

# Choral singing led to a lifelong faith

**HE first encountered God while singing in the church choir at the age of six - and that encounter led to his lifelong passion for music.**

Grandfather John Lea, now 84, joined the church choir at St John's, Richmond after the family lodger overheard him singing and suggested to his parents that he join the choir.

"My mother liked to sing and sang to me as a child and I think I developed her love and gift for music," said John, who now lives in Wootton on the Isle of Wight.

"I joined the church choir at the age of six. I loved every minute of it. I found the whole atmosphere of the church absolutely mystical and it just grabbed me. I loved singing, loved the church and loved being a part of the choir and I knew then that music was what I wanted to do."

John was born in Shepherd's Bush in December 1931 and baptised in the local church, St Stephen's. His family moved to Richmond when he was five.

When his dad lost his job, the family moved to Wimbledon which meant leaving the church choir, something that "absolutely shattered" John.

And when the Second World War broke out, John and his older sister Grace were evacuated to Ilfracombe, on the north coast of Devon. They stayed with a couple, Mr and Mrs Jones, who didn't have any children of their own.

"I have really happy memories of living with Mr and Mrs Jones. They were really good to us. I loved living by the sea and didn't really want to go back home afterwards," John said.

"We didn't get much schooling whilst we were there though. There were so many evacuees and few teachers and so we only went to school for half a day at a time. As a result, I didn't make any progress in my learning and so when I came back to London and went back to school full time I struggled."

John left school and went on to study at London University and Trinity College of Music, also in London.



John Lea today and (above right) as an evacuee during the war

He served in the RAF and while he was there, he decided that he would like to use his passion for music to teach others. So when he left, he enrolled at the Institute of Education of London University to do teacher training.

After qualifying he took a teaching job at St Luke's School in Kingston where the pupils were mainly Barnardo's boys.

Around the same time, John became the organist at St John's Church, Wimbledon. That was where he met and married his wife, Sheila who was in the choir.

They had a son Jonathan. Further teaching posts followed in Maidstone, Kent and in

Brentwood, Essex, before they moved to the Isle of Wight where John took up a post as headteacher at Ryde Junior School.

When his mother became unwell, John took a job as

headmaster of Downside Preparatory School in Surrey to be nearer to her. He stayed there for 15 years.



Over the years he has served as organist and director of music at various churches in the south, including All Saints Church in Ryde, where he served for more than 20 years.

He has also been the chairman of the Isle of Wight Festival of Music, Drama and Dance, a post he held for 13 years. He retired from All Saints in 2012 but still worships there with Sheila.

Music and the church have always been really important to John and he has always felt God's presence with him.

"I can honestly say that ever

with me helps a lot, especially in difficult times. Our son Jonathan sadly died in a motorbike accident leaving his wife and a three-month-old son, Jeremy.

"We were absolutely shattered but I knew that God was with us through that.

"The church has always been so important to me especially music and the Eucharist. It really lifts me. I find God everywhere but I especially find him in music."

In 2000, John wrote the words and music for a hymn called *Let us join in celebration* for a competition organised by St Paul's Cathedral in London as part of the millennium celebrations.

His composition was chosen as one of just 12 winning hymns out of nearly 1,700 entries from around the world.

That same hymn was sung at the Eucharist to celebrate the 75th anniversary of our diocese, held on Castle Field in Southsea in July 2002.

John also received a commemorative plate, which was fired by Andrew Bristow of Bonchurch Pottery.

Now retired, he was inspired to write a fictional novel based on his experiences as an evacuee in Ilfracombe. The book is called *The Vackie Heroes*. The word 'vackie' was the affectionate name given to evacuees in the town.

"I have such happy memories of my time as an evacuee, even though they were such dark times. I wanted to capture those memories in a book so that those memories would live on," John said.

"The book is based on my memories of the time but the events in the story are entirely fictional. I hope people enjoy reading it."

## my faith

**Many will know John Lea for his musical skills at a high-profile island parish, and his previous career as a headteacher. He has now written a book based on his wartime experiences**



## Book features evacuees' adventures

**LIKE** many children, John and his sister Grace were evacuated from London during the Second World War to escape the expected bombing by the German Luftwaffe.

Their father had been called up to join the army and was now fighting in France.

The siblings were billeted with a married couple in Ilfracombe, North Devon.

They weren't looking

forward to leaving all that they knew behind, especially their mother, but they soon settled into their new surroundings and the adventures began.

There were three other girls in the house with them and they soon made friends among themselves and with the local children. The locals insisted that the evacuees should be known as Vackies.

The excitement they found in

their new community changed their whole view of the area and the people who lived there.

That's the plot of John Lea's new book *The Vackie Heroes*, which is a fictional story based on his memories of his time as an evacuee.

It is published by Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd and is available to buy online as well as in shops including Waterstones, priced at £8.95.