

Berkeley Hill

Interview 9th October 2023

St Leonard's Choir Vestry, Hythe. Kent

Interviewed by Alethea Lester and Iris Pearce on behalf of the Hythe Local History Group (HLHG) Transcribed Verbatim .



The first question I've got here is, what is your full title name and where were you born? Well, I suppose my full title now is Professor Norman Wesley Francis Berkeley Hill BEM. But I usually drop all the other names, and I'm known as Berkeley Hill. I was born in a place called Stratton Saint Margaret on the outskirts of Swindon, Wiltshire, in 1944, which makes me 79 at the moment. Am I happy to give my age? Well, not particularly happy about it, but I suppose the way it's gone.

How long have you lived in Hythe? Where were you before?

I've lived in Hythe since 1976.

I was married in 1970 in Swindon. My wife came from Swindon as well, and in one period of about one week in 1970, not only did we get married, but we moved from Swindon to Ashford, and soon after I got a mortgage and a daughter, so it was all a bit traumatic. So, we moved to Ashford and then I lived at Ashford, Kennington on the outskirts of Ashford from 1970 to 1976. The reason we moved down here was that I got a job as a lecturer in economics at Wye College in 1970.

So this period in about 1970 was a very active period of change for us. We moved down to Ashford because it was easy to get to Wye to work. In 1972 I got the job of organist and Choirmaster at St Leonard's Church, Hythe. And between 1972 and 1976, I acted a bit like a yoyo between Ashford and Hythe, coming down all about six times every week. And, so when we had our third child, my wife said, we need a bigger house. So we looked at alternative houses and we found one in Saltwood, just on the edge of Hythe, and it was in terrible condition. It had been abandoned,

more or less, by the woman who mortgaged it, and it had been repossessed by a bank, and it hadn't been lived in properly for several years. Anyway, it was the only house we could afford in Saltwood at the time, it had five bedrooms, a big house at 54 Brock Hill Road, and we eventually bought that, and we moved down to Hythe in 1976.

Next question is, can you tell us about your childhood?

Well, a strange childhood in some ways. I was born in the house belonging to my grandparents in Stratton Saint Margaret on the edge of Swindon, before the National Health Service was instigated, just about, and I'm told that my father decided to call the doctor, which cost some money, and then decided to go off to attend a choir practice in Swindon. So he wasn't actually at my birth, but it was in the old family house. The old family house contained not only my mother and father, but one of my father's brothers and one of his sisters. And there were four other siblings that lived within a few hundred yards of the house, so it was really the centre of a tribe rather than a simple family setup, and as my father was the youngest of his family of six children. When I grew up in a household of relatively old people. I had a brother whose five years younger than me, and we all managed to live in this big Victorian house which had belonged to my grandfather, who bought it in about 1880 and had run a blacksmith business on a timber yard, they made agricultural wagons, agricultural buildings, it's sort of carpentry, blacksmith, iron work, all that sort of thing and that was on the same site as the house. So we had a big yard next to the house and really it was a very busy area. So that's the place I grew up. And none of my father's brothers or sisters moved more than a short distance from the house and they were always calling in. So, it was very strange, very strange not to see several members of the family every day and they also had the habit of all coming together on a Sunday night for a meal. The whole family was closely attached to the Methodist Church at Stratton St Margaret and they had this traditional gathering on a Sunday night where everybody came back together, and I thought that's the way everybody lived. It turned out that it wasn't the way that everybody lived and this sort of tribal gathering together, but because the family was quite big, and frequently on a Sunday night, there were 15 to 20 people come for supper. They tended to have their social life within the family rather than have many friends who are not members of the family. So, the upshot of all this is that I grew up in a household which were dominated by older people. I think this made me behave not like a little child, but even as a sort of young teenager, I was like an old person, really, because that's the sort of people that I always met with and I didn't have any friends of my own age until really right at the end of the school career. But it was, in some ways, a busy and happy childhood. But it was a bit sort of introspective.

Where did you go to school and how was it for you?

Well, I went to the local village school and my great aunt was chairman of the governors. I remember my first day at school I came home and said, "well, I've been to school now, I don't have to go anymore, do I"? And only to be told I did have to go back next day and it was fine, I quite enjoyed primary school and then I passed the eleven plus to go to the grammar school in Swindon, which was about

maybe 3 miles away, something like that, Headlands Grammar School. And it was a grammar school that both my father and my mother had been .Well, they'd been to sort of predecessors of that particular school. My father went to Euclid Street and my mother went to another grammar school in Swindon. But it was sort of assumed that you'd go to that sort of school, and it was assumed you'd go to school every day, which, of course, we did.

I cycled to school after the first year and cycled home for lunch as well. It was fine. I never really fitted in terribly well at school. I didn't have many school friends. My friends were the family at home of older people.

Would you like to share some memories of your parents and family?

Well, I suppose the fondest memories or strongest memories are these Sunday night suppers and the fact that there was family was always around. Two of my father's brothers were farmers, one a big farmer, one a small farmer, and so agricultural things were quite close to the way we lived, and there were always animals around. Although my father was not a farmer, he made portable buildings, garden sheds and poultry houses and things like that on the family site in the yard, various buildings associated with it, such as the carpenter shop and the blacksmith's forge and so on. These buildings were always used, and I remember playing with the blacksmith's forge. It wasn't really sort of active as a commercial forge at that time, but I remember I made some iron hooks or something and took them to school because people said, what do you do at the weekend and what sort of hobbies did you have? Well, mine was blacksmithing for a time, and they just would not believe it at the school that I'd made these things. It was just out of their area of familiarity.

So apparently my first three words were haystacks, pigs, and horses, because those are the things that I had great familiarity with, and I was quite happy with cows and things like that.

What holiday memories do you have whilst growing up?

Well, there was always so much to do because part of our yard was to do with agriculture .In the summer there was haymaking and there was harvest and a variety of things like that to get involved in. And holidays were not part of our tradition, they really weren't. So, in fact, people who had to go on holiday in the summer were sort of pitied, rather. My mother didn't come from that sort of background she came from a background from central Swindon, and her father was an upholsterer, and so she had a sort of tradition of going on holiday. And so, she, my mother, my grandmother, me and later my little brother used to go for a week at Western Super Mare, also the same bloody place, actually staying in the same bed and breakfast.

My father didn't come. He used to drive us in a car from Swindon to Weston Super Mare, a place called Sand Bay and used to leave us there and he used to drove back to do whatever he was doing in Swindon and then at the end of the week come pick us up. So that was our pattern of non-holidays, if you like.

I mentioned earlier that my grandfather and his children my father's generation, in other words were very much involved with the local Methodist church. And it was a bit wicked of us, when we went on holiday, not to go to the local chapel. Anyway, my mother allowed us not to go. We didn't tell those back at Stratton what we hadn't done, and we survived.

When did I become interested in music and were any of my family musical?

Well, yes, my family was musical. My father was a singer and a choir conductor, and my mother was a pianist. In fact, my mother and my father met because my father took on the job of being choirmaster at a Methodist church in the centre of Swindon called Manchester Road, Methodist Church. The buildings are still there now and I think they've been taken over by a Hindu group . He went as choirmaster and my mother sort of fancied this new choirmaster and pretty soon after he took that job, they got to know each other and got married in 1942. My father had some knee problems, so he was not wanted in the army and because he was doing agricultural buildings, things like that, he didn't go off and join the forces. But my parents were musical. As I mentioned, my great aunt, who was the chairman of the governors of the local school, she was also organist at the Methodist Church in Stratton St Margaret. And that's where I heard an organ for the first time. She guarded that instrument with her life, and no one was allowed anywhere near that instrument to play it. It was her job to play the pipe organ and that's what she did. Anybody else was sort of shooed off. I don't know. She was a person of great character, obviously.

But I had an uncle, my father's second eldest brother, and he knew I was interested in playing the organ because I played the piano at home. We had a couple of pianos hanging around in the house. And so, he used to take me to the Methodist Church. On an evening where we knew that my great aunt was going to be away and he acted as guard while I enjoyed myself learning to play the organ. I suppose this started when I was about twelve and by the time, I was 13, I could play well enough to surprise my great aunt on one Sunday, which was traditionally called Men's Sunday, where men ran the church. She was asked whether I could play the organ in her stead, and she said, yes, that was possible. Because I was her great nephew, I suppose I was treated a little less hostile than some other people. Anyway, I got away with that and played that one service in public. And then that happened the following year when I was 13. And then while I was 14, I was poached by a large church in the centre of Swindon, a United Reform Church, whose organists had suddenly died, and they were in desperate need for an organist. So, I was poached, and I went there and got paid for the first time for playing the organ when I was 14 and stayed there four years, playing twice every Sunday and choir practices and things like that until I was 18. And then I went off to university and it was quite a wrench and I got quite used to playing on a weekly basis. So that's how I started as a professional organist aged 14.

And then sometime after I went to university, I went back. As a 14-year-old I wasn't responsible for the choir. There was a very good choirmaster who ran the singing side of the church. It was just my job to play the organ, but I learned so much from him on how to be organised in setting up choir practices and all these sorts of things and planning things, and we became great friends over the years. He was

manager for one of the big sections of the Great Western Railway, and so just occasionally he couldn't be there on a Sunday, but he was normally there always when the choir sang.

Would you like to talk about your university days and the qualifications you achieved?

Well, at some stage I had to choose which A levels I was going to do at school, and I really had no particular preferences whether I ought to do the arts side or whether I ought to do the science side. However, I had a rather testy relationship with the head of music in Headlands Grammar School. I didn't get on with him very well. I think he found my behaviour as a sort of 14- or 15-year-old man adult a bit difficult to take. Added to which, my father was not too polite about this particular individual. So, I realised that I'd have a rough time doing music GCSE or O level, as the name was, and A levels, so I thought, I'm going down the science route, which is what I did. I really didn't know what I wanted to do at university. Didn't have much of a clue. I thought I might do psychology, but then no university would have me for psychology. I thought I might do medicine. I got an offer of an interview at the Royal Free Hospital in London, but that would involve taking a year out. I got four A levels botany, zoology, physics, and chemistry. So, I was very much within the science area. But then somebody pointed out to me that at that time there was a clearing house system operating for degrees in agriculture and would I be interested in taking a degree in agriculture? And because of my sort of semi farming background, the fact I knew about cows and horses and haystacks and things like that, I went up for interview at University of Nottingham, it's a School of Agriculture and Horticulture, which was at a place called Sutton Bonnington, actually outside Nottingham, near Loughborough.

And so I did a degree in general honours agriculture, which is a very broad course, covering both sciences and economics, and I got a reasonable degree there. Among the students I was a bit of an oddball because I tended to be interested in music and in running choirs, and we had a college choir which I helped run, and I played an organ at a local church in Sutton Bollington. Well, I got my bachelor's degree, two one in general Honours agriculture, and then I didn't know quite what to do, but I knew I needed to earn some money. So I came back to Swindon and contacted the local education authority and said look, I don't know really what I want to do, but have you got any room for a teacher in any of your schools? And within about two or three days I had a phone call from the old headmaster of Headlands Grammar School, where I'd been a pupil, saying, I hear you're starting with us on Monday. And so I went there and taught physics, elementary physics, and chemistry in the school that I'd been to as a pupil. Which was very strange because all these people I called Sir or Miss, I was expected to call them by their first names I couldn't do that I just avoided them calling them anything. Anyway, I had the big advantage in teaching physics as that I'd done physics. I had all my exercise books with everything written out that I'd done while I was doing O level. I was teaching, actually year three, which was the beginning of sound, heat, and light in the physics area, so it was stuff which wasn't too advanced. And I knew the material so well because it was in my books. A friend of mine who a person who became a friend of mine saw me on the first day and he said, oh, you must be must

have been here for a time, because you know exactly where to go for all the equipment and for all that it just wasn't true. It was my first day as well, except I knew where everything was because I'd been there as the pupil. I really enjoyed teaching. This was, I suppose, year seven, year tens and elevens, they'd be called today, but I knew that if I stuck there more than a year, I would be trapped forevermore without the prospect of progressing up the science ladder. Because I didn't have a degree in physics or in chemistry. Mine was a general honest agriculture, which covered a lot of science, lot of applied science, and it covered economics and a variety of other things as well. But I would be outbid each time by people who had degrees in physics or chemistry or biology or something like that. So, I thought, well, it would be nice to get into university teaching and to do that I needed a PhD Doctor of Philosophy. So, I managed to find a source of funding to do a PhD. I went to Reading University to do a PhD in the Agriculture Economics Department. We'd covered economics, some elements of it, as a general degree in agriculture. So, economics was well, some of it was quite familiar to me. So I started this PhD in Reading University, which took me actually four years. I got that eventually and wrote it up. And that's really when I met my wife, because one of the things that she helped me do was to type up my thesis. And she was also singing in a choir that my father was writing at the time. So that's really my university days. Undergraduate at Nottingham University, postgraduate at Reading University, and then I stayed on at Reading University after my grants ran out for one year as a research assistant.

Then in 1970, the job teaching economics at Wye College, which is part of London University based near Ashford, turned up and that's why I moved down to this area.

What was your first job and how did your career change over the years?

Well, I only really ever had one job. My job interview was in 1970 at Wye. A person who had been my professor of Economics at Nottingham University had actually come to Wye College as head of Agricultural Economics there. He taught me and I knew him. And because he also ran a choir, he knew my father because he ran a choir. So it's all slightly incestuous. So, I came down to Wye College and had my interview and they didn't offer me the job, they offered it to somebody else who fortunately turned it down. So, I was Wye college's second choice. But when I got the job, it was sort of understood at that time that Wye college would in some ways back your house purchase, which is what they did. So, all I had to do is go to the Hastings and Thanet Building Society in Ashford and said I had a job at Wye College. The Hastings and Building Society said, here's a mortgage of £4200 pounds, the house was £4600 pounds. I had a very kind uncle who lent me the deposit. So we managed to buy ourselves a house. But that's the only job interview for a proper job I ever had and that job lasted from 1970 to 2005, 35 years in the same place. During that period, the job changed quite substantially and of course I progressed through the ranks of being from a lecturer after about ten years to a senior lecturer after that to a readership, because I was doing quite a lot of research. And then in 1999, I think it was, to a professorship, and Chair. Well, they asked me what I wanted the Chair in, and I said Policy Analysis rather than Agriculture Economics, because that's what I've been doing for quite a long time, working on the statistics which are needed in order to shape policy, particularly agricultural policy.

During that time I worked in a variety of areas and for a variety of organisations on a sort of part time basis, including the Ministry of Agriculture in London, which became Defra Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. For OECD in Paris, for Eurostat in Luxembourg, for the European Commission in Brussels, for the Court of Auditors in Brussels, for the National Audit Office in London, for the House of Lords. I had an interesting job with the House of Lords. These were things which you were expected to do in addition to your lecturing and your teaching and your research. Some of these carrots extra pay, many of them didn't, but that's all right. It's all very interesting and lots of different things open up, particularly when I was doing work for the European Commission or for the statistical office based in Luxembourg, because one piece of work meant I had to travel and visit the capitals of all the European Union member states to go to their statistics offices and talk about, in particular, the way that farmers' incomes were measured in all these countries. And that was wonderful, really. I was paid to go around and I always tried to organise an extra half day here and there so that I could spend some time looking at the sites while I was in Athens, for example, going to the what's the place called? The Acropolis or something like that, and going around the Vatican in Rome, flying back after pinching a half a day to go and do these things. And because the lecturing load at Wye College was not enormous, it meant that I could continue my work at St Leonard's Church, Hythe.

I could also run the College Music, the Choral Society there, and later I could take on the directorship of the Folkstone Choral Society, which I ran for 40 years, and also set up a choir called the Shepway Singers, which is based in Hythe and really I did all that until 2005. By that time, Imperial College had taken over Wye College and the nature of the undergraduate body had changed quite enormously and there were very few people doing agricultural subjects. And what's more, there was a dominance of Chinese students. So in about 2004, I went into a class and said, we're going to talk about decision making and the economics of policy to do with agriculture in the European Union. And they said firmly, but quite clearly, we come from China, that isn't a democracy. The Party tells us what the policy decisions are and then I knew that my days in university teaching were coming to an end. Basically, I ran out of students and in 2005, Imperial College said, look, you've got no students. They're not coming in. Because I had a chair professorship, they couldn't sort of sack me, but they said, would you like to retire early? Which is what I did in 2005. I think I had about two or three years to go before I would formally retire. So they made me an offer I couldn't refuse it. And from that period onwards, I kept all my music activities going. But I also worked with a consultancy which had been part of Wye College in the good old days, doing evaluations, policy analysis, the sort of things which I had been doing while doing the teaching and examining of students, but without the contact with the students anymore. And I reckon, as an economist, I worked harder from 2005 until now than I ever did when I was on the staff. So that's the career and career developments.

How did you balance your career, writing and being Director of Music at St Leonard's Church , Hythe?

Well, it sort of always worked out. If I had to go away to Brussels or Luxembourg, I tried to do it on a Thursday and a Friday so that I could be in Hythe on a Tuesday and Wednesday, when I had to take the choirs or the weekends, something like

that. There were the occasional times when I say, had to be in Spain on a Monday morning, which meant flying out on a Sunday afternoon. So, I usually came and took the choir here on a Sunday morning and then got someone to deputise taking the choir for evening song at the end of the day. But we managed to work it. In fact, one of the bits of logic in me leaving school teaching and going to be a university lecturer and teacher was that I knew I'd have a much more flexible time. Because as a lecturer, you probably do between six and 10 hours face to face lecturing for I don't know how many weeks a year, 30 weeks a year, something like that. In a normal time, lectures will be over by 05:00pm. so you could do things in the evening, like taking choir practices. So, looking back, I think I was very lucky that I very rarely had to miss musical things, musical commitments, because of my work all seemed to dovetail together. Of course because I was taking the student music and we did not only things like Messiah, but we did shows, we did Gilbert & Sullivan operas. I got to know the students in a far what's the word? More relaxed way by doing music with them than I ever did by lecturing them in any economics. Some of them are my friends today.

I recorded a lot of our concerts at Wye and in the old student magazine, I told people I had all these recordings and they persuaded me to transfer them to CD, and a lot of people contacted me saying, oh, we were in the choir in 1984, what have you got from the 1984 days? And I usually imagine, find a recording and had them on CD. That was one of my lockdown projects.

Tell us about your role as director of music and the changes you have made.

Well, as Director of Music of a fairly big church, it's my job to give leadership in music to choose all the music which takes place in the church, not only hymns, but anthems and so on. It's been my job to recruit choirs, and we have at the moment, three choirs here, a boys and men's choir, the traditional sort of setup, a girls' choir which was set up in 2006, and an all adult mixed choir of about 16 singers.

So my job is to recruit for those three choirs, to plan all their music, to train them and to conduct them on Sundays and to be the church's principal organist.

Sometimes if I want to conduct a choir, I have to get somebody else to play the organ to make it work. But that's my job. Also, I'm responsible for making sure that the instruments here are kept in good condition, to liaise with people wanting to have weddings and funerals, to talk about their choice of music and a whole host of things. The church wardens here did ask me to list everything which I did some time ago, and I got 33 different tasks, and only the last three involved playing the organ, all the others were admin or training or recruitment and all that, all that sorts of thing.

So the changes we've made well, the first big change, I suppose, was when I came here, there was a choir of boys and men, and that single choir did everything they sang three times on Sundays and had three rehearsals a week. It was a sort of lifelong commitment. And then in the 1990s, so 20 years after I'd started, no before I got into that, I was lucky we had some really talented people and in the 1980s we got good enough to go and sing in, I think we had 17 different cathedral holidays at different cathedrals around the country. So, we were deputising for the professional choir in these cathedrals. And we also represented the United Kingdom in an international festival in Italy of choir music, which was great fun. A bit dangerous,

though, taking a party of 40 on an aeroplane tended you either lose them or you lose their luggage. Anyway, we did that, and it was a really enjoyable time, and the choir got to really good standard. Mind you, as I took the choir over in 1972, we had about ten or 15 years to improve.

Then in the early 90s, things like rugby, youth rugby, started getting in the way, and I couldn't guarantee the number of boys in order to make the Sunday morning service work, so we formed a mixed choir in about 1990 to do some of the Sunday morning services and the boys and men just did Even Song so that was the first big change. The second big change was in about 2006, where people said, well, you've been doing this for the boys for so long, in fact, there'd been a boys' choir here since about 1480. What are you going to do for girls? So in about 2006, under Brian Barnes's care, who was vicar at the time, we started up a girls' choir, called it the Hythe Girls' Choir, and that built up nicely and is still in existence.

That's how we've got our three choirs, which is the way that things have evolved and the changes that have been made.

What musical instruments do you play?

Well, of course, it's part of the job here I have to play the organ. Not all the time, but most of the time. I played piano and I played a double bass. I started playing a double bass when I was at school because I was quite big as a 12/13 year-old. And they said, well, you're quite big you better learn to play the biggest instrument. So, I played the biggest instrument, not particularly well, but the most important thing that I could lift it, which many people couldn't do.

I had a great time playing in orchestras, probably way above my competence level in the National Schools Orchestra and lots of other orchestras. And then when I went to Reading, I took my double bass with me and played in a lot of events there. It's wonderful being a double bass player because you can stand at the back of the orchestra, play your notes, which are not usually too difficult, and you can watch what other people are doing and listen to what other people were doing, and you can see what a good conductor does and what a not such good conductor does. I learnt an enormous amount as an orchestra player. So when eventually I took over the Folkstone Choral Society as its Musical Director in 1976 and found myself conducting professional orchestras which it used to hire to accompany its Messiahs and Elijah's and Verdi Requiem and everything else it did, I was quite happy working with professional musicians because I know the sort of things that they were looking for in a conductor. And I got on with the players very well.

I often wanted to learn to play a wind instrument, a bugle or something like that, or trumpet. I actually bought one about ten years ago and tried to play it. Could I play it? Not on your life.

I could never get a decent sound of it and it's still sitting in my music room at the moment .

Have you received any unusual requests for weddings, funerals, and events?

The answer is yes. Frequently, perhaps the oddest funeral request I had was to play something "The Leader of The Pack," which was a pop song with a sort of motorbike sounds. This was a young chap who had a motorbike accident and his friends were very keen that I played this. I've all said, if you can get the music, the notes to play, I'll have a go at playing it. That was one very strange one. I had a request for again, I think it was probably a funeral. Someone had been in the Royal Tank Regiment and they wanted me to play a march called "My Friend Willie" Or, which I'd never heard of, but again, I said, find the part and they did very strange thing. Only last weekend at a wedding, someone said, can you play "How to Train Your Dragon?" I said, no, but get me the music, and they got the music. I played sort of strange arrangements of this music and they were perfectly happy. It sounded quite good on the organ, actually.

I suppose occasionally things, if they want huge orchestral pieces, sorry, it doesn't quite work. Oh, another one which I actually quite like is the theme music from "Test Match Special." Again, this is a memorial service or a funeral that actually worked and normally its Nimrod and Handel's Wagner and things like that, but just occasionally you get these odd requests. Yeah.

Favourite piece of choral music?

Well, I suppose the big piece, it must be Handel's Messiah, because it is so good. It's got so much good stuff in it, but as a single piece, probably. Parry "I was glad when they said unto me," which is sung at every coronation now, and it's the third chord in it where he changes what you normally expect to be a B flat into a B natural. And it just makes the word glad brighten up and sound glad. It's wonderful word painting, but I do like quite a wide spectrum. And having conducted, I suppose, four times a Verde Requiem, where you have, in addition to four trumpets in the main orchestra, you have four trumpets hidden up in a gallery that's really exciting to conduct. You don't get chances to do that very often. I was thinking the Choral Society folks in Choral Society has always been very good to me in that they've also allowed me to have the sight of orchestral approaching what the composer intended. So if it said you have four horns, you have four horns. If it said three trumpets, you have three trumpets, and if it said 16 1st violins, well, let me have twelve. But they must have spent over my 40 years, about nearly half a million pounds, on hiring instrumentalists for concerts and things, and that's really what people paid their subscriptions to join these societies for. That was a wonderful experience.

I suppose a nice answer would be the favourite piece of choral music is the one I've just conducted where it should be because there's such a wide spectrum of things.

What other interest do you have?

Well, I used to play tennis. Well, I could play tennis, but to be honest, this sounds very prim and proper, but I've become interested in theology, and particularly biblical, the sources of the Bible, how the Bible came to be written. Someone a few years ago gave me a Kindle for my birthday or Christmas or something, and I

thought, well, this is great. What book can I get? Which doesn't cost me much so I can actually read through? And I thought, well, you can download the Bible from some sources, which I did. And so in the course of about a year, I started the New Testament, read a whole of that and then read the Old Testament, starting at the beginning and went through to the minor prophets about how it finishes. And I thought, this is terrible, it's awfully written you know, it really needs a decent editor to sort this out. But then that got me interested in looking at the history of the way the Bible was put together and people are pig ignorant about the Bible, really and church people are as pig ignorant as anybody else in that they don't realise that, for example, the earliest writings about Jesus was actually St Paul, not the Gospels. You see things like all these birth stories about St Matthew and Luke who wrote these things and they were never intended to be historical truths. Things didn't happen like that, the people who wrote them didn't intend them to be taken as historical. My big gripe with churches at the moment is that they read the Bible and teach the Bible as if it is historical truth and it's not. It was never intended to be and that's where I fall out with many people at the moment. They seem to think I'm in heretical as a church organist and say, no, I don't believe the virgin birth and I don't believe that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He was born in Nazareth by a process which was entirely natural and understandable. Anyway, that's what I'm into at the moment.

Could you give us a couple of your proudest achievements?

Well, I suppose getting my professorship by an examination process and justifying why the university should give me a professorship, which then stays with me, because when I retired, they gave me an honorary professor. That's probably the proudest moment as far as academic work is concerned. In terms of personal ones, I suppose. Yeah. Their my children, they're the things I really value. Children and family and friends.

In terms of music, well, almost any Sunday. But there have been some people, some ex choir. I've taught something like 300 choir boys over the years. I've got to put it carefully through my training, and there may be more, but I've got the names of 300 because I've kept all the registers over 50 years since I've been here. They come back, and some of them say that was the happiest time of our life. And some of them have gone to run their own choirs and some are professional musicians, many are not, but some are. But I think what's makes me proud as great is this sort of legacy which has been passed on and the fact that they can do these things and get something out of the training which I've given them. That's wonderful.

What changes have you noticed since living in Hythe? Better and worse.

Well, I tell everybody, Hythe is the centre of the universe in many ways. It has the big advantages of a small community because you can know a lot of people, but it's big enough to have nice restaurants and things like that and you can get away from it if you want to very easily.

It has altered and particularly it's altered as far as my areas of concern are concerned, a negative one is that churches now don't have people in them that are of family age. You look around and sometimes you think the youngest person here is 70. There's nothing wrong with being 70, but if you're trying to run a choir which has boys and girls in it, it's helpful if there are families in the congregation. In the old days, people would bring their kids to me and say, look, this boy needs to be in your choir, doesn't he? He can sing at home, he ought to be here, but they don't do that now. I have to actively recruit in schools and I communicate with, I think, seven local schools and send them the material, talking about boys' choir and the girls' choir, which we run separately here, and it's increasingly difficult to get families interested or parents interested in these sorts of things. And the pandemic, which we're going to talk about in a minute, completely knocked the system, it really did. And before the pandemic, I had 17 boys in the boys' choir here. Now I've got four. To the extent that it's almost non-viable, I've just done all this communication to the schools to try and stimulate interest, and I'll actually go and visit some other schools as well and sort of put my face around. But that's the most difficult thing. The girls' choir has bounced back. I think there are 14 in the girls' choir at the moment, so that's viable, but the problem is recruiting to the boys' choir. If you don't recruit to the boys' choir, sooner or later you're not going to have people singing tenor and bass and the lower parts, so that's a mega problem.

And congregations are also smaller.

What impact did COVID have on you?

Well, personally, I managed to escape it for quite a long time but eventually got it. I think it had quite a long term effect on me, but in terms of effect on the community and societies and clubs and church attendance and all that sort of stuff. It really has caused a major issue which we're not over yet by a long way.

I know people tended to do things by habit and COVID broke those habits. Boys used to come up, come here on a regular basis for choir practice and on Sundays. And I suppose of those who didn't come back after COVID, about half of them were boys who were getting older, whose voices were breaking anyway and would have left during that period because their voices changed. Although hopefully a lot of those may have stayed on in the back row as tenors and basses and grown up to be adult singers. Some of them just lost interest and got out of the habit and some of the parents found other things to do. So there have been quite significant impact. I've got a document here which you might be interested in. It looks at the I've got two copies, actually shows what's happened to the number of boys in the choir over the years. And the key to keeping numbers up is to attract five or six new boys into the choir every year. Then your total number keeps up at about 20.

But that article finished just before COVID and things have collapsed since then.

What memories do you have of the 1987 hurricane?

Yes, it was a Thursday night. I think I finished choir practice here, locking the church up, and went out there through the west door to go home. And I thought, this is unusually warm. You were aware that it was, for that time of year, exceptionally warm. I think I had probably had my son Tim with me at the time. I had somebody with me. Anyway, we went off home and we lived at 54 Brockhill Road, which was which is almost near the green in Saltwood, and we escaped with only one tile off. The tile was actually minor damage. Other people had much more damage. I also remember because next morning on a Friday, I was supposed to be driving to Wye College because I was an elected governor of the college and we had a meeting that morning and I tried to drive there, tried to get out of Hythe. It was always impossible to get out of Hythe because trees were down everywhere. But I did get out of, I think, Black House Hills, I got up there and then drove across my normal route but going through the villages, it was just like seeing a First World War scene with chimneys blown off, trees down. I got to Wye, the centre of the village. At Wye we had several tall buildings and their chimneys had crashed down into the main.

This building (St Leonard's Church) was not much damaged. The roof was partially stripped, which meant water got in here and did some damage to the organ, which meant not long later we had to rebuild, replace some of the electrics in the organ because water got in and this roof was dripping water because tiles flew off the main roof, landed on, this was just a felt roof, they dug into them, dug holes into this roof and so this was like a sieve in here, so that was pretty dramatic. And some of the there was an orchard up on the A 20, which completely uprooted by the hurricane, which was quite dramatic.

Were you here then. No. You were here? Yeah. Mind you, it made you realise that a lot of these trees should have been replaced a number of years ago, because fruit trees don't last forever, and about every 40 years they ought to be replaced.

I got to this meeting at Wye, and people who lived locally had turned up mainly walking, and there were only out of the I don't know, 15 people, there were only about six of us there. And so I said, right, this is the meeting at which we all vote that we're each given the new cars each, paid for by the college. People thought that might be reversed at the next meeting, so we didn't get away with it.

The house which I currently live in, which is 1 Brock Hill Road, is much more exposed, and tiles flew off that roof and were blown through the windows in the front of the house. And some little old lady was a housekeeper there at the time, trying to keep bedroom doors shut so that the wind didn't go through the house completely. But we were lucky at the other end.

Were you aware of the 2007 Earthquake Folkestone/Hythe?

Yes, it's another interesting one, because at that time we were just preparing a performance of Noah's Flood by Benjamin Britton in the church here.

I got up early because I think we'd arranged to meet here at nine, something like that, to have a rehearsal with some of the senior singers. A couple of my choir boys had parts in it and we were going to rehearse it. I remember being in my house in 1 Brockhill Road, and all of a sudden, the curtains started moving backwards and forwards like that, and I thought, well, has a nuclear power station that I can see from my windows? Has it really blown up? I suppose this strange thing happened. Lasted for about just a few seconds, really, and I saw the nuclear power station was still there and the earthquake had been moving the house and even the curtains were staying where they were, and that's what wobbled.

Anyway, I came down here and the kids turned up for a rehearsal and we opened the door and came in, and the whole of the Chancel on that end was covered in dust and little bits of stone had fallen down from the roof. Now, it took me back to was it 1770? Something when a church tower fell down, the result of an earthquake somewhat longer earlier. So I thought, is it going to be the same sort of thing here? Should we actually be in this building at all? But nothing else. There was only sort of dust and tiny little fragments of stone. So we swept up and had our rehearsal here.

But, yes, I certainly do remember that.

Do you have further ambitions you wish to achieve?

Well, I would like to get the choir, the boys section, back to a viable size.

I clearly am not going to go on very much longer, if any longer, after having done a job here for 51 years, but I would prefer to go out with leaving the choirs as three viable groups.

I think that's probably and also to leave this place when I do go on a friendly basis, rather than say, every Prime Minister, every politician is ultimately a failure, there's always something which caused the problem. I don't want that to happen. Yeah, I don't think I've worked with Malcolm McAfee. Norma Woods. Brian Barnes, Tony Wendross. Andrew Sweeney. This is my 6th vicar. I've got on well with all of them, some closer than others, but you hear terrible stories about clergy and organists falling out.

Old customs or local events that have ceased or changed.

One thing I remember was the last time the Court of Guestling was held in St Leonard's Church. I can't quite remember when it was, but it must have been late 70s, was it? Mid 70s I think it was because it was the time that all the Mayors and Corporations turned up and they used to have, I think, an annual court to decide strange things like what the taxes should be on the marsh, or how many sheep could go on it, or who'd stolen whose sheep and all that sort of thing. Anyway, this course of Guestling, it must have been thinking about it must have been slightly older than 1976, because I remember Malcolm McCafee was here always fine regalia, the church was absolutely full.

We knew it was going to be the last one because something had gone through parliament abolishing this court with all its finery and all its procedures. And at the beginning of the court, we sang Matins, I think, a short service, and the choir sang there. And we were hoping that we could stay, but we processed out and they ejected us from the church, saying, "you're not a member of the court, even though you have sung at the service, we can't enable you to stay." And actually, I did watch a little bit from the back, but with all their maces and things like that, it was great, but it doesn't happen anymore and it was the last one ever.

Somewhat related to that I remember back in the 70's and 80's Mayor's Sunday was a great civic event. It was a service held at something like 11:00. It was after the main service and again all the mayors and corporations from the Cinque Ports turned up. This was the Hythe Mayor making service and for years and years and years it was exactly the same because the town council printed the service sheets. So we always had "He who would Valiant be" and things like that.

And all the youth organisations turned up. The church was packed with Scouts and Cubs and Sea Scouts and they all had their flags. So we had to have this procession of all the flags coming in and going out again at the end. I used to play the War March of the Priests or something at the end by Mendelssohn because it could go on forever. Sometimes they did go on forever.

Once I was slightly upset. I was playing some music before the service and a group of trumpeters appeared at the back and played fanfares and things, which messed up my organ playing. As time has gone by, these civic services seem to have disappeared. And the last one we had, which was this year there were a handful of Scouts there. It was nothing like used to be in the olden days of the 1970s and 80s.

That's all I wanted to say.