked how Christians could show solidarity with their Muslim brothers and sisters in the city," said Charlotte.

Out of that conversation came The Friendship Walk - celebrating "One Earth, many faiths" which has become an annual event.

It will be held this year, on June 29. It starts at the Synagogue in Jericho ends at the Central Mosque in Manzil Way, calling at St Mary's on the way. At least nine religious groups are involved and non-believers are also welcome. Usually around 500 people take part.

*Charlotte Bannister-Parker with her father, Sir Roger Bannister*



*Tree in blossom outside University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford High Street*

never forget the bravery of the women, who maintained a sense of normality in front of them. They sang songs and created a makeshift hair salon, while all around their homes were being bombed and destroyed.

"Our film was used on BBC and ITV news and watching me in that war zone was William Parker. Shortly after this he proposed but requested a prenuptial agreement - that I never go back to the frontline anywhere in the world."

Her latest challenge is here in Oxford, but she still is on a front line of a sort, tackling issues facing the Anglican Church as St Mary the Virgin adapts to the 21st century. She took a sabbatical from CRF to be the priest in charge for six months. This month the Rev Dr William Lamb will become the vicar in charge and they will work together for three months. Charlotte will then resume her work with CRF but will continue to have a role at St Mary's.

The priest in charge of St Mary the Virgin has to care for the building as well as its congregation. It was founded in the 11th century and most of the existing structure was built around 1320. Charlotte said: "St Mary's is on the edge of the religious, academic and the secular world. As well as a place of worship, our church is a popular venue for concerts, lectures and public events. The Vaults café is busy every day."

She has invited people of all faiths and none to series of events in the Vaults.

And as well as its regular services, weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals, St Mary's reaches out to the city by organising events like The Festival of Food and Forest on June 9 and 10, with stalls and talks from leading environmentalists, campaigners and writers.

This month, on May 22, the church will be mounting a photographic installation by Jim

Grover titled *Of Things Unseen* will be on display in the chancel. Subtitled *A Year in the Life of a London Priest*, it has echoes of the series *Rev*.

Poetry readings as well as recitals are regular features at St Mary's - its education officer Penny Boxall is herself a poet; her latest collection is called *Ship of the Line*.

"I feel privileged to work in such an interesting place," said Penny. "We host school tours and workshops and welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors throughout the year, particularly over the summer (when our team of volunteer Welcomers is hard at work). My role, in a nutshell, is to enable others to experience that, outside of services."

Rev William Lamb said: "Leading a church during a period of transition can be a real challenge and Charlotte has risen to it with distinction. I will have some great colleagues at St Mary's."