

*Robert Peston on Siân Busby, for the unveiling of the Siân Busby Collection at the London Welsh Centre, June 18 2013*

It is a wonderful thing for us, Simon, Max and me, that you are honouring Siân today. Because in the decade or so that Siân sang here with the Chorale and - later - became a stalwart of the centre itself – building a library and exhibition, joining the board - you all became a huge part of our lives.

I think of the London Welsh Centre as a warm and eccentric friend, whom – it may surprise you to learn, and I will come back to this – I got to know very well indeed.

It was the singing of the Chorale that first lured Siân on to your rocks, so to speak. For more than ten years, Tuesdays were a fixture in our home. Siân would rush out of the house at just before six. For a good few of those years, Max would accompany her to choir – usually, but not always, with enthusiasm (Max knows what I am getting at here) – grab a quick bite in the bustle of Kings Cross station, and then take the 45 or 46 bus up the Grays Inn Road to this solid, steady, very Welsh place.

And Tuesdays were in a way a London Welsh ritual for me too. I would always be here, sitting in your foyer, usually for the last 30 minutes or so of rehearsals – half an ear on the conductor - Ken for many years, Edward today - trying to judge by his inflexion whether you had been working hard enough - waiting to pick up Siân and take her home. It is funny how something that was simply a routine for me is now something precious about my beloved Siân, that I miss, along with everything else about her.

It is hard to exaggerate how important you all were to Siân. She loved music, as you know. And one of the things that is really odd about the house these days is the absence of Siân

singing all the time, whatever she was doing, often rehearsing for your next concert.

But you also helped her to establish who she was, her roots, her Welsh heritage.

When I first got to know Siân in the mid 1970s, I would say she was London first. I am not sure I was conscious at all back then of her Welsh antecedents. By the time she died last year, she was solidly London Welsh. Or even Welsh London. And of course that means for Simon, Max and me that Wales has – to an important extent – become home. Which is not something I would have anticipated ten years ago. To some significant degree, that's your fault.

The friendships she made here, the fellowship, were an invaluable support, especially after Siân was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2007. She wouldn't have told many of you what she was going through, and how serious it all was. That is just how she was, an incredibly brave and selfless person, who never wanted to burden others with her problems. But the life of the choir was – well I was going to say a distraction, but that's not quite right. It was a joy, that helped her – and us – cope with the personal challenges of the illness.

And the choir became a bigger and bigger thing for her, after she became joint chairman with her very great friend Helena Poldevaart, who sadly can't be here today. Max reminded me the other day that she used to say she devoted more time to the choir and the Centre than she did to her career writing superb books. Which is saying something, because remember this is someone who wrote two stupendously brilliant and substantial novels after being diagnosed with cancer, and was a great, loving and diligent mother and wife.

Now for some home truths. You were a nightmare to manage. And this will probably scare you. She used to tell me everything that went on here, in a regular unburdening. The outside world may think that what goes on in a choir is all very dull and innocent. But believe me, if I ever wanted a change of career, I could write quite a soap opera called “The Welsh Choir” – and it would rival Corrie and Stenders for shocks. I would have to include the normal caveat at the beginning of each episode that all similarity to persons living or dead are pure coincidence, but of course the sensational stories of passions and rivalries would be based on what she told me. But before you start having a panic attack, it is all in the vault, never to be revealed.

The important thing is that she really cared about you and this great place. The choir tour to Aberystwyth and environs which she organized required an enormous amount of work by her. But my goodness she was thrilled that it was such a success. I should admit to being really nervous about it. Because she had been pretty ill when she took it on, so I too was overjoyed that it all went so well.

Working with her great and old friend Kate Kneale on the London Welsh exhibition, which has now become one of the jewels of this place, was a labour of love. And establishing the library was something that really mattered to her. The two most important things for Siân, along with family, were singing and books. You here gave her the opportunity to express both of these great loves.

Box after box of dusty Welsh tomes would arrive at our house, which Siân had somehow procured gratis from the estates of London Welsh notables who had passed on. She would then, in her fastidious way, catalogue them all, look for duplications, and identify the real treasures. With this, as with everything, Siân was a perfectionist.

At the risk perhaps of sounding a bit maudlin – which I don't wish to do on what should be a happy celebration of the contribution she gave to you and what you gave back to her – she did these things without a second thought of the cost to herself. Almost exactly a year ago, Siân came back from the Centre, where she had been sorting piles of books and lugging them up and down stairs, complaining that her back was in pain. She wondered whether she had been foolish in not accepting help with the lifting. In fact, we learned a week or so later that the pain was a sign of her cancer spreading and the horrible chemotherapy no longer working very effectively to contain it. I suppose the reason I am telling you this is that creating the library and exhibition were labours of love for Siân – and that is why Simon, Max and I are so pleased by your generous gesture in remembering Siân by naming the library and exhibition after her.

Now, Simon is going to remind you of Siân's great gift of seeing the world as it and telling stories about it by reading from one of her books. We've chosen the opening of her last novel, *A Commonplace Killing*, which has just been published – because it is about a part of London very close to here – the Cally Road, Holloway and Finsbury Park. This is a familiar and loved part of London for both of us, and especially for Siân. Much of her childhood was spent there – and it is one of the main places where the London Welsh – notably the dairy folk from whom Siân was descended – lived and congregated. What Simon is about to read certainly doesn't glamourize the area. Remember this is 1946, just after the war. But my goodness it's evocative.

Thank you