

**Helen Peacocke with the  
copper kettles made by  
her father**

**Photographs:  
Antony Moore**



## Sylvia Vetta talks to author, journalist and dog walker Helen Peacocke

**A**s a young woman, Helen Peacocke made a mental list of all the things she would like to do before she reached the age of 70. That landmark arrives this month – so has she managed to get everything done?

“There is still one thing left to do,” Helen revealed. “I want to do a parachute jump from a plane.”

This month’s castaway on our desert island, Helen will be well known to regular readers of *The Oxford Times* as she has written for the newspaper almost every week for 23 years.

Working for the newspaper also helped her achieve many of her ambitions – including drinking vintage champagne while soaring above the countryside in a hot air balloon. All in the name of science you understand.

But Helen had lived several lives before she sat at her desk at the newspaper’s office in Osney Mead.

She was born at the Acland Hospital, Oxford, on March 30, 1943, and brought up in Eynsham. Indeed Helen Richards, as she then was, came from an Oxfordshire family that would not seem out of place in *Lark Rise to Candleford*.

Her grandfather (Helen cannot remember his name) was blacksmith in Burford, and her father, Alfred Harper Richards (better known as Jim, also had metalworking skills.

Standing in the open fireplace of Helen’s charming cottage in Eynsham are a set of gleaming copper kettles made by her father. He was obviously a fine craftsman because the spouts are slender and elegant – no mean achievement.

Helen said: “I have polished them every Friday since he gave them to me.”

Alfred did not follow in his father’s footsteps, but instead went to work at Oxford Radiators factory in north Oxford as a sheet metal worker.

Helen’s eye for art may have something to do with her father – and her passion for fresh vegetables was also influenced by him. She often accompanied her father to his allotment.

“I vividly remember a warm sunny day when I helped him pull up onions and lay them out to dry. Taking the largest one, he cut it in half and sitting side-by-side we ate raw onion – an amazing taste I never forgot.”

In 1959, Helen became the first head girl of the recently built Bartholomew School.

“I am angry at how we were educated at that time. We all had enquiring minds but were not seen to have any potential, so were basically trained to become shop assistants. No effort was made to stretch us,” Helen said. “We were regarded as plebs and that was the life schools mapped out for us.”

“In the final year, the head teacher called me and my mother into his office. My mother, Molly, was the school cook.

“He asked her ‘Does Helen like to cook?’ Mother answered: ‘Yes and she is good with her hands.’ So the head suggested I should go to catering college. And that is what happened.

“I worked for my City and Guilds in catering



Helen with her border collie puppy Barnaby

# Peacocke’s progress

at Singletree House in the Iffley Road. But my dream was to be a writer. At night I would scribble poems and hide them under my pillow,” Helen recalled.

“Seeing my love of poetry, my aunt Dorothy gave me a copy of Kipling’s verse. My copy of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* is a possibility for the desert island. It is well-thumbed, almost dog-eared and I love it. While I still like Kipling, I enjoy the variety of voices in this anthology.”

When she completed her course, Helen went to work at the Cadena, Cornmarket, which closed down in the 1970s. The company sent her to work as a trainee manager at one of its restaurants in Bournemouth.

“I did not stay long because I had a yearning to see the world. The equivalent of a gap year, in my case, six months, was to work as a staff

cook at the Moulin de Lecq in Jersey. I returned to Jersey last year and it is still there.”

Helen was lured back to Oxfordshire and found herself working at The Kings Head in Woodstock

“In 1962, food, apart from nibbles, was not common in pubs, but they were on the cusp of change,” she remembers. “I wanted to introduce meals, but knew that they had to be as affordable as sandwiches and appeal to both blue and white collar workers. I realised that a potato cost the same as two slices of bread.

“A sandwich needed butter and a filling and a baked potato needed butter and a filling, so the cost structure was the same, the difference was in the cooking. I devised different fillings and we were ready to launch the meals but had

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no money for advertising. I gave some friends £5 each to come in and buy a meal and make noise praising it. It worked. Soon regular customers were trying them. I set a challenge to customers to try all 21 fillings. Anyone who succeeded had a free meal. As news that they were good spread, we often had queues stretching around the corner into the High Street."

The business succeeded, but Helen, now 21, wanted a new challenge. She applied to British United Airways (owned by Freddie Laker) to become an air hostess – another tick on the wish list.

"The interview took place at a posh hotel in London," Helen said. "A team of six asked me questions, all of which I answered with confidence, until we got to the big one 'Do you speak French?'"

"I hesitated for a moment, because I did not, but this interview was important to me and there are ways of answering questions that avoid telling lies. With a big smile I said 'Oui'. I got the job! It was wonderful and took me all over the world, including Africa, India and South America. I kept the uniform and it still fits."

The next tick on Helen's wish list was Australia. In 1967, she settled in Melbourne, eventually getting a job as a senior lecturer in William Angliss Catering College. Although working full-time, she accomplished another of those dreams on her list, to go to university.

In those days, only eight per cent of pupils in England went to university, but Australia was

one of the first countries to open up higher education to mature students.

"I needed 'A-Levels and so I took English and History and Politics. When it came to the exams one of the English questions was 'Why are you sitting this exam?'"

"Lots of students wrote reams, I simply answered 'I lived in the shadow of the walls of a university and was not aware that they are made of paper and that I could have torn them down at any time.'"

Helen passed and went on to take a degree in Philosophy but said: "I should really have been given a degree for parking in two minutes. Working full-time, I was always in a hurry and had to run to get to lectures in time. I needed to work out the best places to park allowing the shortest distance."

Helen stayed in Melbourne for ten years, but was homesick.

"I woke dreaming of driving over Eynsham tollbridge on a misty morning and the dream would not go away. So I returned to Oxfordshire and opened a wholefood shop in the village, but there was still a big hole in my list and that was writing. I wrote to *The Oxford Times* in search of work."

By that time, Helen was divorced but decided to keep her married name of Peacocke because she rather liked it.

She was taken on for what she thought was a temporary post with the *Oxford Star*, but the job lasted 23 years. Even after her retirement she continues to write for *The Oxford Times*.

I discovered that one of her first interviews was with me when I was director of the Oxford

Antiques Centre in the former factory of Coopers Oxford Marmalade.

My business partner Gill Hedge and I thought marmalade factory a mouthful and named it The Jam Factory – the name seems to have stuck. I remember a delightfully relaxed interview with Helen and now I realise why.

"I loved exploring all the nooks and crannies and wonderful things in the Jam Factory and often headed there in my lunch hour," she said.

Helen pointed to a heavy antique copper pan that she had bought during one of those lunch breaks and which hangs above her father's kettles.

"That interview was also convenient because when I started writing features and advertising features in the *Oxford Star*, the editor assumed I drove to assignments. But it was a few years before I was able to buy my dream car, a Mini. In the meantime, I was using public transport. Getting to a garage forecourt in Bicester by bus was a logistical nightmare!" she recalled.

In those early years, Helen wrote about just about anything. "Those were some of the happiest times of my life. I loved the unpredictability. Wondering who will phone and when. I have been privileged to interview people who I would not normally get the opportunity of meeting. One person who was on my wish list to meet was Tommy Steele."

Helen got to interview him at The New Theatre. "I was met by his agent who told me to clear off because Tommy was due to be interviewed on Radio Oxford.

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"I asked him how he intended getting there. 'In his Rolls, of course' was his reply. So, without hesitation, I said: 'In that case I will interview him on the way.' So that tick was fulfilled on the white leather upholstered back seat of Tommy Steele's Rolls-Royce."

Helen soon established her reputation as a food writer. One of the most unusual challenges she accepted in 2009 was to eat British and mostly local for a year. The majority of ingredients had to be sourced within 30 miles of her Eynsham home.

"My father's onion is to blame for my passion for just-picked vegetables. My biggest problem was finding local flour. Most commercial flour is from mixed sources. I eventually found a source for locally grown and ground flour in Wantage and used it to make my own bread. But I had to fight an overwhelming desire for lemons and bananas!" Helen laughed.

"Every weekend, for as long as I can remember, I have cooked a recipe for the paper. At the Thame Food Show, I found a rare radish for sale for 50p. I had never seen one like it before. It had a black, black skin like a rhinoceros. I looked up its properties and discovered it was quite fiery. I created a salad and grated the skin on top.

"My problem is that I can get so excited cooking that sometimes I forget the ingredients I put in and have to make it again. I always take my own photographs and do it in my garden in natural light."

It is no secret that dogs have played an important role in Helen's life.

It all started when a dog was found in a dustbin at the Apollo (now the New) Theatre in Oxford. "The editor's instructions were, 'Helen, go and interview him.' I took one look at the poor animal, took him home and named him Apollo after the place where he was found. He

lived for ten years. When he died I said I would never have another dog because the loss was so great. But I missed the company and realised I needed another dog.

"I looked in *The Oxford Times* and found an advertisement from a farmer in Kirtlington offering border collie puppies for £100 each. Of the five, four were yapping and drawing attention to themselves but the fifth was alone cowering at the back. Our eyes met and that

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was it. Pythius is an epithet for Apollo and we were together for 12 years."

Helen shared her life and cottage with the tri-coloured border-collie and insisted on giving him the dignity of a surname – hence Pythius-Peacocke. When writing up her reviews for both the *Herald* newspapers and the *Witney Gazette*, Helen often added a few comments about his antics when he accompanied her to a pub. She even managed to sneak his name into her food pages from time to time.

So, in 2009, when Helen announced that her first book was about to be published and was entitled *Paws Under the Table*, it came as no surprise. "My colleagues expected nothing less, particularly as the book, which is written in two voices, mine and the dog's, takes the reader to 40 dog-friendly pubs and on walks from Oxford to the Cotswolds," Helen said.

The success of that first book of walks has led to three others – *Paws for History*, *Paws on*

*the Way and Paws in the Cotswolds*.

The books bring together all Helen's passions – fresh, well-prepared mostly local food, for pubs, beer, dogs and walking in beautiful English countryside. It also ticked off another of her ambitions, to publish a book.

Pythius died in November last year and Helen once again felt the loss of losing a canine companion. She has since filled the void with another border collie.

This puppy, called Barnaby, is already making a name for himself. He has his own blog and his portrait will be on display during Artweeks as part of award-winning photographer, Rory Carnegie's exhibition from May 9-12 at 45 Park Town, Oxford.

We were getting close to that crunch time when Helen must make her final choice. If she can only have one thing, what does she want to find washed up on the beach of our desert island?

"Well that has to be a painting – *The Butcher's Shop* by Annibale Carracci. It hangs in Christ Church Picture Gallery. But it did not always hang there," Helen said.

"I was at the gallery reviewing an exhibition when I first saw it. It really appealed to me because it was one of the first ever pictures of ordinary people living ordinary lives.

"It appealed even more when I learned something of its history. The dons of Christ Church have always eaten well in the dining hall at the college, where there are some fine portraits on the walls. But none of them realised that a masterpiece was hanging in the kitchen over the cooking fire, covered in grease.

"It was only in the 1950s when the kitchen was improved that an art expert discovered it. If I take that picture, it would take me full circle. When I was a child, I was told that was how my life was meant to be – working in a kitchen."