

...Susie Gregson, MBE

Diana Brahams chats to Suburb Treasure and home-grown MBE, Susie Gregson

Susie Gregson MBE is one of the best known faces on the Suburb being the founder of the now famous Proms at St Jude's

Susie Gregson (née Gillard) was born, brought up and educated in the Suburb where she has lived with her family all her life; except for two significant stints abroad after she married Paul at St Jude's in 1979, having met him when only fourteen while they were both still at school. She is currently Chair of the Henrietta Barnett School Alumnae and Chief Executive of Proms at St Jude's.

She was a Brownie, a Guide, and still is a member of St Jude's Church choir and involved in a host of different local activities. After her 'A' levels she took a course at the Institut Français to qualify as a bilingual secretary but ultimately got a job selling major English and American TV programmes to the East Europeans.

Her marketing skills and experience were to come in very useful later on, but she had to abandon this career when Paul's job flew them out as a young married couple to California where they spent four exciting years, and she concentrated on her first baby, Emma, who was born there and took advantage of the facilities at the luxurious

condominium where they were living. They returned home to the Suburb in 1984. There was a later two-year stint abroad in Sri Lanka, which, at a time of civil war, was rather more 'challenging' but exciting too.

After coming to terms with the terrible tragedy of losing a baby girl at the age of 6 weeks, Susie and Paul added 2 boys, David and Luke, to their family. Susie had her hands full as a young mother of three, but embarked on fundraising for Great Ormond Street as a way of giving back for the care their family had received. The couple bought a new house early in 1992, which was just three doors away from her parents, but before the house was ready to move into, her father died and then within ten months her mother died too.

As an only child, very close to her parents, Susie was devastated, but after the shock she accepted the offer of her American cousin to sing in a concert held in memory of her parents at St Jude's. There was an offer from an orchestra to play at another concert – and Susie thought why not have a week of concerts to raise money for local good causes – and thus was the 'Suburb Proms' founded.

Twenty-three years on the Proms is a major event, which

attracts world class performers and people, from far and wide as well as locally, and raises much needed money for Toynbee Hall (founded by Dame Henrietta Barnett and her husband in the East End, where he was vicar of St Jude's Whitechapel, to help the many desperately poor people, of whom many were immigrants) and for the North London Hospice. In 2012 a Literary Festival (Litfest) at Henrietta Barnett School was added which takes place over the first weekend of the 9 days of Proms.

The MBE was a wonderful surprise and totally unexpected. Susie told me that at first she thought the letter that arrived by post in November 2010 asking if she would accept an MBE was a hoax. Having been assured it was real, she was hugely excited and delighted to accept. She had a wonderful day in February 2011 when Paul drove Susie and the family through the gates at Buckingham Palace for her to receive the medal from Prince Charles. Shortly after the New Year's Honours List was announced Susie shared the celebrations with the Proms committee and some key supporters, for she felt her MBE belonged to them all.

Susie exudes energy and she likes to get things done. She is passionate about the Suburb but she is not suburban in her outlook, aspirations or achievements. She

does not hide behind net curtains (I don't think she has any) and does not keep herself to herself, or use the Suburb like a dormitory town and scuttle into her car to avoid her neighbours; indeed she would be the first to offer help to any of them if it were needed.

Her fierce energies to create and sustain the annual event of the Proms at St Jude's are vital; there is a committee of fourteen and sub-committees, but she takes on a lot of activities herself including successfully selling adverts in the programme and finding new sponsors. She admits she is persistent and not easily discouraged and she doesn't just want 'a lump of cash', but involvement in the community and the events by local businesses. She is delighted when sponsors attend or their staff engage in a hands on way – such as long term supporters the RA, the Trust, Waitrose, Barclays Bank and Godfrey & Barr. She wants them to reap benefits from their engagement with the festival. There is a large army of volunteers and, for the last eight or nine years, a professional team of lighting and health and safety people are paid to take charge of the functional management under Susie's ever-watchful eyes. Most importantly Susie wants the whole Suburb to feel Proms belongs to them and that all residents are welcome to

get involved if they would like to. Susie's energy and desire to get all residents where possible to enjoy and contribute to Suburb life, along with the money raised for Toynbee Hall in the East End

of London, would certainly have commended her to the late Dame Henrietta Barnett, whose former house is in South Square (identifiable by the plaque bearing her name) **S**



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