

# GOOD NEWS

FOR NORWICH & NORFOLK

Christmas 2010

## Inside

Last orders – 2  
Christmas spirit – 3  
Miracle escape – 4  
Inspiring love – 6  
Millionaire Gary – 7



**REAL SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS:** Based in Norfolk, the Thursford Christmas Spectacular show is known as Britain's largest seasonal musical experience, but director John Cushing is determined that the show reflects the real meaning of Christmas. ■ See page 3

## Police chief forgave son's terrorist killer

By MIKE WILTSHIRE

**F**orgiveness not revenge was the powerful message of a Christian father and former chief constable, whose son was murdered by a terrorist, to a Norwich audience.

It was national headline news when Stephen Oake, a young detective, and a father of three, was stabbed to death while on an anti-terror raid in Manchester in 2003.

"Revenge imprisons us, but forgiveness sets us free," Stephen's father, and former Chief Constable, Robin Oake, told a Norwich FGBMFI dinner recently. He spoke movingly of the night he had to break the tragic news to his wife, Chris, by phone before she heard about it on the 10 o'clock TV news.

"Darling, I have some dreadful news. Please be strong as you always are," and then I told her, "Our Steve has been murdered on duty."

Later, a TV reporter asked Robin in a news conference how he felt about his son's killer. Fighting back the tears, Robin said, "I forgive him" - but he believed that only God could give him the strength to say this.

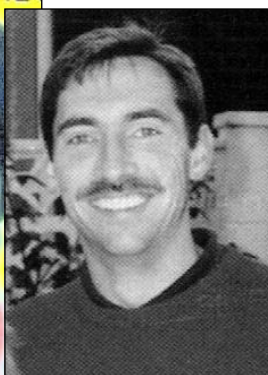
Former Prime Minister Tony Blair was among the 1,000-strong congregation that attended Stephen's funeral at Manchester Cathedral. Since then, Robin Oake has written a moving book called "Father, Forgive" and has seen many people across the UK discover afresh the power of forgiveness in the face of extreme personal pressures.

Robin and his wife, Chris, a former nurse, believe that with God's help, the miracle of



forgiveness is possible in every situation. "It is part of the healing process. For us, it has removed the bitterness and anger that we might have had - we've been healed from that."

Recalling his heroic son, who was awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal, Robin told his



**Far left, Police chief Robin Oake and, left, his son Stephen.**

audience: "I thank God for Steve. All the good memories of childhood, the difference the Lord Jesus made in his life, his great marriage to Lesley and their three super kids; his abilities in music, his humour, his expertise as a police officer. I thank God he taught us so much."

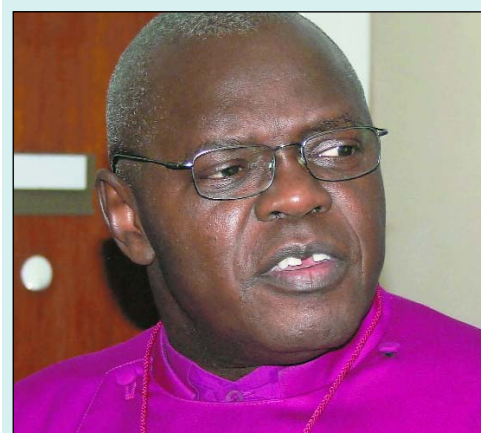
Despite the tragedy of his son's death, Robin has a fascinating story to share. He became a PC at 19. At 6ft 5ins, he was also a keen sportsman and was also popular with the Royal family in a varied "and very happy" police career of 42 years.

After service in the Metropolitan Police during the bombings of the seventies, he moved to Bramshill, the Police Staff College, and then to Manchester's Moss Side during the time of serious race riots. Finally, he became Chief Constable of the Isle of Man.

As a well-known Christian, Robin has spoken in many venues including the Royal Albert Hall.

He and Chris have seen lives transformed as they have shared the Bible's message of the "why" and "how" of Christian forgiveness.

Their late son, Stephen, became a believer at 15 after seeing the Christian film, A Thief in the Night. Little did he realise he would one day become a police officer like his dad.



**The Archbishop of York in Norwich.**

## The Christian Big Society

■ Christians have been developing Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society for the past 2000 years, according to the Archbishop of York, the Most Rev Dr John Sentamu, speaking to church ministers during a visit to Norwich on December 2.

"If you took all the Christian activity out of the centre of Norwich there would be a big hole," he told over 70 Church of England ministers and guests at a private reception in Norwich.

The Archbishop was referring to Christian based organisations such as the YMCA, the Matthew Project, the Magdalene Group and Norfolk Street Pastors, to name just a few.

While he was in Norwich, the Archbishop also visited another project, Pregnancy Choices Norfolk, which helps women facing an unplanned pregnancy, to launch their new counselling centre in the middle of the city.

"There was a young lady who took a very bold decision to tell her story on a DVD, about how she went through a lot of trauma with a pregnancy," said Dr Sentamu. "She told me how that group has helped her to put her life back together."

"The problem in this country is that we so reticent to talk about the good news stories. We don't want to look as if we are competing with our neighbour and we don't want to wear our faith on our sleeves. Therefore people don't recognize that in this country there are some 23.7 million hours of voluntary work done for free by Christians every year."

## Claim your free book

■ A free book, which explains the real meaning of Christmas, is being offered to every reader of *Good News for Norwich & Norfolk*.

*What's the Point of Christmas?* is written by popular author and speaker J John.

Why are people still celebrating the birth of a baby born over 2000 years ago in the Middle East?

If you would like an answer to this and

other questions about the Christian faith then, with no strings attached, send an 11cm x 16cm large letter rate SAE to: Good News for Norwich & Norfolk, 4 Linden Road, New Costessey, Norwich, NR5 OBE.





## NEWS

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# GOOD NEWS

FOR NORWICH & NORFOLK

■ Good News for Norwich & Norfolk is published by Festival Norwich, 48 St Giles St, Norwich, NR2 1LP.  
 ■ Website: [www.networknorfolk.co.uk](http://www.networknorfolk.co.uk)  
 ■ Editorial (01508) 488318. e-mail stories to [keith.morris@networknorwich.co.uk](mailto:keith.morris@networknorwich.co.uk) or send copy to Pear Tree Farmhouse, Wymondham Road, Wrenningham, Norwich NR16 1AT.  
 ■ Advertising: Peter Barnes (01603) 743786  
 ■ Distribution: Les Champion (01603) 402310  
 ■ Editor and designer: Keith Morris  
 ■ Regular writers: Peter Barnes, Kevin Gotts, Mike Wiltshire, Aaron Curran, Helen Baldry, Sandie Shirley, Les Champion.  
 ■ Printed by Archant Print.  
 ■ Churches, Christian organisations and individuals from within Norwich and Norfolk are invited to send news, events and pictures which relate to the demonstration of the Gospel in social action, community care and evangelism generally.  
 This will not only encourage those Christians involved in similar activities but also inform leaders in other churches who are contemplating similar forms of outreach.

■ The deadline for material for the Easter edition is Friday March 18. It will be available for distribution from Friday April 8.

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## Transforming power of Christmas

■ Jesus and Satan are having an argument as to who is most computer-savvy, and they agree to hold a competition.

They sit themselves before their computers and they type documents, create spreadsheets, send emails, make PowerPoints, design web-sites until, suddenly, seconds before the end of the competition, a bolt of lightning strikes and the power goes out.

Moments later, the power is restored, and God announces that the contest is over.

God asks Satan to show what he has come up with. Satan indignantly protests, "I have nothing! I've lost it all!"

"Very well, then," says God, "let us see if Jesus fared any better." Jesus enters a command and the screen comes to life with a vivid display, the voices of an angelic choir pour forth from the speakers.

Satan is astonished. He stutters, "B-b-but how? I lost everything, yet Jesus' work is intact! How did he do it?"

God chuckles, "Satan, when are you going to



**Rev Matt Stone is a Minister in the Norwich Area United Reformed Churches**

learn... Jesus saves!"

In the busyness of Christmas, we can forget that the heart of our celebration is God wanting to transform the world... starting with you and me.

Throughout the Bible, God promises transformation, as the prophets of old give their 'I have a dream' speeches. In communities, disputes would be settled; crime and fear would be no more.

As individuals, we would be saved from ourselves and our destructive tendencies, and we would know God's joy and love in abundance.

It's exciting stuff and, as Christians, we believe that this transformation has already started... beginning with God becoming man and being born to a teenage girl in a dirty stable 2010 years ago.

That little baby came to announce that the new kingdom was here, breaking into the lives of those who would follow him.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

This Christmas, may we look to Jesus, and may we be transformed – for our sake and for the sake of the world.

## Norfolk landlady Janet swaps pub for church

By MIKE WILTSHIRE

**A** Norfolk pub landlady has swapped last orders for holy orders and become a parish priest after an amazing experience in her local church.

Running a Norfolk village pub was the dream job of husband-and-wife team, Janet and David Wyr.

But after 11 years of hard work and exhausting hours, Janet felt 'something was missing'. Eventually, with David's support, Janet discovered her 'real call in life' – and today Janet is an ordained minister in the largest parish church in Norwich: St Peter Mancroft, opposite the Forum, and adjacent to the Open Market.

Janet's remarkable journey into Christian ministry may have been triggered by the influence of two 'incredibly faithful Christians' who helped out as stand-in staff at 'The Golden Dog' in Shipdham. The pub was almost next door to the village church - and one day Janet, seeing an open door, ventured in – "and it was like going home . . . it was where I belonged. I was pretty amazed."

Janet's faith came alive. Although in teenage years the Bible had been hard to understand, now "it was as if the words were written in gold and they made sense."

With her husband David's blessing, Janet – who was confirmed as a Christian in 1996 – began a course in the social sciences and, later, did a degree, believing her future was probably social work. "I love working with people," she says.

The call to ordained ministry came as Janet sat at the dining room table, reading a centre-page feature in the EDP newspaper about a



**From pub to parish: Rev Janet Wyr.**

long-serving woman verger at Norwich Cathedral.

Surprisingly, the next day Janet saw a job-share advert for a verger at the city-centre church of St Peter Mancroft. Janet, to her

amazement, was given the job and also worked with the church youth department until 2007, when she began the Eastern Region Ministry Course.

Janet worked out her curacy among 'the wonderful people' of the Chet Valley Benefice which serves in parishes of Chedgrave, Hales, Hardley, Heckingham, Langley, Loddon and Sisland in Norfolk.

Then, the Rev Janet Wyr was licensed by the Bishop of Norwich on March 31 this year, and now is associate priest at St Peter Mancroft, working with a team headed by the vicar, the Rev Peter Nokes.

People come from far and wide to the historic church which John Wesley described as 'very large and beautiful . . . and surprisingly cheerful.'

Janet admits she has a tough job, 'but is much blessed'. She has a big heart for vulnerable and marginalised people and those outside the church. In her early years, Janet grew up on a council estate in a loving home that was overshadowed by the loss of her four-year-old brother, Derek, who died of meningitis. The family were not church-goers, "though God-aware," says Janet. "It was a home of sadness."

Today, Janet and David (an ex-accountant) are parents of three grown-up children.

Janet's first-hand experience in the pub trade has given her insights into alcohol abuse and binge drinking by young people, especially at Christmas – "for some, it's one of the demons we face."

"It appalls me that we live in a culture where this happens," says Janet, who believes that parents must try to set a good example. "How will our children learn if we don't model it right?"



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# Test cricketer who defied Mugabe

■ International test cricketer Henry Olonga, hit the headlines during the 2003 World Cup when he bravely defied Zimbabwean tyrant Robert Mugabe, a move which ended his career and led to a charge of treason, a Norwich audience heard recently.

A right arm fast bowler, Henry was the first black cricketer to play for Zimbabwe. He made his international debut in 1995, becoming the youngest player to represent his country and helping it to its first ever Test victory.

Olonga played 30 Tests and 50 one-day internationals and once took six for 19 against England in a one-day match. He hit world headlines during the 2003 World Cup when he and team-mate Andy Flower – now England coach – wore black armbands and issued a statement protesting at the "death of democracy" in their homeland, a protest against the policies of

Zimbabwe's government, led by Robert Mugabe.

Death threats, intimidation and phone tapping followed the act of defiance which led to a warrant issued in Zimbabwe for Henry's arrest on charges of treason (which carries the death penalty) and forced him to retire from international cricket and go temporarily into hiding.

Now 34, Henry cannot return to his homeland after being stripped of his citizenship and lives in England with Australian wife Tara. He does not qualify for a British passport until 2013, so he cannot travel outside the UK.

"I'm not really a citizen of anywhere," he admitted in his recently published autobiography, *Blood, Sweat and Treason*, in which he discusses in great detail not only his cricket career, dressing room conflicts and the black armband controversy, but his deep Christian faith, his complicated family life – he was born in Zambia and his father is

Kenyan – and relatively privileged education.

"The decision I made at the 2003 World Cup still lives with me every second of every day. I don't let it get to me and I get on with my life," he said, admitting he had finally stopped looking over his shoulder after years of fearing for his safety.

Henry realises that there is more to life than the MCC coaching manual – there is the Bible. "I became a Christian when I was 16," he says. "I couldn't have made my protest unless I was sure that it was something God was asking me to do."

"At the time it was a step of faith. I knew there would be consequences. I didn't know what would happen to me. I just knew I should take action. As I look back I have no doubt God called me to do what I did. He has always provided for me and I've never been disappointed with him."

Henry told his story in Norwich as guest speaker at a Norfolk Cricket Society event.



Henry Olonga in action.

Right, action from the Thursford Christmas show and, below, producer John Cushing. Pictures courtesy of EDP.



# Show captures Christmas spirit

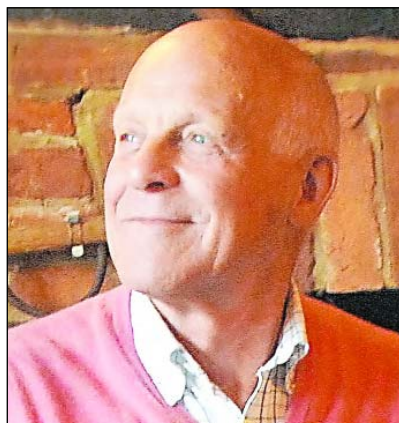
By MIKE WILTSHIRE

**T**he dazzling 'Christmas Spectacular' that is staged each year at the village of Thursford in North Norfolk is not only Britain's largest seasonal musical experience, but is all set to attract a record 136,000 visitors this year.

With 130 singers, dancers and musicians, many from London's West End, this season's 86 sell-out performances attracts multiple coach-loads of visitors from all over the UK.

The show's location near Fakenham may seem remote, but the production is cast in London where 1,000 musical artists apply each year - and only 300 win auditions, because standards are set very high. Each multi-million pound extravaganza has all-new arrangements and takes a year to bring to the stage.

But amid all the excitement, glitz and glamour, the show's director and producer, John Cushing is a pioneering man of faith who ensures that the event also reflects the true spirit of Christmas. Each show includes festive readings. It's a careful blend of musical theatre in traditional



and modern with styles ranging from jazz to classical choral productions.

The original idea for the production came to John three decades ago as he was reflecting in the bath. "It was sort of premonition: I knew we'd do it."

Today, John has 22 talented people on his management team, but it all began as a humble carol concert in 1977 in a big barn that housed the unique collection of steam rollers, farm machinery and mechanical organs amassed by John's father, the late George Cushing.

John had a deep appreciation for choral music and eventually invited the choral scholars of King's College, Cambridge, to Thursford. "It was quite a coup," he says. From there, the show developed: it has twice featured on TV's *Songs of Praise*, and in other TV reports. The Bishop of Norwich attends each year; the Cathedral knows that its visitors peak each year when the Thursford show is on.

John and his family do not hide their personal faith: "Yes, we all pray – and He answers us," says John. "And I'm glad that local Christians also pray for us – we need God on our side."

John's father, George, was a pioneer, too. He left school at 12 to become a farm-hand and later got a job as a steam-roller driver. In time, he developed a contracting business and became a millionaire who never lost his love of the steam-age. George, who died aged 98 in 2003, always remained a Norfolk boy at heart, attending the Thursford shows each night. He would waylay departing guests with a smile and a question: "Did yer loik it, then?"

They did. And they have been coming back in their thousands ever since.

[www.thursford.com](http://www.thursford.com)

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Bishop of Norwich, The Rt Rev Graham James

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# Bob's miracle

By SANDIE SHIRLEY

**A** living miracle, Bob Morrish believes he was saved from death to play a part in the miracles he sees in others during his Norfolk prison visits.

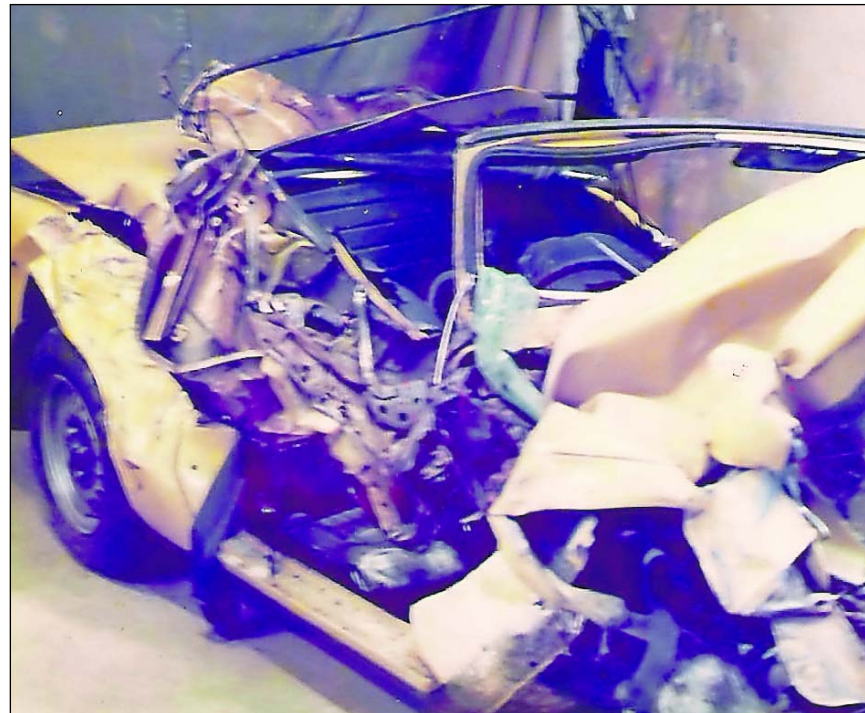
The sports car Bob was driving was a mangled wreck when police covered his body with a sheet, presuming he was dead. But Bob still had a pulse despite the terrible injuries that included umpteen broken bones, a ruptured spleen, damaged internal organs and facial injuries requiring 54 stitches.

He underwent hospital surgery after an ambulance team passed the accident scene by chance and discovered he was still conscious after the horrific head-on collision with a lorry.

"Surgeons believed my injuries were too severe for me to survive the night," said Bob who astounded nurses by leaving his hospital bed and walking unaided within weeks.

The accident three decades ago did not take his life but it did rob him of his joy and caused depression. He later suffered a slipped disc and for ten months spent five days a week at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital.

Having reached rock bottom he responded to a church invitation by his eldest daughter. Bob received prayer and gave the reins of his life to Jesus Christ. He said: "Until then I thought religion was reserved for children and old people but within a few days I was singing with a new joy and my life started to get interesting."



The mangled wreckage of Bob Morrish's car.

Two years later he again suffered a slipped disc but within a fortnight Bob was invited to a Norwich church for a healing service. He struggled to get out of his car to walk through the church door 28 years ago, but explains: "Two men stood either side and prayed for me with a hand on my shoulders and my head. Afterwards, I turned round to thank the person behind me since I felt a hand on my back with much warmth but there was no-one there. It was

absolutely amazing; physically I had God's hand on my back where the disc was out and it has never slipped out again since," said the member of a south Norfolk church.

Bob shares his amazing testimony and life-changing experiences with male prison offenders and is seeing their lives transformed.

"I have the proof of healing, joy and blessing in my life and I want to encourage others," says Bob, who also

## Here come the McBrides

**T**he run-up to Christmas is a whirlwind time for the Salvation Army - as the new leaders of the Norwich Citadel Corps are well aware, after their 25 years' service with the church in other parts of the UK.

Majors Ian and Sally McBride from Northern Ireland were welcomed to Norwich in August and have discovered that the St Giles Street church (established in 1882) is one of the most active they've experienced after service at postings in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

For example, the nightly 'soup run' in Norwich, which operates throughout the year, is co-ordinated by the Norwich Citadel.

This year also marks the fifth anniversary of two of the Norwich church's social services: the successful Mile Cross furniture shop and the Pottergate Advice and Refreshment Centre (ARC) in the city centre.

Norwich Citadel also has one of the best brass bands in the country. The band has recently done a 10-day tour in the US and Canada



Ian and Sally McBride.

The Citadel not only has events right through Christmas, but is also well into the 2010 'Toys and Tins' Christmas Appeal that provides a little Christmas cheer to people across Norfolk, thanks to public donations. The annual appeal, which has been going for 30 years, is a collaboration between BBC Radio Norfolk, the Salvation Army and vari-

ous agencies across Norfolk.

Majors Ian and Sally McBride first met at a Bible Week in London and were married in 1987. While involved in Salvation Army youth work, they both felt a call from God to train for full-time service. It wasn't an easy decision for either of them, Ian was a biology laboratory technician and Sally was a secretary in a large laundry and dry cleaning firm. But, looking back, they agree "it was the best decision we ever made."

They served during the Troubles in Northern Ireland - where, one night, a car bomb went off near the church during a Bible study: the door was blown in and roof damaged. But the church was saved, although the building next door was totally destroyed.

Ian and Sally succeed Majors Denis and Olive Lomax who have moved to Northern Scotland where Denis is the new divisional commander.

To donate to the Toys and Tins appeal: call the Salvation Army at St Giles Street, Norwich on 01603 620 747.



## NEWS

Norwich & Norfolk Christian online shop at [www.norwichchristian.co.uk](http://www.norwichchristian.co.uk)

# crash escape

found divine strength and provision when his business collapsed 12 years ago.

"I started to go into prison on a Wednesday evening. I soon realised that God has given me a one-to-one ministry for encouraging offenders. As I have got close to many of them I have seen God change them over time," said Bob, a member of Prison Fellowship – a volunteer organisation across 112 countries.

"I recall one guy – an ex-Hell's Angel. It took 26 armed police men to arrest him but he found Jesus in prison and the change was amazing. I kept in touch with him following the end of his sentence and remember his wife saying she had a new husband who became drug and alcohol-free, who helped with the housework, sometimes cooked the meals and even began attending church!

"A few years later I started helping with the Sycamore Tree course. The six-week victim awareness course runs for two-and-a-half hours a week. It is not a Christian course but it is run by Prison Fellowship volunteers using the bible story of Zacchaeus the tax collector and is accredited by the Open College Network at level 1 and 2.

"The men receive an attendance certificate, which is sometimes the first certificate they have ever received. The course is held in the chapel and men are often attracted by the peace and love from the chaplaincy team. It is rewarding when seeing the change in men who realize the damage done to their victims, families and themselves. If you want to witness the miracles and the power of God in prison please join us."

Contact: [info@prisonfellowship.org.uk](mailto:info@prisonfellowship.org.uk) or Prison Fellowship, PO, Box 945, Maldon, Essex CM9 4EW.



Miracle escape: Bob Morrish.

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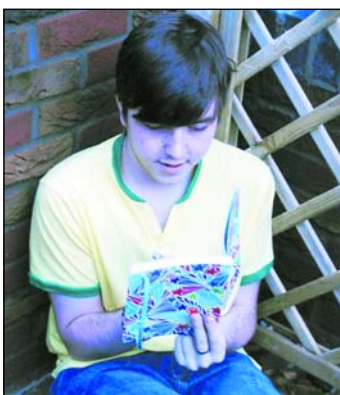
## Young Norwich playwright

■ A very modern adaptation of the Nativity story of the birth of Jesus has been written by a young Norwich student and is set to be performed this Christmas

City Church Norwich will come together for their Christmas service on December 19, which will include the performance of It's The Nativity, Innit a play written by local student Aaron Curran (right).

Aaron is currently studying an Access Course in Creative Writing at City College Norwich. This led him to write a Christmas play which he took to City Church who saw potential in the play and agreed to work alongside him to show the play as part of their Christmas service. The three-scene play will be shown in slots during the service.

Aaron said: "It's the Nativity, Innit' is a play that updates the Nativity story into modern times through the thoughts of two narrators. As the narrators sit down and imagine what the Nativity would look like in 2010, the scene they imagine then starts to unfold before their eyes. The play explores the modernisation of Mary and Joseph, the three kings and wise men and also the birth of Jesus. Although underpinned with a



serious storyline element, the majority of the play is in comedic form."

Aaron sees this play as a testimony to God's amazing love. A couple of years ago, Aaron found himself struggling with depression after hitting a low point in his life, but never lost sight of God's love for him and with His help Aaron managed to get his life back on track. This is when he felt God calling him

towards the Access course at college and Aaron has not only enjoyed broadening his love of writing but has enjoyed the avenues it has taken him down including writing for website NetworkNorwich.

Aaron added: "It's amazing how gracious God is and was with me when I suffered and I am still amazed at His love for me. I am convinced that God has a great plan for my life and I hold onto to that. It is a weird and exciting experience knowing that something I have written will be performed in front of a lot of people, but one that I am thoroughly looking forward to."

The play will be shown at City Church Norwich which meets at the Ramada Jarvis Hotel as part of their morning service on December 19, at 10am. All are welcome.

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# Love is the inspiration

By SANDIE SHIRLEY

**A**n inspirational and pioneering Norfolk teacher, who grew up in the slums of Antigua, and fought decades of poverty, racism and violence, has just published her life story with co-author Sandie Shirley.

A 77 year old grandmother, Coralita Martin, has gone from the slums of Antigua to the suburbs of London and the wilds of Norfolk to pursue the doorways of destiny to influence thousands of youngsters for 50 years despite poverty, abuse and prejudice.

The first black teacher in Watton and Thetford, she has written her dream in ink with the publication of her biography: *Courage to Dream - the impossible becomes reality*.

Coralita has fought injustice, silenced misery and outlasted fear during eviction, near-death, a violent marriage and forced departure to the East End of London where she faced racism and hardship. She has found divine grace to forgive those who have hurt her, including the man she was forced to marry who twice tried to kill her.

She pleaded for leniency for him when she mounted the witness box at the Old Bailey in London. She says: "In the quietened formal proceedings, I forgave him for every terrible deed and despicable act. I forgave him as Jesus my Saviour forgave me for all my wrongs when he died on the cross. Forgiveness – the total letting go – may not always blunt the pain and distress, but I knew it was the only way."

Coralita was rejected by her mother in Antigua when she was just ten days old. She lived with her godmother who she loved, in a tiny two-bedroom house with a tin roof by the beach in Antigua with no kitchen, bathroom or electricity; she cooked and washed outside, using a standpipe. At six she was summoned back to the family home. There were no regular meals, she slept on the floor and fought rejection and outwitted poverty when she sold empty bottles for a few pennies and helped with her mother's fruit and vegetable business before school.

As a schoolgirl she changed history when she became the first youngster from the slums in Antigua to win a school scholarship. She excelled at her studies, survived a hurricane and worked at the Christian mission while having a heart fired with faith after attending a mammoth crusade led by Billy Graham.

Home tutoring students became the launch pad for her dream to teach; at 21 she began a life-long vocation that started in Antigua without any formal teaching qualifications.

"Provision was unexpected and divinely imparted. Sometimes there were anonymous finances and huge bags of potatoes left on my doorstep when I wondered how I would feed my children,"



Coralita Martin.

said Coralita. "My family and friends have wondered how I have managed but God has always made a way where there was no way – his light has shone through the darkest night."

Teaching has spanned the generations and cultures from a private school in the Caribbean (where she knew now-famous entertainer, Joan Armatrading) to tough inner London schools, exclusive fee-paying ones and a variety in Norfolk; she taught in Thetford until she was 70 years old.

Over the years she has schooled future doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and dined with rich, influential parents and cried tears for the youngsters downtrodden by abuse, fear and poverty as they struck a strong chord of empathy.

"I wanted to be a teacher since I was a little girl. If you want something badly enough you have to keep persevering although it may be a struggle," says Coralita who studied long and hard to qualify as a teacher in England despite the difficulties.

"Seeing the happiness on children's faces has made it all worthwhile," says Coralita, who adds: "Faith, hope and love have been important but the most important has been love for others."

Coralita will be signing copies of her book when she speaks at the Norwich chapter of Aglow International on Tuesday January 25 at 7pm in Norwich. Contact Sharon Plummer: 01953 454606, or e-mail: [roseofsharon2911@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:roseofsharon2911@yahoo.co.uk)

*Courage to Dream* (Last Word Publications, ISBN 9780955943942) is available at £7.99 from [www.lastwordpublications.com](http://www.lastwordpublications.com) or Jarrols.

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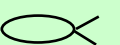
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## NEWS

Norwich & Norfolk Christian news at [www.networknorfolk.co.uk](http://www.networknorfolk.co.uk)

# Millionaire Gary hated his life

By MIKE WILTSHIRE



Gary Flynn: money did not make him happy.

**A** Norwich audience recently heard the dramatic story of Gary Flynn, a business man who 'lost everything' after his health and business collapsed. Gary told how he'd 'been to hell and back' but in an unusual encounter he had found healing and hope after he came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Today, he is a happy man and is now the managing director of a scaffolding business – but all this is very different from his early years when he began drinking at 13 after his dad, Jimmy, was killed by a stray bullet on an Army firing range. Gary married at 18, but it ended in divorce.

But despite the onset of near-suicidal depression, his scaffolding business prospered and he soon had a £1million house. His grandfather came to visit Gary at his luxury home and said: "You must be very happy to have achieved all this."

After a pause, Gary replied: "Happy? No, I hate my life, I hate me, I hate everything apart from Joanne and my children."

He was working 18 hours a day and began to feel unwell. When doctors diagnosed stomach cancer, Gary pleaded: "Doctor, don't let me die."

Gary went home to tell his family and then in despair went out to drink a bottle of spiced rum in Sainsbury's car park. As business pressures mounted, he experienced panic attacks and began drinking again – up to 20 pints a night.

Because of his illness, his business fell apart. Gary and Joanne lost their house and ended up in a caravan.

One day, while on chemo treatment, he had a visit from an old friend, Geoffrey, a straight-talking street trader. He asked Gary to come to an Alpha course at a local church – "and you don't say no to Geoffrey".

Gary went along to the Alpha discovery course – and was surprised by the friendly welcome at the weekly sessions.

It was the start of an unusual spiritual journey – because Gary says God woke him up in the night and he sensed the healing presence of Jesus. "I said, 'If you are there Lord, please come into my life. Please, Lord, I need you. I need saving.'"

"At once, I felt like I was floating, with a wonderful sense of peace and God's love."

Then, a few weeks later, he awoke in the middle of the night.

"A beam of light was coming from the ceiling and entering my tummy." Gary says he felt the presence of Jesus.

From that moment, Gary's life was radically changed. Joanne noticed a dramatic change in Gary's attitude.

"I couldn't get enough of Jesus. I felt as if my life has just begun . . . now I am a changed man, no more swearing, drinking, womanising. Jesus has made me smile again. He can do the same for anyone."

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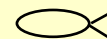
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"It is far more rewarding seeing people making positive changes in their life than scoring a goal in football."

# Luke swaps a football career for Bible college

By KEITH MORRIS

Norwich youth worker Luke Brendling passed up the chance to play professional football to fly across the world and attend Hillsong International Leadership College in Australia following an encounter with God.

Now he is a leader, helping to lead the youth work at Taverham Evangelical Church, is a support worker for YMCA Norfolk and has frequently travelled to Holland to speak at churches and youth events.

As a teenager, Luke was a promising young centre forward who had trials with Exeter City and Wimbledon before being signed up by Rushden and Diamonds for a season. He also played for King's Lynn for two years.

At the age of 20, Luke had a life-changing experience.

"I had been invited to a wedding of some close family friends. I found myself becoming emotional but I didn't know why. After the ceremony some old friends of mine, who I hadn't seen for a few years, invited me to come along to a special youth night their church was putting on the following week."

"Everything the speaker said was about my life and with tears in my eyes and my heart racing I had an encounter with Jesus which changed my life and set me off in a completely different direction," said Luke.

"The next day I made several big decisions, left my old life and moved back to Norwich to start again."

Twelve months later and Luke's life was to take another change of course.

"I felt God speak to me about going



Luke Brendling.

to Bible College, I thought I was hearing things as that was certainly something I didn't want to do. But God has a sense of humour and after much thought and prayer, a door opened up for me to go to Hillsong International Leadership College in Sydney, Australia. I went originally to do one year but ended up doing two.

"It was an incredible experience where I learnt so much and was fortunate enough to be a Head student. This gave me an opportunity to speak, lead and encourage students."

Luke made many friendships at Hillsong, including one with a fellow student from Holland, who subse-

quently invited him over to speak at his church. From that, word got around and he has now spoken all over that nation and the UK addressing congregations up to 1200 people.

Comfortable speaking to large audiences, Luke is equally happy speaking one-to-one with the residents in his care as a support worker at YMCA's Norfolk's Throckmorton Yard supported Housing project in Norwich.

"I love preaching to large audiences but I also love talking to individual young people in my role as a support worker. I am passionate about the work we do at Throckmorton Yard, equipping these young people with the necessary life skills to move forward in life."

"But we are about more than just housing and life skills. Many of our residents come to us broken and hurting, so to have the opportunity to come alongside them, encourage them, build them up and believe in them is a privilege. We truly want the best for every young person who walks through our doors. We want them to succeed in all they do in life."

"It is all about building relationships with the young people, taking time to listen and invest into them... investment and love is the key."

"My motivation is that I know I can make a difference to the young people in my generation. I am passionate about helping young people to succeed. To help them see, reach out for and fulfil their potential. It is far more rewarding seeing people making positive changes in their life than scoring a goal in football."

## YMCA NORFOLK

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### We need your help to raise £1m

towards a new £4.4m development of 40 move-on accommodation units for homeless young people.

### Brick Appeal

**Its estimated we need 70,000 bricks to complete this building & just £1 will cover the cost of one brick, the mortar and labour.**

## Join the YMCA Sleep Easy in Norwich to help the homeless

■ YMCA Norfolk is calling upon local people from across the county to spend a night sleeping under the stars on January 29, 2011, to draw attention to the issue of homelessness in the region and raise much needed funds to help tackle the problem.

This year's YMCA Sleep Easy, back in January, saw more than 800 people sleep rough for one night right across the country, raising around £120,000 to support the work of their local YMCAs. This included 21 people who raised over £3,000 in Norwich.

Armed with sleeping bags, warm clothes and hot drinks, staff, supporters and friends of YMCA Norfolk will be sleeping out at St Peter Mancroft Church, opposite The Forum in Norwich's city centre, to raise vital funds for homeless people in Norfolk.

Last year, according to official government statistics, Norwich was found to have almost as many rough sleepers as Liverpool or Manchester.



Two Sleep Easy participants brave the cold in Norwich back in January.

Sleep Easy participants, including Chief Executive Tim Sweeting, will be sponsored to help support the work of YMCA Norfolk, which provides a warm bed to 231 young people in supported accommodation across the county each night.

Tim said: "We hope that the Sleep

Easy event will draw attention to the issue locally and also help myself, and others who take part, put themselves in the shoes of the homeless and the conditions they can face on a daily basis."

The YMCA Norfolk schools and community team will provide lots of activities to keep people busy until it is time to go to sleep and the event and hot drinks and breakfast will be provided. The event will run from 7pm on Saturday January 29th to 7am the following morning.

Participants, who must be aged 18 or over, are asked to get sponsors to support their efforts.

All are welcome to join in and there is a small registration fee of £10 to cover refreshments and admin. To register visit [www.sleepeasy.org.uk](http://www.sleepeasy.org.uk) and find the YMCA Norfolk page or contact organizer Susie Knights on 07967 741103 or at [susieknights@ymca-norfolk.org.uk](mailto:susieknights@ymca-norfolk.org.uk)

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