

Interview with EJ Milner-Gulland (1985 BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES)
PROFESSOR OF BIODIVERSITY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY AT OXFORD



Why did you choose New College?

I hate to admit it but I chose it because my Dad went there. We were going through the prospectus together and he made notes on each college. When we got to New College he just ticked it and wrote "Best". What could I do?

By complete coincidence, he was helping me move into my second-year room (top floor of 12NB) and when we walked in he said – but this was my room when I was an undergrad 40 years ago! ... And this was my desk – I remember the ink stain!

But I also chose it because it was big, central, beautiful, and had a laid-back atmosphere, not too academic, not too sporty. I am so glad I did, because my Dad was right!

Were you the only woman in your year group studying biology in New College?

There were only two people studying Biology, both women – me and Michelle Gilders. There were actually quite a few female zoologists around but our degree course, Pure and Applied Biology, was newly introduced. It combined zoology, botany, agriculture, forestry and pest management. In the 1980s, and even more so in the 1990s, applied subjects were frowned upon in British universities. So even though Oxford had a world-renowned Forestry Institute, the applied parts of biology were having a hard time keeping going. This degree was meant to be a way to bring in some

income, but it didn't work because it only lasted 5 years before being abolished. But I loved it – I got to study my favourite bits of zoology (like behaviour and evolution) along with economics, development, forestry ... That interface is still what I do today. I do remember a low point when I had to write a tutorial essay entitled "The potato" when all my friends were writing about far more interesting topics.

Did women across subjects hang out together in college or did you spend more time with the other biologists?

I spent lots of time in College and I did rather fall in with a PPE crowd. There wasn't much opportunity to get to know other biologists outside College. I was quite active in women's issues – we had a Women's group which was not particularly mainstream. For example, I invited an outside speaker who was rather eminent; we had 5 people attend and held the event in someone's bedroom! I was Women's Officer on the JCR committee (elected unopposed – or I would never have stood!) and also did some women's/welfare work for OUSU. I wasn't prominent in any of this stuff but I did enjoy feeling useful and part of things, and it enabled to hang out with the PPE-ists (sad I know!). Oxford student politics really is the training ground for national politics though – many of the people who I was aware of then were part of the Blair/Brown/Cameron years in government.



Did you feel conscious of being treated any differently by tutors as a woman?

No. But I did come back to New College in the early 1990s as the Cox Fellow. I arranged lots of social and other events to link the JCR with the SCR, and also did welfare work. It was just when the last cohort of Fellows who had been appointed before women had come to the college were coming towards retirement, and I have to say there were several who just really didn't understand female undergraduates. A couple of times I got rung up by older male tutors who said "I've got a female undergraduate crying in my room, so I'm sending her over for you to deal with". I got a pretty good sense of how deeply pervasive the issues around how women are treated in academia were, and I have seen pretty much the whole gamut of bad behaviour during my academic career. These issues still persist, but I don't think today's younger women would put up with the things we put up with 20 or 30 years ago. I hope not, anyway.

What was your most memorable tutorial?

There was the one-to-one tutorial (on agricultural economics, which I did find interesting!), in which I fell asleep, I had been enjoying myself a bit too much the night before... maybe we've all been there? I had some very memorable tutorials with Richard Dawkins of course, but there are too many

stories about those to be repeated here!

Do you think women studying science subjects felt differently about their future careers?

Not that I'm aware of. We had all worked really hard to get to Oxford and we were ambitious for our futures.

Did you always want to be a biologist?

When I was 13, I was really worried about nuclear war (that was the "climate change"-type existential threat of the late 70s-early 80s) and decided I wanted to be Prime Minister so I could sort the issue out. I even went to our school careers fair and asked for advice as to how to do it. The careers master said I had to join a political party first, which rather put me off. But I'd always loved nature and learnt a lot of natural history from my parents. So biology was a natural fit for me, but I've also always been interested in the applications of science in human societies.

You are now Professor of Biodiversity at Oxford, how do you think our current biology students' experience at Oxford differs from yours?

I don't think it actually differs that much here at Oxford, though I don't really know. As you get older you think you still have your 18-year-old self inside you, and that you understand your students' experiences, but maybe that's a bit of

an illusion (and one that makes actual 18-year-olds cringe). I think that the kind of experience students get now is much more structured at the Departmental level, and that the tutors are more focussed on giving students all the different types of support they need to do their best. It was a bit sink-or-swim in my day, especially for DPhil students.

Any other points?

I thought you might like to see this absolutely cringe-making article in our local paper about

me getting into Oxford. My school was a very large comprehensive and I was the only person to get into Oxford that year, so the local paper covered it. As you can see, the reporter didn't exactly warm to me (apparently our geese attacked him as he arrived). I particularly like the last line: "her one other interest is horse riding". Not only is that visibly untrue as I was sitting at a piano, but it does make me seem a real saddo. And you can see two guilty secrets; I was known as Jane at the time, and I have straight hair.

