Oxfordshire

March 2015

Limited Edition

incorporating Intuition

Opening the door to science

Georgina Ferry joins our castaways

The doctor will see you now

Why stand-up comic and campaigner Dr Phil Hammond champions the NHS

The editor writes

Inside this issue we conclude Linora Lawrence's fascinating A-Z of the Bodleian, which gave us remarkable access to its many treasures.

I have found the most interesting aspect of Linora's access-all-areas tour were her profiles of the people who ensure the smooth running of this world-famous library, arguably the Bodleian's most precious commodity. When Thomas Bodley opened his library in 1602 he made two appointments – the librarian and the janitor. Today, the Bodleian group of libraries employs approximately 700 people across 27 libraries which come under the Bodleian banner.

The story of one of the 700 caught my eye while reading one of Linora's articles. Colin Harris, currently superintendent of the special collections reading room, has dedicated his working life to the Bod. Colin has worked at the library for almost 50 years.

He came straight from school in 1967 and since then has worked in several different areas of the library. He even met his wife, Susan, in the hallowed halls of the Bodleian. In 1978 he caught a thief attempting to make off with a rare volume – just one of the many tales from the library which deserve being recorded.

Also in this issue we preview the Bodleian's *Marks of Genius* exhibition, being staged to mark the public opening of the new Weston Library in Broad Street.

Stephen Hebron, curator of special projects, was the person responsible for putting the exhibition together. He told our writer Julie Webb: "The 130 exhibits cover 2,000 years – from fragments of a poem by Sappho copied in the second century AD to an insulin structure map drawn

Dorothy Hodgkin pictured with her young family in 1947, the year she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society

by the Nobel Prize-winning Oxford crystallographer Dorothy Hodgkin in 1968."

And in a remarkable piece of serendipity (or planning as I like to call it) we interview the biographer of Dorothy Hodgkin, the journalist and broadcaster Georgina Ferry, who reveals how she became fascinated with the Nobel prize-winner while selecting her castaway choices in conversation with Sylvia Vetta.

Also in this month's issue, Maggie Hartford goes in search of the Ancient Mariner (or the seafarer who inspired Coleridge's famous 'Rime'.

There's music and comedy too – as Nick Dent-Robinson catches up with the members of Fairport Convention who chat about their latest album, while Richard O Smith talks to health campaigner and stand-up comic Dr Philip Hammond, who has some down-to-earth ideas about our health service – it is shame, as he revealed to Richard, none of the politicians he has met have taken notice of his sensible suggestions.

Meanwhile in our **Intuition** supplement we discover the joys of ballet for grown-ups and give away a trendy Ruxx bag. LE

Oxfordshire Limited Edition

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Published by: Newsquest Oxfordshire, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0EJ
Printed by: Garnett Dickinson
Cover image: Georgina Ferry photographed in the University Museum of Natural History by Richard Cave

Georgina Ferry in the University Museum of Natural History, Oxford

Photographs: Richard Cave

In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

Sylvia Vetta meets journalist, author and broadcaster, Georgina Ferry

A passion for science

Georgina Ferry champions science and scientists, past and present. She is also passionate about encouraging women to follow a career in science.

Her name has been especially linked with Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, the only British woman to win a Nobel Prize in science (1964). Georgina has much in common with her heroine.

She researches her subjects with similar hard work and dedication and has managed to cope with a demanding career and bringing up a family.

She was born in Hong Kong in 1955, when her father Peter Ferry was a junior officer in The Royal Artillery.

"Army life is peripatetic," Georgina said. "I went to four different schools before I was 11. I was at a primary school in Malaysia with British, Ghurkha, Australian and New Zealand children, so early, on I acquired a sense of how big the world is.

"There were advantages and disadvantages. You give up forming intense friendships because you know you are going to leave. But you become adaptable and also somewhat self-contained," she added.

Aged 11 Georgina went to board at Ellerslie School for Girls in Great Malvern.

She recalled: "I drifted between the arts and sciences, though I think my instincts were always more on the literary side. I took physics with chemistry at O-Level thinking I might like to become a vet, but changed my mind and took English, French and History at A-Level.

"My school encouraged me to apply for Oxford but it had little experience of Oxbridge entrance and neither of my parents had been to university," Georgina said.

"My father actually thought it was a waste of money for girls to take degrees. So as a 17 year-old I tried to negotiate the system with no advice. I applied to read Experimental Psychology, thinking (wrongly) it would give me insight into human nature.

"Non-scientists usually studied psychology jointly with philosophy, but I felt strongly that the alternative option of physiology would provide a better basis for understanding the brain. At the interview at Lady Margaret Hall (LMH), Alison Brading, who became my tutor

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asked me 'What is the function of water in the body?' My one-word answer– 'transport' – drove me on to the course," Georgina explained.

After graduating in 1976, Georgina went to Washington DC for six months. Her father (her parents had separated when she was 12) was working there as a defence attaché at the British Embassy.

She said: "I was having a lovely time working in a bookshop on Capitol Hill when my tutor contacted me. She had recommended me for the post of research assistant in a laboratory in London. I took the job purely on her recommendation, without application or interview.

"My boss assumed that I would do a PhD but the project didn't seem to me to be important and anyway a life in research did not appeal. So I looked for other jobs that would make use of my science."

Publishers Chapman & Hall then specialised in science and technology and they were advertising for a copy editor, Georgina said. She applied and got the job.

"I enjoyed it immensely. I loved the moment when a finished book was placed in my hands for the first time. I have never lost that delight in the smell and feel of a new book. I probably would have stayed in publishing if my partner and future husband David Long had not pointed to an advertisement in 1979 for the post of book review editor at the *New Scientist,* saying 'you could do that'."

David and Georgina met at a drama society sherry party during their first week in Oxford in 1973 when all the colleges were still single sex. They had spent most of their spare time as students in theatrical productions, she as an actor, he as a lighting designer.

With nothing to lose, Georgina took up David's challenge, applied and was called for an interview.

"To my surprise I got the job. I was only 23, with no experience in journalism, and suddenly I had seven pages a week to fill with reviews and contributors' columns. For the first few months I used to cycle to work weeping with anxiety, but I learned on the job, and eventually began to write news and feature articles on neuroscience."

Soon afterwards Georgina heard of an opening for an occasional presenter on the Radio 4 programme *Science Now*. She joined the team, anchoring the programme every five weeks while holding down her *New Scientist* job.

At this point Georgina asked if she could take a radio to our desert island. I thought maybe a wind-up radio could work.

"From all the bewildering variety of media, radio is the one I always return to," Georgina said. "It creates images in your head and allows the space for you to think about what you are hearing. The experience of writing scripts was an excellent training in writing short, clear, simple sentences."

"*Science Now also* gave me valuable experience interviewing scientists across the whole range of disciplines. It was a topical programme and the subject could be anything for particle physics to immunology. The trick is to get the interviewee to explain the science until you understand it yourself – then there is a good chance the audience will too.

"One memorable interview was with John Kendrew and Max Perutz who shared the Nobel Prize for work on the structure of proteins. I sensed their professional rivalry. Max Perutz was a devoted friend of Dorothy Hodgkin and I later wrote his biography."

In 1981 David and Georgina married, and moved from London to Oxford. The following year, Georgina went freelance following the birth of her son Edward.

"I had not experienced a place to put down roots as a child. Oxford was somewhere we both felt at home. We bought a house in Plantation Road. To begin with we both commuted daily, but after Ed was born I went freelance and worked mostly from home, and David started his own consultancy in Oxford a few years later.

"I continued to write features for *New Scientist*. One of the topics I took on was gender and science – 1984 was the first 'Women into Science and Engineering Year'."

At the same time she was writing and presenting radio documentaries for the BBC, and found herself doing a lot of travelling once more. Ed's brother Will had been born in 1985, and she began to feel that she needed work closer to home. Oxford University had just launched *Oxford Today* with Christine Hardiment as editor.

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Georgina said: "I rang her up and offered an article on Susan Greenfield – this was before Susan became famous. From then on I wrote a science feature for each issue, and began to build connections across Oxford's science departments.

"In 1990 the University made me its first press officer, so I had the fun of setting up an office where, if journalists rang up, they were actually made welcome. Dealing with the demands of the American press for details of Bill Clinton's student days during the 1993 Presidential election was particularly memorable."

"I did not particularly want to stay in public relations and returned to freelancing in 1994. I had continued to write for *Oxford Today*. In 2000, when Christina resigned, I became the editor and stayed until 2007. In the meantime I had begun to write books," Georgina said.

In 1994, Georgina decided to mark the 30th anniversary of Dorothy Hodgkin's Nobel Prize with a feature about her in *Oxford Today*. By that time Dorothy was too frail to interview, but Georgina sent the family a copy of the magazine.

"Dorothy died a month later, but her daughter, Liz, wrote to me saying they had been able to read her the article," Georgina said. "And she had appreciated it.

I visited Liz at the family home in Crab Mill in Warwickshire. Dorothy had an instant claim to fame as the only British woman to win a Nobel Prize in science, and there was no biography of her. I just knew I had to do it."

The Contemporary Scientific Archives Centre had acquired Dorothy's professional papers and they were kept in Bodleian.

Jeannine Alton who used to write arts reviews for *The Oxford Times* was a highly skilled cataloguer of scientific papers and she had catalogued Dorothy's papers.

"Jeannine was also a dear neighbour of mine until her death in 2007," said Georgina.

"I still miss her. I wanted to write a rounded biography to answer the question 'How was a woman born in 1910, when opportunities for women in science were almost non-existent, able to reach such heights – and in chemistry, the most male dominated field?

"I had abundant material because the Hodgkin family rarely threw things away. Dorothy had an unorthodox marriage. She and her husband Thomas were often apart for months at a time and they wrote to each other every day," Georgina revealed.

"When Dorothy wanted to write to Thomas about her work – he was a non-scientist – she explained things simply and described her feelings and difficulties with people and equipment, things you never get from the published scientific record."

"Science is a tremendously social activity. It is possibly the fault of historians who depicted scientists such as Newton and Einstein as lone geniuses that this is often ignored.

"Modern science is usually collaborative and the interchange is international. The other thing people fail to understand is that science is creative. That misunderstanding is partly due to the fact that science education in schools is involving less and less practical work."

Georgina channels her desire to enthuse people with the joy and creativity of science into her role as deputy chair of The Oxford Trust, the charity behind Science Oxford, founded by Sir Martin and Audrey, Lady Wood

that works in schools and the community.

"I have just been judging the local heats of the FameLab competition – there is such amazing talent for performance among Oxford's young scientists, we had a really hard time picking who to send through to the national final," Georgina said.

"Scientists are faced with a problem to solve. You have different materials and equipment but what to do with them involves creative thinking and practical innovation. That kind of imagination and creativity is what Dorothy had in spades."

Dorothy Hodgkin's chosen field was X-ray crystallography, a technique that reveals the three-dimensional arrangement of atoms inside crystals, and so gives insight into how they work. She was particularly interested in crystals of biological molecules such as penicillin, vitamin B12 and insulin.

"The techniques of the time could not get you the whole way there,"said Georgina.

"She had to begin by imagining possible structures in her head in three dimensions. But it was the aesthetic qualities of crystals that set her off on the path of wanting to be a scientist. She first grew crystals from colourless liquids at the age of ten at a little school in Suffolk, and marvelled at the resulting brilliant colours."

Much of Dorothy Hodgkin's working life had been spent in a laboratory in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History when working on crystallography, and in 2010 Georgina was invited to be writer in residence to mark the museum's 150th anniversary.

Among other projects Georgina wrote a play called *Hidden Glory* which was performed in the museum in 2010, to mark the centenary of Dorothy's birth. The play about the scientist has since been performed in York, Bristol, Cambridge, Manchester and in Georgina's alma mater Lady Margaret Hall. It was also made into a DVD.

Georgina said that her time at the museum gave her time to look at things and ponder them. She started a blog about objects and activities in the museum.

"If I could take one thing from the museum to your desert island, it would be a prehistoric hand axe from the Oxfordshire geology collections," she said. "I remember being struck that someone living near Eynsham more than 200,000 years ago, an early ancestor of our own species *Homo sapiens*, had made it and it is beautiful and useful. It fits in the hand, which gives you a powerful connection to its maker. It was the tool of its day, just as Dorothy's microscopes and X-ray tubes were the tools of hers."

In October 2014, BBC Radio 4 marked the 50th anniversary of Dorothy Hodgkin's Nobel Prize with a series called *An Eye for Pattern*, based on Dorothy's correspondence with family and colleagues. With all her biographical and radio experience, Georgina helped to select the extracts and introduced the dramatised readings.

Returning to her personal choice of objects for Oxtopia, Georgina said: "I would love to take my British Moth dinghy that I sail on the Thames by Port Meadow. I love the natural world so a pair of binoculars could be a good idea. And as Dorothy Hodgkin has had my attention for many years of my life, her model of penicillin (now in the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford) could be another possibility. But if I can only take one thing, I think it has to be the hand axe."

Dorothy Hodgkin: A Life by Georgina Ferry was published by Granta in 1998, and was reissued last year, in time for the 50th anniversary of her Nobel Prize, by Bloomsbury Reader.

It is a good read, even for those of us without a degree in chemistry. It captures Dorothy's engaging personality, her immense dedication to research and her connection with the issues of the day.

The respect Dorothy commanded among her national and international colleagues, as she combined a demanding career with no respect for regular hours with bringing up a family, is inspirational.

I wondered what Dorothy might have chosen to take with her to Oxtopia. Georgina suggested that Dorothy might have considered the beautiful watercolour she painted when she took part in an archeological expedition at the age of 18. Her parents were excavating mosaic pavements from Byzantine churches in the ancient city of Jerash, in Jordan. Dorothy took spent part of her first year as a chemistry student at Oxford painting the intricate geometric patterns on a paper grid. But Georgina doubted that she would care much about possessions in Oxtopia.

"She was the least materialistic of people, Georgina said. "She went to the States for three months in 1947, taking only one suitcase and most of that was filled with a model of penicillin.

"I suspect she would most have wanted a trowel and a microscope so that she could work on the island," Georgina said.

"Her colleague Eleanor Dodson told me: 'Dorothy never tired of peering down her microscope and it was one of the possessions she kept when she officially retired'.

"She did not even stop working when Maggie Hambling painted her portrait."