

President of the Fitzwilliam Society 2016-2017 – Rachael Webb (1979)



Rachael Webb (née Brooks) matriculated in 1979, being amongst the first intake of female undergraduates at the College. The previous year, her school in West Yorkshire had arranged with Emmanuel College to host a group of prospective applicants. When Emmanuel cancelled at short notice, the school arranged to visit Fitzwilliam instead. Here the party was jovially hosted by Dr Brian Johnson, who immediately calmed the northerners' nerves, and Fitzwilliam became the first-choice college.

Rachael read Natural Sciences, but by her own admission was easily distracted by all the social opportunities; she met her future husband, Doug Webb

(1979, Geography), in the College bar.

Harbouring an ambition to pursue forensic science in the police force, she was disappointed to be told there was a freeze on recruitment at that time. Rather than commit to further academic study or look for a temporary job, Rachael decided – for some reason that she now cannot remember – to join National Westminster Bank in London on their graduate trainee programme. As Assistant Manager in charge of lending to personal and small-business customers, she was famed for bouncing more cheques one Christmas Eve than she had done during the previous four weeks.

When Doug was offered a two-year tour in Toronto, Rachael was not too disheartened to wave goodbye to the bank, and when they returned to England, she joined a property-management company and became a client manager. That did not last too long because Doug was soon offered another opportunity, this time in Boston (USA, not Lincolnshire).

This time they were abroad for six years, and Rachael worked in freelance journalism and public relations. Her most memorable writing assignments included a newspaper article about whether the 1990s British foot-and-mouth crisis could hit America. She persuaded a Cumbrian newspaper to allow her to use their photograph of Prince Charles' visit to a devastated farming community. Rachael's American editor was in raptures! Her other favourite assignment was interviewing Bill Bryson and reporting on his visit to the recently-extended town library. He was as funny in person as he is in his books.

Upon their return to England in 2002, Rachael intended to re-establish her PR business, going as far as to take a Diploma in Copy Writing that allows her to add the letters 'Dip C' after her name. However, five days after they moved into their new home in a beautiful, tranquil, rural corner of North Buckinghamshire, Luton Airport announced that they wanted to re-route some of their flights over the hamlet. The PR business was put on hold, and an environmental activist was born.

Rachael went from True Blue to Mean Green overnight and formed, joined, and chaired several organisations to try and protect rural Britain from all forms of inappropriate development, not just flight paths. She is currently a member of the Executive Council of the Aviation Environment Federation (AEF), the principal UK NGO campaigning exclusively on the environmental impacts of aviation and promoting a sustainable future for the sector. She also represents Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes' parish and town councils on Luton Airport's Consultative Committee.

Regarding non-aviation issues, Rachael was a Parish Councillor for 12 years, a member of the steering committee of the Local Planning Authority's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, and chaired a parishes' planning consortium, representing them at several Public Examinations into district and regional strategic development frameworks.

Conscious that her knowledge of planning issues was patchy, she enrolled at the Open University for a Master's Degree in Environmental Policy and Society, her dissertation for which was an examination of the impact of aircraft noise in rural areas.

When Rachael and Doug were looking to support Fitzwilliam financially, Rachael at first said she would prefer not to fund building work, having developed a nervous twitch around bricks and mortar. But when she heard about the aspiration to renovate the former library into an income-generating, multi-functional, eco-friendly space, without knocking down a tree or encroaching on any green space, she recognised this rare example of a truly sustainable development and gave the green light.

As a member of the Fitzwilliam Society Committee for several years, Rachael helped to launch the annual Careers Fair and the fledgling Grants Programme, and is now looking to attract younger alumni onto the Committee.

Rachael's plethora of voluntary commitments does not prevent her from currently learning German with the OU, researching her family tree, singing in the community choir and, as at Fitz, enjoying an active social life with Doug.