

## From none to a Network: 40 Years of Women at St John's

An adaptation of the speech given at the Launch for 40 Years of Women on October 25<sup>th</sup> 2019

### [Professor Carolyne Larrington](#)

2019 is a significant anniversary for me, as well as for women in College. It was exactly thirty years ago that I first arrived at St John's, aged thirty. My Oxford journey had thus far taken me to St Catherine's, where I was an undergraduate and, for two years, a graduate student; Christ Church, where I was a Junior Research Fellow (or a Lecturer as we were paradoxically called); and New College, where I had been teaching for a year, learning my trade in medieval English language and literature and the history of the English language. There were also, in the middle of this, a couple of years teaching English in Japan, at Gakushuin University in Tokyo, on what was a forerunner of the now well-known JET Scheme.



Professor Larrington giving her speech  
at the launch of 40 Years of Women

Technically I was the College's first woman Fellow, though I was not its first Official Fellow. My appointment was as a Supernumerary Fellow and Tutor for Women; here I was following in the footsteps of Cathy la Farge, my predecessor teaching medieval English, who had been a Stipendiary Lecturer. Elizabeth Fallaize was elected to the Governing Body after my first six months or so, and thus became the first woman Official Fellow. She arrived in 1990, and with her election and that of June Clark, an administrator from the University Offices in Wellington Square, Governing Body meetings – which I attended *ex officio* – became slightly less strange. St John's was not devoid of women at a senior level of course; in the SCR there were lecturers and Junior Research Fellows, but there were no women involved in College governance. I found the atmosphere to be both welcoming and positive; the College wanted to lead in making itself into a good place for women at all levels.

One great asset in the first months was a wonderfully progressive JCR Women's Officer, Katie Gollop. She was only Women's Officer for one term, given the usual change of committee members at the end of Michaelmas Term, but since she was also an English student, she was a great source of information and we were able to continue working together in matters of policy. Katie and I, I'm delighted to say, are still in touch; she is now a very distinguished QC, taking on extremely important cases that are often concerned with children's wellbeing.

In 1989 the College was not by any means trailing behind compared with the wider university. While still at Christ Church, I had joined the Women Tutors' Group, a campaigning group of senior women across the University, whose aims included the appointment of Fellows for Women at College level, the adoption of sexual harassment codes, maternity pay for college staff, female representation on all appointment committees, non-sexist questioning in interviews and university nursery provision. Three of us were once summoned to Wellington Square (and had to attend in full subfusc) by the Vice-Chancellor and Daphne Parks, Principal of Somerville, to be grilled about the issue of interview questions. Daphne Parks was aghast that we felt it was inappropriate to raise questions such as 'who would be looking after your children' in interviews with women. It was also typical of this era that a friend was asked in an interview for a College Fellowship what her husband would think about her moving to Oxford to take up the post; she retorted that, since she was getting divorced, she neither knew nor cared. And she got the job.



[Lady Daphne Park, Principal of Somerville](#)



Professor Mark Freedland

Back in St John's, I want to pay particular tribute here to Mark Freedland, who, as Senior Dean, quietly, but with clear and incontrovertible argument, spearheaded the important policies that were needed to lay the basis of equality in college. And it would be quite untrue to claim that this was a long-running battle against entrenched male ideas of entitlement. There was plenty of warmth and goodwill, a real commitment to making change, but there were also occasional failures of understanding. A kind of paternalism was often evidenced: Fellows argued that the College would (of course) always aim to look after its female members. So, it was mooted, can't women rely on College to do the best for them that it could if they were to become pregnant, but this need not necessarily mean that hard-and-fast maternity leave policies for College-only staff needed to be set down. But you can't make career and life-changing decisions about fertility based on a trust in paternalist benevolence.

This, of course, is exactly the kind of thing that equality actually means in practice. Overall our aim was, in effect, to bring about a situation in which we were not always having to pipe up: but what about the women? And so we got things done. There was no pushback against making sure that women were always represented on appointment committees (except they were hard to find), the logic of asking identical questions of men and women in interviews was recognised and issues around maternity leave were resolved. We started talking about a college nursery too back then ... and twenty-five years later it opened its doors.

I want now to talk about Elizabeth Fallaize, whose portrait you may have seen in Hall, if you were not here when she was. As a member of Governing Body, she had some particular battles to fight; these were outward-facing ones for the most part, in her interactions with the University, particularly when she became a Proctor. As someone who came here from outside the Oxbridge system, when she first arrived she had lots of questions about how we did things here in Oxford – and why? In anthropological terms, I was her friendly native informant, trying to interpret these things to her, but quite often failing, shrugging and saying, 'well, it's just because we do'. Gradually more women appeared on Governing Body in those years before I left St John's in 1994, when my five year Fellowship was up. There was still work to do, on equality, on harassment, on welfare issues affecting women, and still there were not so many women in permanent appointments.



Elizabeth Fallaize's portrait that hangs in Hall

But since my return to St John's in 1999 (twenty years ago!), there really has been an exponential rise in the number of women. When we reached the figure of ten women on the Governing Body, a celebratory dinner was planned – but by the time it had been organised, there were another three of us, and that increase has continued. We've had a woman as Senior Dean (that was me), and a woman President, a woman as Tutor for Admissions, two successive women chaplains, any number of women Vice-Presidents and briefly last year a woman as Acting Senior Tutor (that was me again).

This speech was intended to give some sense of women in our institutional history. St John's women arrived 40 years ago, and we are clearly here to stay, to make our mark and to shape the history of the college. It was hard for women in Oxford 40 years ago; still hard 30 years ago; and now I'd like to think, it's less difficult, but the elimination of difficulty is a constantly moving target. Our task this year must be to reflect on how being a woman intersects with other identities in our environment, where inequality is still palpable and full inclusivity remains in our sights rather than in our lives.



The Opening of the St John's Nursery