

Girton150 The Visitor's Lecture: 100 Years of Women in Law May 2, 2019

Girton's 150th Anniversary celebrations would not be complete without acknowledging the role and contribution of our Visitor, Brenda Hale, DBE, The Baroness Hale of Richmond and President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.

The Visitor is the overseer of the College, someone who is to the College as the Chancellor is to the University, though with several other dimensions. On taking up her Office - and at Girton it is now an elected position - Lady Hale succeeded two former Prime Ministers (Lord Balfour and Lord Baldwin of Bewdley) and a former Queen of England (Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother). In the past our Visitors have had an important role in resolving disputes, but - ironically given her credentials - the current incumbent has never had to do that. She brings other immeasurable gifts.



Lady Hale inspires all at Girton with her leadership in life as well as in Law: she brings wisdom and encouragement, breathes energy and enthusiasm, and stands firm for the principles of excellence and inclusion on which this College was founded. One of the several very proud anniversaries Girton is celebrating during 2019 is the fact that Lady Hale has been our Visitor - with unflinching support and unflagging energy - for fully 15 years. To mark this special moment, Lady Hale's visit had several memorable elements.

A trip to the Old Orchard

First, the Visitor agreed to plant a tree in the Old Orchard, as part of the restoration project underway for our 150th birthday. To open the tree-planting ceremony Dr. Roland Randall offered a few words about the Orchard to an audience of College members and guests. He noted that the original purpose of the orchard was to provide fruit for the College kitchens. Its value then was in having varieties that provided late-cropping and long-lasting apples, pears and plums during term-time from September to April. Today, the orchard is particularly valued for its biodiversity (in 2007, Traditional Orchards were designated by English Nature as UK Priority Habitats for insect and bird life) and for its role in the conservation of long-lived traditional fruit-crop varieties.





Dr Randall went on to mention three of his favourite apple trees (which you can read about elsewhere). The Visitor, however, was to plant a plum tree - an old variety on original St Julien rootstock. Her reintroduction of Oullin's Golden Gage will bring back to the orchard a once very popular plum that we lost many years ago. It was, said Dr. Randall, *originally developed in France in the mid-19th century and is often known by its French name 'Reine Claude d'Oullins'.* This self-fertile variety crops best in warmer years, producing its attractive, golden-yellow, red-speckled fruits in abundance in late-summer. It is very much sweeter and juicier than typical plums - a sweet treat fresh from the tree. The versatile fruits are also perfect for use in cooking and would have originally been bottled for use in the Michaelmas Term. For the restoration project it will be particularly valuable because it acts as a good pollinator for some of the other plum varieties.



Tree Planting in the Orchard (L-R) Foreground: The Right Hon. The Baroness Hale of Richmond (The Visitor). Front Row: Dr E Cornwall, Revd Dr M Guite (Chaplain), Mrs C Hopkins, Professor S J Smith (Mistress), Dr G Jondorf, Dr L Janik, Dr J Dusinberre, Dr S Maghenzani and Dr R Randall. Back rows: Ms D Lowther (Bursar), friend of the College, Ms M Hackett (Junior Bursar), J Jia (MCR President), Dr H Marlow, Professor R Ong ViforJ, Mr J ViforJ, Ms K Lee (Vice-Mistress), Dr C Shenton, Dr L Conradie, Dr S Fulton (Senior Tutor), Mrs M Stanley, N Brocksom (JCR President), Dr A Donovan, Dea Begaj (JCR Vice-President) and Professor M Summerfield.

An inspiring Lecture

At Girton, one of the ways we are marking our foundation 150 years ago, as the UK's first residential college for the degree level education of women, is in a series of five public lectures. We chose the figure five to represent the first five students who were brave enough to present themselves to study at 'The College for Women' in October 1869, and we are fortunate enough to have secured five anniversary lecturers - all Girton alumni - who currently embody the same pioneering spirit that set the whole enterprise into motion. To form a centre-piece in that series, we were honoured to welcome to the platform our own College Visitor, The Right Honorable, the Baroness Hale of Richmond, who the nation knows as the first (and for some time only) women member, and now the first women President, of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.



As it happens, in addition to marking 150 years since the foundation of The College for Women, and the 15th anniversary of the election of Lady Hale as Visitor, Girton has been recognising the role of its founders and our predecessors in securing women's access to the professions, marking in particular the '100 years of women in law', enabled by the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919. The Act did not receive Royal Assent until 23 December, but we have been reflecting on it all year, not least because the bid for women's higher education, the suffrage movement and the struggle for women's entry to the professions were all part of the same unstoppable bid to secure full participation in civic society in Britain and the world.

It was fitting, therefore, that during the annual Ceremony for the Commemoration of Benefactors in October 2018, when we were in fact celebrating Girton's role on the path to universal suffrage, we heard historian, Dr. Hazel Mills, describe the life and work of OG Sybil Campbell, one of the first women formally called to the English Bar, and the first to be appointed as a full-time stipendiary magistrate - a judge. She was indeed the only full time professional female magistrate or judge until she retired in 1961.

We also made '100 years of women in Law' the theme of our largest annual alumni networking event



- for Law and Finance - in London on 6 March this year. Over 150 people attended and our Visitor not only supported the careers event offered to students in advance of the reception, but also spoke about the first 100 years to a spellbound audience. As it happens it was the 10th anniversary of this important networking event, which is supported by Slaughter and May, and hosted by alumnus Guy O'Keefe. In keeping with the theme of the year, a rather spectacular cake arrived during the applause...

Then, on May 2, nearly 200 people from the College, the University, our alumni and the surrounding town assembled in the Old Hall and the Stanley Library to enjoy the Visitor's public lecture at the start of Lent term. It seemed apposite to hold the lecture in that part of the College that dates from the early 1880s. With a crowd of distinguished visitors and many notable women in Law - as well as Honorary Fellow, The Right Honourable The Lord Mackay of Clashfern - in the room, it was not hard to imagine the debates that drove those early campaigners forward; you could almost hear their voices whispering in the eaves.



Turning to the present day, and remembering that all great lawyers need teachers, we were delighted that Girton's first Fellow in Law, Cherry Hopkins (who shared that distinction with the late and legendary Poppy Jolowicz) was present, as were their successors among women Fellows in law, Dr. Stephanie Palmer and Dr. Shona Wilson Stark. Dr. Stelios Tofaris was also present, reflecting the fact that in Law as in all other subjects, we are celebrating 40 years since the admission of men, and recognising that becoming completely co-educational is also a fine achievement. Girton currently keeps in touch, in fact, with over 700 alumni working in the legal professions: around 2/3 are women, and just over half studied Law as their first degree; the rest turned to Law later suggesting to me that within these walls the attraction to that vocation is very much in the air. Certainly that was the case tonight.

As well as a wide-ranging audience including Professors and Scholars of the University, we were delighted to welcome Dana Denis-Smith, founder of the '100 years of women in law' project, together with project manager Caroline Dix; we were also very grateful for the loan of their '100 years of women in law' exhibition, which the audience much enjoyed (and which included a great many leading Girton lawyers). I could not, of course, resist noting that it was in fact Girtonian Janet Wood who, in 1878 - that is 141 years ago - became the first woman to complete what was effectively a law degree in the UK (though being at Girton, and excluded from key exams as well admission to the University, she was of course not awarded a degree at the time).

Lady Hale herself has achieved a number of notable firsts: she was the first woman law commissioner (in 1984), she has spearheaded some of the most progressive legislation in recent decades, she was the first woman to sit on the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, and the first to become its President. It was truly an honour to hear her lecture in College, and to reflect on the gradual acceptance of what Lord Hope apparently described as 'The Brenda Agenda'. The video of Lady Hale's lecture, the transcript and a short review by the Vice Mistress Karen Lee are posted separately.



Needless to say the lecture - rounded and complete as it is - has intervened in and provoked an ongoing conversation. We were delighted that deliberations continued during the Girton150 Festival when three of our most distinguished alumnae in Law, Lady Arden, Lady Hale and Dame Rosalyn Higgins were 'in conversation' with the Vice Mistress, Karen Lee, and with an audience that the capacious marquee could scarcely contain.



A special formal hall

It is always the case that members of the College meet for dinner on a Thursday night. Such was demand on the occasion of the Visitor's lecture that we doubled the usual numbers and filled the Dining Hall. I am always thrilled when this happens, because that Hall was built in the early 1900s, shortly after the University's massive vote against women's admission to Cambridge degrees in 1897.

I love the idea that a College consisting of little more than 100 women in all would build one of the largest dining halls in Cambridge *just after they had been turned down for full membership of the University!* Today when the Hall is full it contains barely one third of our students. That is what the phrase 'triumph of hope' means to me...



On May 2 we really appreciated that triumph as Lady Hale reminded us of women's success in securing access to the professions, their ongoing struggle to shatter successive glass ceilings, and our own College's contribution to that cause. We also celebrated the life and work of our remarkable Visitor who spent much of her evening talking to students and inspiring them with her vision and enthusiasm. Lady Hale is seen here with Girton's first Fellow in Law, Cherry Hopkins, me, and Vice Mistress Karen Lee, poised to cut another cake - this one testifying simultaneously to 150 years since Girton's Foundation, 100 years of women in Law, the Golden Jubilee of the Visitor herself being called to the Bar, and the fact that she has contributed so much time, energy and wisdom *as* our Visitor for fully 15 years. It was certainly a night to remember!

**The Mistress, Professor Susan J. Smith
July 2019**

