



A wing, a prayer, and a love of Wagner

GREAT ESTATES

Laura Silverman
meets the developer
who went from
building brick houses
to opera houses

Martin Graham is proud of his shed. It's not a hideaway for a book he's writing, nor a fancy retreat to rent out on Airbnb.

No, this "shed" is a 500-seat opera house. Graham, 75, and his wife, Lizzie, 67, are behind Longborough Festival Opera (LFO), held at their home, near Moreton-in-Marsh in the Cotswolds. LFO is 20 this year.

The shed has come a long way since it was first used as a theatre in 1997. It was once home to cattle, evicted that summer to make room for *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni*. But the couple, who had moved into the house a year earlier, had a vision that didn't sit well with a farmyard. They dreamt of establishing a festival where they could stage Wagner. They wanted to put on the *Ring*.

Today the building has a mock-classical façade and is a shade of blanchmange pink with white trimmings, columns and a balcony. Clay statues of Mozart, Verdi and Wagner (naturally) loom from the roof. The views of the rolling hills are magnificent. Inside, plush red seats, salvaged from the Royal Opera House, line the stalls. The stage is as deep as the auditorium. And the orchestra pit can accommodate 70 musicians.

"People say, 'Wasn't it complicated? Who was the architect?'" says Graham, when I meet him for a snoop around. "I say, 'Bugger a bloody architect! It's just a big shed.' Go to any opera house – they're just long, tall sheds." The Coliseum will be delighted to hear that.

Graham was originally a builder. Born in Yorkshire, he moved to Longborough as a young boy and has lived there most of his life. At 16, he left school to work as a labourer, before setting up his own building



On song: the opera house, top, and its stage in Longborough, Moreton-in-Marsh

company. He then moved to London and made a fortune as a property developer. Along the way, he trained as a barrister, absorbing intricate knowledge of property law. "I realised a lot of people who objected to my building plans were bull---ters," he says. "They didn't know anything more than me."

All this experience came in handy when he set up LFO with Lizzie. "There were no plans for how we were going to turn the shed into a theatre," says Graham. "I just went out into the field with a spade and this was the result." He guessed the distance between rows of seats, and never considered acoustics. By chance, things worked out. But while the couple rejoiced, the local planning authority ordered Graham to demolish it – although he won his case.

'You've got to go against the herd in this world. You don't want to be like everyone else'

"We survived on a wing and a prayer for a long time," he says. A wing, a prayer and a love of Wagner... For it was the couple's passion for the German composer that has seen them through. Neither Graham nor Lizzie grew up in a musical household. Graham was introduced to Mozart, Schubert and Haydn by a neighbour when he was growing up. Lizzie's love of opera came from her interest in theatre. It was only when they watched the BBC Two centenary *Ring* broadcast in 1990 that they fell for Wagner and decided that they

would start their own festival. The couple's first productions were small chamber concerts held in the drawing room of their previous house around the corner. They moved on to host the Travelling Opera, based in Stratford-upon-Avon, in their garden. But everything was on a much smaller scale. In 1991, they entertained 400 people. Last year, it was 8,500.

LFO was a grander proposition. They had some guidance from Sir George Christie, who ran Glyndebourne. But Graham describes the first few productions as "hellish" because there was so much to do. He didn't know how arts companies operated. Lizzie, a former English teacher, had no administration experience. They called in favours, asking friends to put up singers in exchange for tickets. Many opera aficionados thought they were crazy to stage Wagner, but the couple were unfazed. "Once you're doing it, your brain just takes over," says Graham.

Anthony Negus, their music director and a Wagnerite, having worked as assistant to the conductor Sir Reginald Goodall, was a huge help. LFO put on their first Wagner production in 1998, starting with a "mini-*Ring*", an abbreviated version. They then worked towards 2013, when LFO became the first privately owned opera house to have put on a complete cycle of Wagner's *Ring*, all 14 hours of it, and the only one to do so in his bicentenary year. Critics were impressed. "People didn't know whether we could pull it off," says Graham. "But we did. You've got to go against the herd in this world. You don't want to be like everyone else."

The building renovations haven't stopped. Since 1997, the shed has had a new front, a balcony, a new roof and multiple extensions. Builders are currently constructing a scenery dock and doing up rooms for the cast and crew. Much of the furniture has been rescued from skips.

Even so, running an opera festival is not cheap. LFO has a turnover of £1.5million. "People always say, 'What about the money?'" sighs Graham. "I say, 'What do you need to know about that for?'" This is a way of life for him.

Alongside this life project, he and Lizzie have had three children: Polly, 32, is an opera director; Cordelia, 29, is a comedian; and Leo, 26, is

an actor. The opera house is 100m from the family home and all the children have acted in performances. This year's festival includes Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. LFO is also working towards a new *Ring*, starting in 2019 and finishing in 2022. Lizzie retired as general manager of LFO in 2014, leaving the running to Graham and the office team.

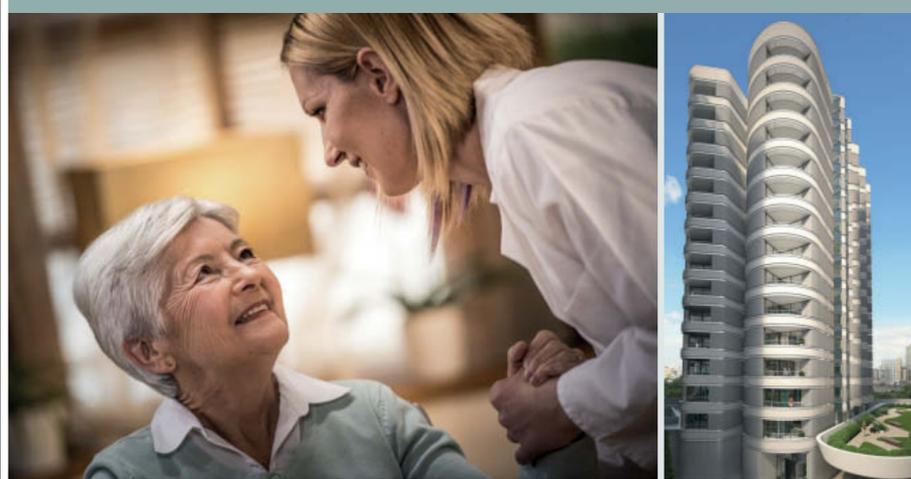
But there's no sign of him passing on his shed yet. "When you're put on an opera, you create a work of art," he says. "No builder ever thinks that when he slams up a house. He just moves on to the next one. An opera house? That's for life."

Longborough Festival Opera runs from June 8 to August 4 (lfo.org.uk; 01451 830292)

Correction: Sir James Guise
May 14's article about Elmore Court in Gloucestershire referred to the owners as Sir Anselm and Lady Guise. This was incorrect. Although Anselm Guise has inherited the estate, he is yet to inherit the title from his father Sir James Guise, the 8th and current Baronet of Highnam.

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Life's work: the Grahams' family home is just 100m from the opera house