

Bryan Harris's

PARISH PROFILE

The Vicar, Canon Patrick Washington, describes the parish as "Typical of much of South London" – and certainly that's the initial impression you get.

The church is set in a pleasant tree-lined street off Pollards Hill just a stones-throw from the busy A23. St Philip's was carved out of Christ Church, West Croydon as Croydon sprawled outwards meeting the rest of the London sprawl. Like much of the surrounding property, the church dates from the turn of the century. It was expanded in the 1930s but much of the present internal layout and decoration is due to a major re-ordering about 10 years ago. The church is very light and airy with a traditional nave, side aisles, chancel and sanctuary, a short north transept and vestries to the south of the chancel.

All very 'typical' so far.

Patrick Washington, has been the Vicar there for 23 years – long enough to have been part of Canterbury Diocese for the first year of his incumbency.

He told me "Like many parts of south London, it used to be an identifiable 'village' but that has diminished in recent years so that today it's hard to see where Norbury ends and say Thornton Heath or Streatham Vale begins. We're surrounded by seven parishes, and whilst, when I first came most of the congregation came from this parish, nowadays people go wherever the church style, service times or whatever suits them. So we have people come from all around and people in this parish going elsewhere."

Again very typical.

The parish divides neatly into three parts, a 'posh' bit around where the church is located, an ex-LCC overspill housing estate and at the far end 'something in between', as Patrick put it. With the growth of supermarkets and



retail estates, the shops on the main road have changed over the past twenty years – now mostly estate agencies and restaurants. The population has changed too, since Patrick arrived. Today about 50% of the residents of the parish are from ethnic minorities and while in a recent census 56% of residents claimed to be Christian, the remainder are largely Muslim and Hindu.

It's also a very mobile population. Many of the ex LCC properties have been bought under 'Right to buy' and sold on, and many of the larger houses have been broken up into small flats – so there's a degree of 'churn'. Singles or couples move into the small properties but as children come along, the need for a nursery, and space, even a garden to play in, means they move on.

"A lot of people stay here 4 or 5 years" said Patrick, "A major factor is that local schools have in the past had a few problems and parents move out to areas where the schools, especially secondary schools, have a better track record. It's a constant challenge – we're ever running faster to stand still. We have longstanding parishioners, including some who've moved but still come back on Sundays – but nowadays they are in the minority."

Nothing unusual so far....

Patrick's point about the shifting congregation was amply illustrated on the morning I visited. As part of the main Sunday service at 9.45am, Patrick was baptising baby Allie Goss – parents Andy and Monica have been attending St Philip's for a while, but not for much longer. Monica is Polish and in the near future the little family are moving to Poland "to look for a better quality of life", Monica told me.

The congregation numbered around 75 plus the twenty five or so in the Baptism party. It was a mix of ages and ethnic backgrounds and there were several children. Although Patrick Washington comes from an Anglo-Catholic background, the style at St Philip's is very 'middle of the road' – Common Worship, by the book. The service is one of three each Sunday with an 8am BCP Holy Communion and, on most Sundays, a 6.30 pm Prayer Book Evensong.

And it's at the Sunday worship you finally start to see why St Philip's is far from a typical parish.

The first reason is Patrick himself. The parish magazine listing weekly services adds that "because of the Vicar's disability" the weekday evensong is sometimes said at the Vicarage. Patrick suffers from Limb-girdle Muscular Dystrophy – a genetic complaint where the skeletal muscle of the body is destroyed. It has always been there but in the last 10 years the effects have grown much worse.

When I went to St Philip's a couple of years ago, Patrick conducted the service from a wheelchair. That was a particularly bad spell – most weeks he's able to get around with some difficulty and the help of two walking sticks. But it does hamper him in lots of unexpected ways.

"I can't administer communion for example – so I preside while others administer the chalice and patten. Visiting

St Philip's, Norbury...

can be difficult, especially where there are stairs. I find I do everything very slowly and I tire easily."

"My writing is getting indecipherable – and I can't type easily. Fortunately my wife Jean acts as Secretary, scribe and administrator – without her help and the incredible understanding of my parishioners, I couldn't continue."

The understanding is symptomatic of the genuine 'caring' which Patrick says is at the heart of the congregation. It is also shown practically by hospital visiting and phoning people who are 'missed' on a Sunday morning. It extends to the building too with a lot of time commitment to repairs and maintenance. The £200,000 reordering 10 years ago was managed by a church member who made sure it came in on time and on budget!

As well as Vicar's wife, aide-de-camp and carer, Jean Washington is also a Reader, one of three in the parish and the longest serving Reader in the Diocese still on the 'active list'. Patrick also has an Honorary Parish Assistant, Capt Terry Drummond CA, Bishop's Chaplain and PA, who lives in the parish and 'helps out most Sundays'.

It's when the service begins that you see and hear the second reason why St Philip's is different – the choir. Men and boys in white robes – St Philip's choir equals the 'boy-band' Libera, present and past members (see facing page) – and their sound is quite something!

"It's a good noise", Jean Washington agreed "But what really matters is that it's an inclusive noise. It would be easy for the congregation to sit back and enjoy a performance, but they join in too".

"We've always had a good choir" said Patrick "Robert Prizeman was Director of Music here before I came. The first opening up into wider things came around 20 years ago when they were asked to back a pop singer – I suppose Libera and its distinct sound just grew from that."

"Their success is due largely to Robert – he sets very high standards and gets extreme loyalty and commitment from the boys. And as a church we benefit from that."

"When they are here on a Sunday we see more young people in the congregation. We very often have their parents with us, we have people who



The Baptism of Allie Goss

come just to hear them – we had a 'fan' from Poland and one from the States came at Easter for example – and of course, Libera training includes training in faith, which means that a significant number stay on as adult church members".

St Philip's also has a youth club which has seen a tenfold growth in numbers over the last couple of months – and nothing to do with Libera! The Mayor of Croydon knew where there were some funds available for youth work. With other local churches and faith communities, a Detached Youth Worker was employed to work with local youngsters on the streets and in the hall at St Philip's. The result, St Philip's youth group of half a dozen or so youngsters is now over 60 and still growing – enough to attract a visit last month from Prime Minister's wife Mrs Cherie Blair (page 3).

On the ecumenical front, St Philip's also works closely with the local Methodist church. Patrick and the Methodist minister have weekly 'staff meetings and there are joint services at least monthly at St

Philip's. "We've also planned joint confirmation preparation".

There's also a small but dedicated Mothers Union branch and a Women's Fellowship with around 2/3 of its members from outside St Philip's regular congregation.

Finally I asked Patrick – what about money? "It's always a struggle to meet the quota and other ongoing costs – because we're not a wealthy parish by any means" said Patrick "but somehow we always seem to manage." – back to a typical south London parish...

But at St Philip's 'managing' means 'not touching capital'. The parish is fortunate in having 'money in the bank' from legacies over many years – but that is strictly for capital projects! The church lighting system is now below standard and needs modernising costing at least £20,000. However, Patrick told me "careful investment and stewardship means that the £20,000 lighting costs will be no problem" – without making serious inroads into the capital!

Now that's not 'typical'!

Patrick & Jean Washington





...and the phenomenon that is

The distinctive sound of Libera has travelled the world in the last few years.

The group's albums have topped mainstream and classical charts in many countries, and their recordings hold their place in top-tens alongside the likes of Bocelli and Pavarotti.

While the boys who make up the vocal band have been described as "normal" and "ordinary" the music they produce is extraordinary.

With shimmering, mystical chords and ecstatic harmonies, they are unlike any other group you have ever heard. At times plaintive, at others climactic and transcendent. These are truly sounds to lift the soul.

Apart from their own albums, millions know their music, without ever knowing their name. You may have heard them singing the haunting soundtrack to Merchant Of Venice; accompanying the gruesome Hannibal; serenading Baz Luhrmann's Romeo & Juliet; abetting Gary Lineker's crisp-stealing TV adverts; backing Pavarotti, Elton John, or Bjork; supporting Hayley Westenra and Aled Jones; or bringing the long-running UK TV series This Is Your Life to a close.

The boys aged seven to sixteen attend different local schools in South London and come from a variety of backgrounds. They don't think of themselves as choirboys, but as an alternative kind of boy band.

Robert Prizeman, a freelance Music Adviser to BBC Religious programmes like Songs of Praise, is to Libera what George Martin was to the Beatles – and like George Martin is content to stay 'off-stage'. When Libera is performing he's in the wings not upfront – they don't need conducting anyway. And at his insistence there no photos of him or co-producer Ian Tilley in this feature – "it's the boys who matter". Nevertheless it's Robert who delivers Libera's professional focus and to Robert we turned to 'lift the lid' on Libera.

The beginning

The origins of Libera stem from Robert's arrival at St Philip's Norbury as Choir Director 20-plus years ago. There was already an established choir but with Robert came a new focus.

"We began to do more outside concerts and started to develop

LIBERA



our own style of singing - less and less a conventional church choir".

When Robert was asked to create a piece of music for a TV programme, the boys sang it – and Libera (Latin for 'free') was born!

"Libera is a group of people – but it's also a style – spiritual but accessible with words that are not off putting" said Robert.

At first they tried to keep it under wraps that Libera was a church choir. "Of course we want church people to enjoy it but we also wanted to make music for everyone"

"We recruit from a wide range of backgrounds, mostly from years 3 and 4 in local schools. But it's very difficult these days. We don't always realise how separate our church culture is from the rest of the community. Few people outside a church know what a choir is and most boys don't know how to sing.

When I go to a school to 'listen' I usually take one of the older boys with me – when he sings most of the pupils are amazed at the sound. We look for potential rather than ability - sometimes we come across a really talented boy who has never sung before. A couple of

verses of 'Away in a manger' which is all many can manage and an aural test and I can usually tell whether a boy will make it."

Most of the boys don't come from church backgrounds but being part of Libera means being part of the St Philip's Church Choir – and singing regularly on Sundays.

"You can only sing well if you sing regularly and Sundays are just as important as the twice-weekly rehearsals. And of course it can be 'evangelistic' as parents, grandparents come to church to support the boys".

Voices

The core of Libera's sound is the treble voice – sometimes reaching unbelievably high registers. There are 28 trebles at the moment. Always there are some in training, keen young ones who copy what they hear and soon become part of the group

Inevitably there are those whose voices have broken. Currently there are 16 adult voices, tenors to basses, who sing with Libera on Sundays. Several have become mentors to the younger boys and help with rehearsals and training. Some

are into the 'technology' which enables a Libera concert or recording, some now write the words and music which Libera sing and one designed the cover for the last album.

Talking to Robert it's clear that choir rehearsals have changed since my day! Practice and scales are interspersed with games and just having fun together. Said Robert "What they do is very hard work and they need to be supporting each other all the time."

Libera made their first album in 1999.

"Over 3 or 4 years our style had evolved and we'd written and practiced the music. We looked for a recording company who'd not just make the CD but would issue it widely. We've never had a marketing budget but somehow the word has spread – to a quarter of a million in sales! We've now done four albums and we're working on number five".

Libera is an experience to be seen as well as heard. It takes several weeks to put a Libera show together – it steadily evolves and the boys often learn the show from memory. They try to do a run of performances to make it all worthwhile

Stop press...

Libera have a new album out in October. The current one 'Visions' is also still available - EMI Classics No. 3 39862 2 .

"It's very visual," said Robert, "a two hour stage show - fully lit and multimedia. A lot of work and very demanding".

Timing has to be carefully organised – after all the boys are at school. So, for example, tours whether in the UK, US or the far east have to be geared around school holidays.

Fan 'frenzy'

It's no exaggeration to say that they were treated like pop idols in the Far East – press conferences, TV interviews, screaming fans. So why are there no screaming fans chasing them down the streets of south London?

Says Robert "It's perhaps cultural preconceptions that hold them back in the UK. The music isn't hip enough for the 'pop' generation and not traditional enough for the classics buffs".

Nevertheless they've reached number one in the classical charts and the album 'Free' came second in the Best Album category at last year's classical Brits Awards.

Libera are definitely a class act and that has advantages when dealing with classroom mickey-taking. Musical encounters with everyone from Bjork and Elton John to Pavarotti and Dame Edna carry a lot of street 'cred' – even in the streets of South London!

Callum Payne

"The thing about our music is that it's mainly

ours – there's no other act like us in the world. You're a bit nervous when you go on stage – but once you start singing it's all right!



Ben Crawley

"All the songs are tailored around voices and

some are written with particular voices in mind – that's why Libera has the sound it does."

Joe Platt

"Strange to think that millions of people all over the world listen to us – gives you a strange feeling – no pressure of course!



Tom Cully

"We're just normal boys from South

London, but when we go to another country we're like 'superstars'!"

The last word to Ian Tilley, Co-producer with Robert on Libera albums... "it's not exactly a difficult job because they're all so talented".

Some of the fans at last year's Japan concerts

