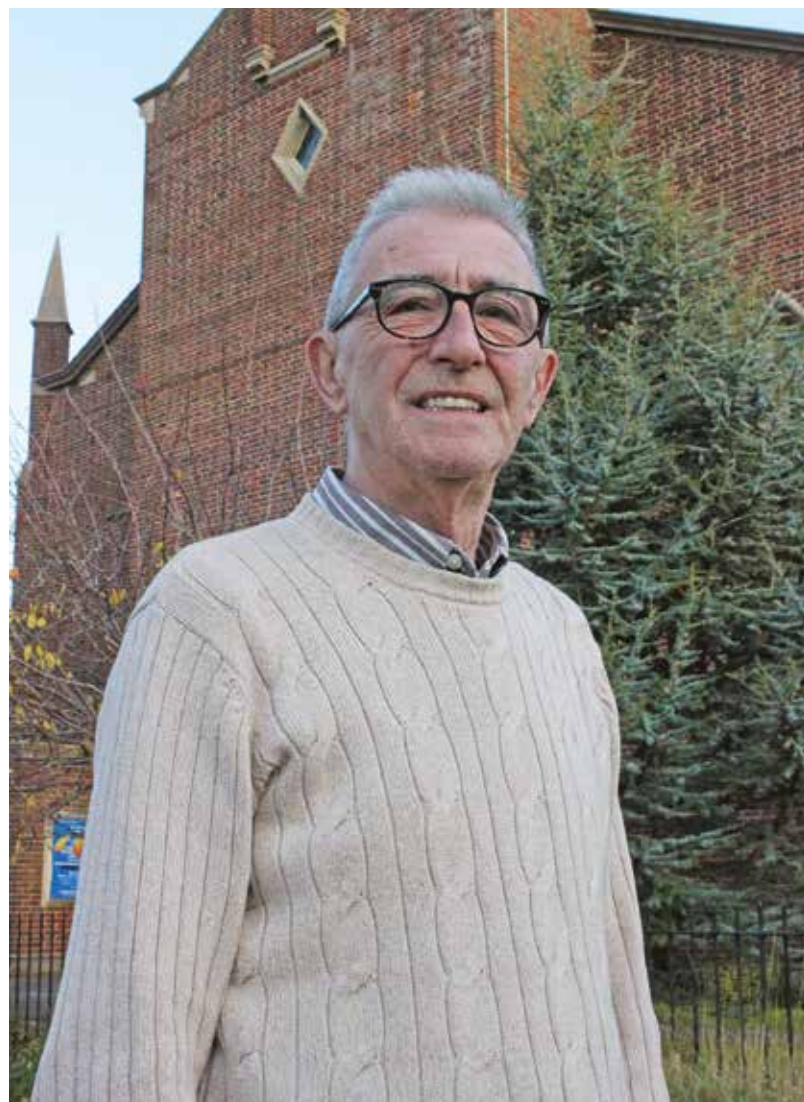


# Here's a theatrical man with acting in his veins



**HE has been involved with his theatre company for its entire 54-year history - and Richard Tovery hasn't finished acting yet.**

The 71-year-old is just about to step down as the chairman of Highbury Players, the company based at St Philip's Church in Cosham.

He has been involved in some way in each of the 90 productions they have staged since 1962, apart from one when he was abroad. He has acted, directed, sold tickets, built scenery, written programmes and even put out the chairs for the audience. Now he's ready to hand over the reins to someone else.

"I do enjoy it, especially directing plays," he said. "It is very rewarding when you try out ideas and they work on the stage. I wouldn't call myself a good actor, but I enjoy it.

"When I was 17 or 18 I could just look at a script and memorise it first time. Now I have to read it 20 times and I still don't always get it!"

He moved onto the Highbury estate in Cosham in 1949, started going to Sunday School at St Philip's and was confirmed there. He became part of the youth group, and by the time he was 18 or 19 he was a sidesman and part of the PCC.

In 1962, the then vicar's wife wanted to stage a Passion Play and recruited the youth group to take



**Richard Tovery outside St Philip's Church in Cosham (above); Richard acting with Highbury Players back in 1965**

company. He and Toni have now been married for 29 years.

He had worked in social security for 23 years and then for the Crown Prosecution Service for 10 years before taking early retirement at 51. He then worked in the local post office, in gardening, and in other temporary jobs

before ending his working life around six years ago.

His faith took a knock when his father died of Motor Neurone Disease when Richard was just 20. The death of other family members at early ages has also affected his faith. But he senses there is something special about

the parts of Jesus, the disciples and others.

"We got the bug of performing, and decided to start a drama group," said Richard. "At first it was called the St Philip's Drama Group and the first play we performed was *Murder in the Vicarage*, which seemed appropriate. My job for that play was just to pull the curtains, but by the second play I decided I wanted to act."

The company has performed two plays a year for most of its existence, rehearsing every Monday night in St Philip's church hall, and transforming it into a theatre for each performance week.

Most members were part of the congregation in the early days, but non-churchgoers joined too. In 1978, the company changed its name to the Highbury Players to avoid possible negative associations with church hall

amateur dramatics.

"We tend to perform comedies, as I think people like a laugh," he said. "And we choose plays for a family audience. We have about 17 members at the moment and we do auditions to find the right cast.

"Each performance raises money for a specific charity,

sometimes the church itself. And our Monday nights can be rehearsals, play readings or socials."

Richard has been married three times, and all three of his wives have been part of the theatre

being in a church, and has been happy to assist the parish's new pioneer minister Nicky Pybus with fresh ideas.

"Motor Neurone Disease is horrible and we had a dreadful 18 months before my father died,"

he said. "It took a long time to get the bitterness out of me, and a lot of things didn't make sense, even though the vicar at the time was very kind. And my sister died at 54 and my cousin at 52.

"I don't feel bitter now, but my faith took a dent. I still have a sense of values, and I find church services very peaceful. I've done quite a few speeches at funerals, and I still get something out of being in a church.

"I like what Nicky is trying to do to make it more relevant, and we've helped her where we can. I've always thought that church shouldn't just be a building, it should be something for the whole community."

Now he is aiming to find someone else who can take over as chairman of Highbury Players.

He has been one of its officers for 31 years of its 54-year history - chairman 12 times, treasurer 19 times and also secretary for one year. In January, he won't be standing.

"I think it just needs someone younger to give the company some fresh ideas," he said. "I'm getting tired, and I can't carry on being the person who opens up the church hall every Monday night. But I'll still be around to act and direct if necessary."

If you're interested in joining Highbury Players or finding out more, contact Richard on 023-9238 7329.

## my faith

**He has been part of the furniture at St Philip's Church for 54 years, because of his involvement with the Highbury Players. Richard Tovery will be stepping down as chairman in January**