



Carolyn Killen and Ellen Gilbert wore fancy dress



Sally and Richard Hall with Chris Kellerman



Peter and Yvonne Oliver chat with Fay Naylor

No place like home

Some booked restaurants months or even years in advance. Some went to the Pyramids. Two million endured hours crushed together on the banks of the Thames to see a wheel that refused to turn and a river that didn't catch fire. But the 500 or so who accepted the Residents Association's invitation to spend New Year's Eve on Central Square decided that, when it comes to a truly once-in-a-lifetime event, There's No Place Like Home.

Britain's leaders should be pleased. Here was community spirit in double doses. The grantees of the Trust opened their chequebook to provide champagne by the crate, and St Jude's church opened its doors to give everyone somewhere to drink it.

And what a party. A bit stilted at first, things livened up with the arrival of pink-cheeked country dancers who had been bopping away in the Free Church Hall. The Suburb regulars were soon at it, downing champagne by the bucket and catching up with the gossip.

But this occasion was also a nice way for old acquaintances not to be forgot. Many of us who grew up on the Suburb and have since moved away had turned up. Old friends - and old enemies - bumped into each other, the memories softened by the years and the bubbly. Vicar, Alan Walker, cutting a dramatic figure in his long black cloak, wandered up and down the aisles, smiling benignly at revellers dropping plastic beakers and crumbs of Stilton all over his floor.

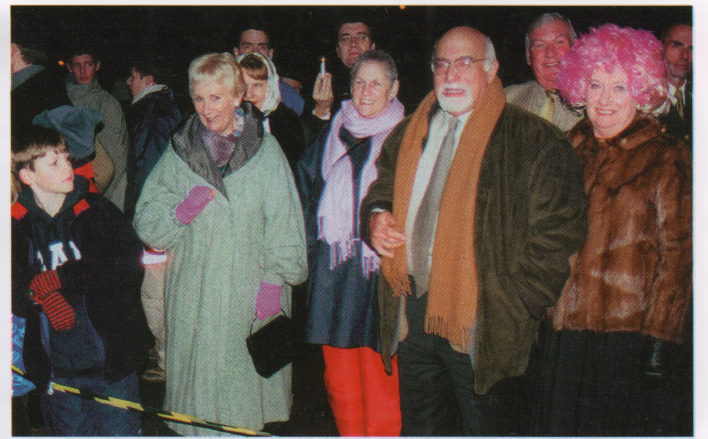
Then came the main event - the fireworks. Clutching Millennium candles the party-goers walked, or staggered, out of the church into Central Square to see where the rest of the RA cash - their money, after all - had been spent. And to learn a valuable lesson. One thousand pounds worth of fireworks looks more spectacular from fifty yards than one million pounds worth from half a mile. I've seen bigger displays, but I've never been dazzled in the way I was by the magnesium flashes that came near the end.

What Henrietta Barnett - or, come to that, St Jude - would have made of the church pews cluttered with empty champagne glasses is unclear, but the Big Boss of the church seemed to approve. He held off the rain until the fireworks had finished.

And then came another bonus to the evening: Not for these party-goers the nightmare of struggling back from the Thames through traffic gridlock and closed tube stations. They had only to totter to their nearby homes, the good mood preserved long enough to resume the party once indoors.

So well done the organisers, and well done the participants. In younger years, New Year's Eve seemed often to be an anticlimax. You went to parties, you tried to get into the mood, but in the end the false bonhomie went flat faster than last night's champagne. Not this one. I am proud to have spent it with the people who mean the most in the place where I grew up.

CHRIS STEPHEN



Waiting for fireworks, Pia Duran and Jill Ambrose (centre, left and right) had come on from a fancy dress party



Some partygoers were very young



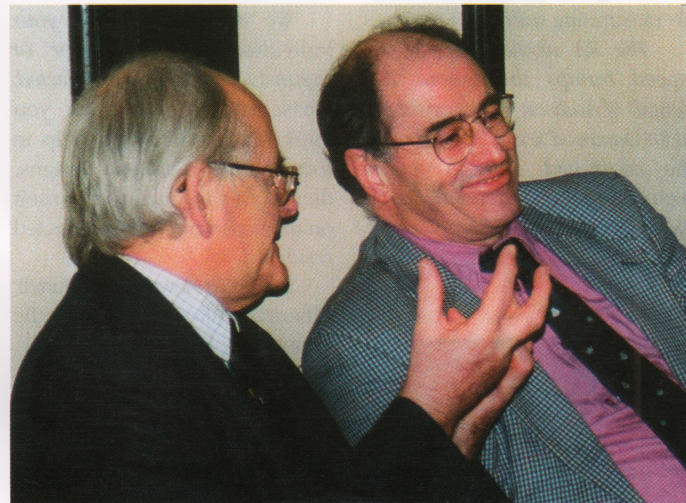
Samantha Ambrose



Anne Crawley and Douglas Thomas



All ages waited in anticipation of what was to come



Cllr John Marshall, Rev Tony Spring watch country dancing...



... while Jean Dyson and Camilla Raab sit this one out

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