

## Examples of Biography entries from 1974

### Pamela Akerman (née Gooder) – Physiological Sciences



Studying for a medical degree I spent six years at Somerville and I remember at the time being amazed at the way life in Oxford changed so completely with each year. The first year, meeting new people, embracing new experiences and having a good time was a different world to third year finals. My time as a post graduate was as if in a different city, yet in the same places, with almost no overlap to the life of my undergraduate years. I was experiencing the complexity and magic of Oxford.

The full programme of medical training had many highlights which included physiology tutorials with Jean Banister. Yes, I worked hard but there was plenty of time for socialising especially visiting friends for tea with crumpets toasted on electric fire guards. I rowed for Somerville with early morning training sessions on the river and running or cycling back to be in time for breakfast.

We were privileged to be at Somerville and I am grateful that Somerville set me up with confidence to enjoy life. I trained as a GP and then as a Public Health Consultant; two completely different but related disciplines. I married a dairy farmer and we live in rural Wiltshire with our dog. I have 2 children, a daughter who is now a GP and a son working in finance in the city.

Now retired I am a school governor and Parish Councillor as well as having farm responsibilities. I remain active with the village tennis club, regular parkruns with the local event I helped to set up and lots of cycling. Theatre trips whenever possible and ongoing garden projects for any spare time.

Cycling around Oxford was always a joy (except cycling up the hill to the John Radcliffe in foul winter weather). I was a keen cyclist before Somerville and I still am. My favourite retirement occupation is as a cycling instructor teaching Bikeability in local primary schools. Holidays are often cycle touring.



## Penny Bruce – History



Arriving at Somerville in October 1974 felt like the start of a new life coming to the city from Somerset. At first, it seemed very daunting - long reading lists, three essays a fortnight to write plus the pressure of History Prelims at the end of the first term - but I soon settled in and developed a close group of friends.

One highlight of my second year was living in West Flat (formerly used for staff) with Sue Morris and Nicky Thomas. We soon got over the novel experience of finding a host of cockroaches in the downstairs cupboard (!) and settled into regular communal cooking and visits to the open market near the train station on Wednesdays to buy lots of cheap vegetables.

Jane Davis and I hosted a joint birthday party in West Flat in January 1976 billed as an Elegant Extravaganza to celebrate Jane's 20th and my 21st birthdays. Happy days!

On the academic side, I'm grateful for the challenges posed by the Oxford tutorial system which gave me the confidence to think for myself, not be daunted by embarking on completely new areas and being able to work out possible answers to interpreting different situations.

This proved to be enormously helpful after Oxford when I embarked on the process of becoming a solicitor and started as an articled clerk in a London law firm in 1979. For me, it turned out to be the right combination of intellectual challenges, commercial nous and practical solutions in bringing transactions to a conclusion. I started off in general commercial work with a focus on film and TV financing, moved into banking and finance and ended in financial services regulation until I retired in 2021.

When I reflect on my legal career, it strikes me that I worked on several transactions where there was no precedent for the legal documentation or a practical solution needed to be found for a novel situation, and here the skills I developed at Somerville proved to be invaluable. Looking back, I feel very privileged to have been at Somerville.



## Teresa Clements (née Moylan) – Zoology



Did anyone else feel this exercise was like writing one's own obituary? Getting beyond that, my account is not very exciting, but I offer it in fair exchange for reading about everyone else.

I loved my time at Somerville and my heart was in my boots when my three good friends and I sat down for a final lunch together at Browns before going our separate ways. What a moment. What to do next? There has never been a plan.

There was no option to go back home and no job lined up so my then boyfriend, Jason, (Maths, Exeter, 1974) and I stayed on in Oxford and did odd jobs in town to pay the rent. Eventually he began IT training near Bicester and I became a lab technician in the Developmental Biology group originally in the Zoology building and later in the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology on South Parks Road. Things were looking up, we bought a house in St Clements and married in 1979.

For family reasons and a job change we moved to Harrogate in 1981, Our daughter was born on New Year's Day 1983 and our son in October 1985. Having settled in Harrogate, we didn't move again. When the children were small, I enjoyed some horticultural courses at nearby RHS Garden Harlow Carr and later at Askham Bryan College, York, and worked at a plant nursery.

When the local school needed a new biology technician, who also had to look after the school greenhouse, I couldn't resist the opportunity and spent some very happy years working there. The job changed over time as computers became an essential part of school life. With very little experience, I took on some computer work and gradually Information Technology became the main part of my job. Several years on, I was the Network Manager.

Eventually, I moved on again, still in IT, but to a less demanding job. After the buzz of working in school it felt so dull. Aged 54, I went back to University, this time at Leeds, and did a one-year MSc in Plant Science, which I thought would complement the Oxford BA in Zoology.

That certainly livened things up! It was a completely different experience to my earlier years of student life. There was very little botany, but I was brought bang up to date on scientific developments and being part of the University community was a life-enhancing bonus.

Throughout life I have loved tulips. Membership of the Wakefield and North of England Tulip Society led to me being the Secretary for ten years, and Jason the Treasurer. Then came an invitation to join the RHS Bulb Committee and, at the end of this year, I will have completed my five years as Chair. I think I worked as hard in these last two voluntary positions as I ever did in paid employment.

There never was a career plan, things turned up and I didn't say 'No'. I have been very lucky.

## Judith Forshaw – English



As a teenager, I lived in an isolated town on the Cumbrian coast and went to a school which had no history of sending students to Oxbridge. My mother, who was a Somervillian, encouraged me to apply and persuaded the school to support me. Latin was not on offer until a new teacher arrived when I was in the lower sixth which enabled me to scrape through my O level and meet the academic requirements. Much to my delight, I was offered a place.

Somerville and Oxford opened many doors to exciting new experiences, challenges and opportunities. On the whole, my three years were extremely happy and I felt privileged to be in a beautiful place and in the supportive community that Somerville offered. I did study but also had a lot of fun and met many people, some of whom I am still close to. A joy of retirement is being able to give more time to those friendships.

I fell into teaching as a way of staving off making decisions about the future and found I really enjoyed it so I spent my working life teaching English in a variety of institutions: mixed comprehensive schools, a girls' independent school, a sixth form college, a college of higher education.

I have been blessed to have a long marriage to David; we have a son and daughter, a grandson and two granddaughters. In retirement, I've had the time to look after my elderly parents and young grandchildren as well as volunteering as a family magistrate and finally having some more time to myself.



## Jane Jones (née Davis) – History

I did enjoy my time at Somerville, but I always felt rather that I didn't belong and actually wasn't clever enough to be there! It wasn't until I had left and was struggling with inane staffroom conversations, and later, struggling to be a Shell wife overseas, that I appreciated how wonderful it had been to have so many intelligent and interesting people to talk to, and that actually, I was clever.... But when I left, I didn't want to be a lawyer, or an accountant, or a civil servant, or do research... so I made the non-decision to be a teacher – not to teach History; I could see that many teens wouldn't want to learn History – but a primary school teacher. I was to be married in tenth week of the final year and my intended had a job at Shell already lined up. I looked forward to being posted abroad and didn't care that it meant I would have no career to speak of.

We never went anywhere very exotic, but zigzagged across the North Sea between the Netherlands and Aberdeen. I loved Holland: the matter-of-fact Dutch, the environmental awareness decades ahead of the UK, water everywhere. It was a good place to have a baby and I had three there. In Aberdeen, on the other hand, (where I had another baby) I felt foreign and unwanted. Scottish nationalism can be unpleasant if you aren't Scottish, and Aberdeen is cold, grey and very far away from everywhere else in Britain.

To add to this, when I arrived the second time, ahead of my husband by a few weeks to get the children into school for the start of term, I received a telephone call to tell me that he was ill. His stroke was not diagnosed for another two weeks. He survived, and was able to return to work, but this probably didn't help my relationship with Aberdeen, where, first time round, I later realised, I probably had postnatal depression.

So, looking back on my life, I feel as if I have always been in a supportive role and quite alone. I did return to teaching and discovered how to make children love history. I joined a choir. I got an allotment.

One by one the children all left home to fly south and my husband and I separated, but, somehow, I've never managed to leave this granite city by the sea. I've grown to appreciate walking in the landscape, singing at the cathedral, doing my garden and my plot, and most of all, the very varied coastline and the sea. The cold, clean grey sea. I swim most days, summer and winter. It has changed my outlook, as anyone who does it will tell you, ad nauseam. I love the islands- I've visited most of them in a sailing boat and sailed from here to Orkney, Norway, the Faroe Islands. I spent a year helping my daughter with her toddler when she became Head of the school on the isle of Westray in Orkney. I love a ceilidh, but I still hate Hogmanay and Scottish nationalism.



Although I never had any ambition of any sort, I don't think my time at Somerville was wasted. If nothing else, it taught me to get the meat out of several sources and present a cogent argument. But also, I think that intelligence and education in a teacher is as important in primary education as in secondary or further. A friend commented that all the parents were terrified of me, but they all wanted their children in my class! I am happy with those accolades, as I am with my life now, very peaceful and quite happily solitary.

## Helen MacEwan – Modern Languages



I arrived at Somerville to read Modern Languages as a shy 17-year-old after two years at Peterhead Academy, the last school I attended in a peripatetic childhood spent in three different countries. My sole claim to distinction was being the youngest person in our year at Somerville. This, I am absolutely sure, was accidental and owing to some switch between school systems rather than academic brilliance. I was far too immature to take full advantage of Oxford or Somerville either academically or socially, but am grateful for the opportunity given to a gauche teenager from a Scottish comprehensive.

I remember telling a college friend that my one great ambition was to write. However, a novel written in my university days failed (wholly understandably) to find a publisher and I never wrote another one. I had no idea what to do on leaving Oxford; apart from wanting to see my name on the cover of a book, I had no defined ambition and couldn't picture myself doing a 'proper job' of the kind that will be described in most pages of this booklet. I did a PGCE, went abroad to teach English as a foreign language, met my (Spanish) husband and ran a language school with him in Spain for several years. I then worked as a staff translator at Deloitte in

Madrid before moving to Brussels to work as a translator for one of the EU institutions. I enjoyed the working environment in Brussels and my husband and I quickly became fond of the city and the odd, quirky little country called Belgium. I have now retired from the day job but we are staying on here.

In middle age I finally realised my teenage ambition to be published, almost 40 years after confiding it to a Somerville friend. Two of my passions are history and nineteenth-century literature, and moving to Brussels sparked an interest in Charlotte and Emily Brontë's time in the Belgian capital. *The Brontës in Brussels* was published in 2014 and further non-fiction books followed on the Brontës and other subjects. In parallel I founded a literary society, the Brussels Brontë Group. I have enjoyed every aspect of running it, from the challenges of being a conference organiser to the pleasure of making interesting contacts and sharing a love of literature with like-minded people. The urge to share my enthusiasm has led me into ventures I couldn't have envisaged as an introverted 17-year-old, such as leading guided 'Brontë walks' in Brussels, a city in which a guide's umbrella often comes in handy.



## Alison Mathias – English



Although I read English at Somerville, you could say that I was called to the Bar .... I was quite vocal that the Somerville Bar – then the little room off Hall – should be a sociable hive rather than the desert that it was. My reward was to be elected Bar Chairwoman, at a JCR meeting that I didn't attend. Sharon excitedly reported that 'Alison's been elected Bare Charwoman!' Spoonerisms aside, I kept all my clothes on, and installed Table Football in the hope that it would attract convivial company. It didn't.

Together with Sharon Mehew and Fiz Markham, we were the 3 Miss Ms – so called by the Bursar after a representation about the quality of the loo paper ...! Another fond memory is of dancing Cotswold Morris in the energetic Women's Morris side that Sharon took on, and that got us free entry as performers into the College May Balls.

Much volunteering ensued. After Oxford, I volunteered with Community Transport in Birmingham. A huge contrast with life at Oxford, driving a 3-ton lorry and a 2-ton Commer van doing removals, and a 12-seater minibus ferrying community groups around. And living in Handsworth, Birmingham. A brochure from the careers office led me to work in social housing – some Real Life after the Dreaming Spires of Oxford. I got a proper job in housing management in the London Borough of Southwark – managing housing in Peckham and Bermondsey, and studying for my Professional Qualification in Housing on day release at Hackney College. This was Real. The 1960s and 70s saw the beginnings of Housing Associations, inspired by Ken Loach's film *Cathy Come Home*, and I went to work for Stonham Housing, specialising in special needs hostel accommodation for ex-offenders. I developed a taste for property development: buying land and property – instructing architects - doing financial appraisals – securing grant funding – letting contracts and going to site meetings.

Many handovers and happy tenants later, I came back to Oxford as Development Director for Oxford Citizens Housing Association. I followed this with an MSc in Policy Research at Bristol, and a post in Policy at the Housing Corporation (now Homes England).

In retirement I live here in Oxford with my partner Helen. I've taught French students studying for their Prepa; acted in plays at the Burton Taylor theatre; and studied drawing at the Ashmolean. I'm Chair of Trustees of Low Carbon West Oxford, my local Climate Action Group. I am appalled at the loss of housing provision in the UK since the beginning of my career; and I've fallen back into my old ways, as a voluntary Director of Oxfordshire Community Land Trust. We completed 8 flats just outside Oxford in 2023, let on permanently affordable rents. Join for £1 at [www.oclt.org.uk](http://www.oclt.org.uk) and help us house people in Oxfordshire!

## Vivien Tyrell (née Adams) – Jurisprudence

After graduating in law in 1977, I did articles in my home city of Newcastle upon Tyne, qualifying in 1980. I then moved to London to practice in the City.

I can proudly say that I'm still a practising lawyer of 44 years' standing. Thank you, Somerville! Most of my career was with DJ Freeman which later became Kendall Freeman then afterwards the London office of US firm, Edwards Angell.



I became a partner in 1988 and remained in that role for 40 years including my time in my current firm, Reynolds Porter Chamberlain, which I joined in 2009 to establish their first dedicated Insolvency Group.

Specialising in insolvency, I had carved out a specialism of insurance insolvency and restructuring. Contrary to what the name might imply, it is a dynamic and ever-changing field which took me to some brilliant locations worldwide. I established some wonderful friendships with other cross-border professionals in what became essentially an international "village" in which all manner of ideas are shared.

In 1984 Glen, a then dashing young barrister, and I married. I was our Ruby Wedding Anniversary last month. It has been a great mutual support for us both to work in the law.

In 1993 our son and only child, Edward, arrived and, as I type, we are preparing to go to his wedding to Roisin whom he met in their first year of medical school. He is an obstetrics registrar at King's College Hospital, London and Roisin is in the last year of her GP training contract.

My professional career continues at RPC as a Consultant advising on an interesting case for a very good client with an excellent team in the office.

My years in Somerville set me up for a great career. They opened up so many opportunities for which I am very grateful.



## Sue Williamson (née Barratt) – Modern History and Modern Languages



On matriculation, we were told that there was a high possibility that we would meet our future partner while at Oxford and Reader, I did and married him in Queens College Chapel, a staggering 46 years ago. While we met through a mutual friend, we bonded over our shared love of music as members of the Queens' College Eglesfield Choral Society and singing has been a huge part of our lives ever since. Indeed, the friendships I made while here at Somerville have been strong and long-lasting, with 3 of us being mutually godmothers to each others' children, with two godfathers also part of our Queens' friendship group.

My husband's role as an engineering officer in the Royal Air Force meant that we had 16 homes in 23 years and our two children became used to upping sticks and moving every couple of years. One of our postings was to RAF Bruggen, where I was able to use my German working for the Dresdner Bank managing servicemen's accounts and teaching conversation and GCSE classes for the RAF. The opportunity to live in so many different places was simply brilliant and may have contributed in no small part to one child now living and working in Hong Kong and the other in Toronto.

As a result, I was late in starting to build a career, but the last 25 years have been truly eventful as I qualified as a librarian and developed that career in public libraries. I worked for Cambridgeshire Libraries for 14 years, finishing as Operations Manager for the county and then went to St Helens as Head of Library Services. That role resulted in my having the exposure and the experience to apply successfully for the role of Director: Libraries for Arts Council England which I started in



2018, an absolutely fabulous job to finish my working life. Apart from anything else, I was honoured to receive an MBE for services to Libraries in the final Birthday Honours of the late Queen, largely because of that role and I met some wonderful people (and saw some great work) in the 5 years I was there.

Retired but not retiring, I am currently still active in my profession as President of CILIP, the library professional organisation and as a Trustee for The Reading Agency as well as getting involved in reading activity in Suffolk, where we moved (hopefully for the last time) last December. With children and 3 grandchildren at opposite ends of the globe, travel is high on our agenda in our retirement, but we are thoroughly enjoying living in what is truly one of the most beautiful and historic parts of England.

