



The best place to be marooned?

Sylvia Vetta reveals how the 'castaway' series began

While writing these features, I had a blinding moment of revelation a vision of this amazing city of Oxford. It was not only of the beautiful buildings, the museums, libraries, theatres, parks, meadows and rivers — but the people thriving within this environment.

The 50 castaways have come from completely different backgrounds, often from other parts of the world but the atmosphere of Oxford has added a rich ingredient to their lives.

Oxford is rather a small city but with each interview, a realisation grew that the lives of these wonderfully creative people have sent out ripples of influence and benefitted not only this county, but the rest of the UK — and often those ripples have become waves that have crossed the world.

As you read about the lives of our 50 castaways, I hope you may come to a conclusion about what is so special about this place and the people.

We live in a time obsessed by the idea of celebrity. Because of their modesty, you are likely to pass without recognition in the street. I believe most of the castaways are happy with that situation and would hate to be called a celebrity.

A good example is Sir Roger Bannister. In 1954, he was the first man to run a sub-four minute mile, which made him one of the most well-known men in the English speaking world. I discovered that he is as proud of his work as a neurologist as the sporting achievements which catapulted him to fame.

So how did I come to meet them and be inspired by these intriguing people? It all

began in the summer of 1998, with a telephone call from Tim Metcalfe seeking my advice. The writer of *Oxfordshire Limited Edition's* antiques page was moving to London and they needed to find a replacement.

Why ask me? At that time I was Chairman of the Thames Valley Antiques Dealers Association and until recently had been a director of Oxford Antiques Centre, affectionately named by me and my business partner as The Jam Factory.

Situated in the former Cooper's Oxford Marmalade factory we thought Marmalade Factory was a bit of a mouthful but we were happy to call the centre's café The Marmalade Cat.

My first encounter with author Brian Aldiss was when he became a customer.

From the week of my arrival in Oxford in 1970, I became an avid reader of *The Oxford Times*.

At that time, I was probably not aware of just how exceptional Oxfordshire's county newspaper is.

It was not just that I loved newspapers but I was addicted to the printed word ever since I joined my local library aged seven.

By 1998, I was inclined to think that if you read, you can also write. So Tim may have been surprised by my response. "I'll do it for you," I said.

The result of that impetuous promise is that every month, since August 1998, I have been privileged to write the antiques pages of the award-winning *Oxfordshire Limited Edition* magazine.

For the first two years I wrote a potpourri of features but decided that the best way to avoid



repetition was to write a series.

My first series was *The Antiques Time Machine*. Starting with Gothic and moving through time, I looked at the way homes were furnished, in the broadest sense, and discovered what is available to buy from each period until eventually reaching the present. At that moment in 2002, I asked specialists to suggest what will be the antiques of the future. Art Glass was not a surprise but the just invented iPod did give me a jolt.

My next series was *Ask the Experts*, for which I interviewed specialists in everything from costume jewellery to fine art.

When handling antiques I always wondered who owned them and what kind of lives they lived. What drew me to appreciate antiques has nothing to do with their monetary value. Frankly, knowing what something is worth bores me.

I love history, art, design and storytelling and it seemed to me that they are all present in the world of antiques. Surely, I thought, every

antique comes with a story?

That idea led to my next series, *Every Antique tells a Story*. This was 2007— well before Neil McGregor's wonderful *History of the World in a Hundred Objects* broadcast on the BBC.

In 2010, Dr McGregor had the benefit of the contents of the British Museum but I simply asked our readers to send me stories of their antiques. They were not as erudite as Neil's Radio 4 series but were fun.

For example, Dr Geoff Smaldon contacted me with the story of his collection of apple scoops. It turned out to reflect an aspect of social history we may wish to ignore — before modern dentistry and oral hygiene, people lost their teeth and could not eat apples unless they were shaved into soft little strips — hence the origin of apple scoops.

The problem for me was that many of the stories from readers needed supplementing to fill at least two pages so I wondered where to go next for inspiration. Like many readers





of *The Oxford Times*, I have enjoyed listening to Radio 4's long-running programme, *Desert Island Discs*.

I felt that the castaway's choice of luxury and book were more revealing than their choice of music. Eureka!

What if I asked castaways which antique, work of art or book they would like with them if marooned on a desert island? The formula could be similar to *Desert Island Discs* in that they can suggest various items but in the end choose one of them. And so, in January 2008, the castaway series began.

My choice of first castaway was not difficult. In Oxford we are privileged to have what is probably the world's first public museum, the Ashmolean.

Its energetic Director, Dr Christopher Brown, came to Oxford in 1998. In those days, the museum appeared closed to the public behind its huge blue front doors and you entered into a rather dark space.

Christopher had a vision of opening up the museum to the community, local, national and international and amazingly he has achieved that ambition.

When I interviewed him, the later

extensions at the rear had been demolished and work on building the wonderful New Ashmolean was in progress.

The Ashmolean began life in Broad Street in the building that is now home to The Museum of The History of Science.

The original Tradescant collection included Powhatan's cloak, brought from Virginia in 1638. It is embroidered with delicate little shells and Christopher pointed out that a lot were missing, although the cloak had arrived in Oxford in perfect condition. The curators of the Ashmolean had nailed the cloak to the wall of the museum — and visitors had helped themselves to shells as souvenirs!

A certain visiting German academician was horrified that not only the local farmers and tradesmen visited the museum on market days but even *women* were allowed in!

The Ashmolean although part of the University has always represented an overlap of town and gown. I hoped our castaway series could do the same.

Another area where town and gown overlap is continuing education. Reflecting that among the castaways are lecturers employed in that

department and Sir Christopher Ball, a former Master of Keeble College, who as a devotee of lifelong learning, was a founder of Kellogg College.

Gown is no longer just those colleges in the centre of Oxford but up the hill in Headington where the first female vice-chancellor of Oxford Brooks, Janet Beer, and its present chancellor, Shami Chakrabarti, both agreed to be castaway.

An organisation where the town overlaps with gown is The Oxford Preservation Trust, so the feisty Deborah Dance, who is its director, joined the castaways on the island.

The series has been a success and, in February 2012, the 50th castaway — Oxford MP Andrew Smith — was marooned on our island.

Since we were flexible in our interpretation of antique, some intriguing items have been chosen for the island. Within six months, the emphasis changed from the objects to the castaways themselves and the series has continued to evolve.

The castaway has also been able to choose the location for the photoshoot within Oxfordshire. That too has shown how lucky we are to live in this city and county.

I asked Tim Metcalfe, the editor of Limited Edition whether he thought we could reproduce the features in a book and the rest — as they say — is history.

How to live a good life is one of those big philosophical questions but I hope that you can make some interesting reflections based on the journeys of these fascinating men and women to the desert island.

There are stories among them to inspire young people about to choose a career, and others, in midlife who maybe want a change of direction. For those about to retire, the dramatic new directions some castaways have taken after the age of 60 are motivating. These are all positive and often surprising stories and I hope you enjoy reading them.

Illustrations by Weimin He

