

# Interviews

## Baroness Deech

**B**aroness Ruth Deech, DBE, was born in Clapham, London and is an academic, bioethicist and former Governor of the BBC (2002-2006).



Baroness Deech attended Hertford between 1953 and 1961, with a London County Council Grant. After a gap year and time at LSA, Baroness Deech went on to study Law at St Anne's College

Oxford, graduating with a first in 1965. She returned to the college in 1970 to be a tutorial fellow in Law, a job she retained until 1991 when she was elected Principal of the college. She retired in 2004, and the college has since named its latest building after her: the Ruth Deech Building.

She has held many other positions during her life; among others, she served as Senior Proctor of the University of Oxford between 1985 and 1986, as a member of the University's Hebdomadal Council (where after a long campaign she succeeded in setting up a University nursery), as chair of the UK Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority from 1994 until 2002, and was appointed to a four year term as a Governor of the BBC in 2002, the same year that she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE), in recognition of her work at the HFEA.

After leaving St. Anne's, Baroness Deech was appointed the first Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, dealing with the resolution of student complaints at all UK universities.

On 22 July 2005 it was announced by the House of Lords Appointments Commission that she would be created a life peer, sitting as a Crossbencher. The title was gazetted as

Baroness Deech, of Cumnor in the County of Oxfordshire, on 5 October 2005. Lady Deech made her maiden speech on 24 November 2005.

Baroness Deech is married to a solicitor and has one daughter, a journalist. She is a member of the Jewish Leadership Council, and her interests include travel, opera, theatre, entertaining and public speaking.

The CHA manager met Baroness Deech at her offices a stones throw away from the Houses of Parliament, that very morning she had given a speech on higher education.

**You have had a very successful career to date, what are you looking forward to doing next?**

I will be spending more time sitting in the House of Lords, and also from the end of September I have been invited to become the Gresham Professor of Law at the Gresham College in the City of London, which is a type of cyber-university, which means I will be giving a number of free lectures on reproductive law and ethics, which any member of the public can attend. (For more information on this visit [www.gresham.ac.uk](http://www.gresham.ac.uk))

I will also be chairing the 'women working in medicine' working group, so still keeping very busy.

**What are your early memories of your time at Hertford?**

Ruth joined Hertford aged 10 in 1953 via a LCC (London County Council) award which was available to those six boys and six girls across the inner London counties who received the top grades in the 11+ exams.

Ruth recalled her images of boarding prior to starting Hertford (there were no prior visits before starting) were from her Enid Blyton books "a little different to real life boarding!".

"I recall my first day at Hertford. I turned up to be allocated to ones and told to strip naked and I was re-clothed from my underwear up! We were only allowed to have our own bible, indoor shoes, hairbrush, three personal books per term and I remember only being allowed six sweets and a small jar of marmite or jam, strictly under 100g, as our only luxury items."

### How did you find the transition from Hertford to St Anne's?

I fought hard to get into Oxford, which I was determined to do. In my second year of sixth form I took 10 exams across each of the Oxbridge Universities (I had failed my History A level at Hertford as the well known and respected Miss Page was ill the year I studied History). I was not successful in my third year of 'sixth form' either but after noting my determination at attending these exams again I was accepted at St Anne's after leaving school. In between this time, and much to Miss West's displeasure I attended LSE and then took a gap year off in Israel.

Given the two year gap between leaving Hertford and joining St Annes there was no real transition problem; also within the last year at Hertford I lived within a small self contained sixth form flat which helped with independent living.

What I must say is, it is in part thanks to Hertford that I attended St Annes. Since I had a gap between leaving Hertford and starting St Anne's the LCC withdrew their grant for my first year, Hertford took on this grant and I am very grateful for that.

### What have been the key challenges you have faced since leaving Hertford?

What Hertford helped with in terms of dealing with challenges is instilling the need to work to earn a living (rather than considering marriage as the only choice for a woman). I also think that Hertford's insistence on getting all girls on stage reciting poetry and speaking aloud has helped me in terms of public speaking. I truly believe in some ways it was easier back then to get ahead in working life as a woman due to the maintenance grants and no university fees for further education and the fact there were fewer women applying for positions.

My main challenge was been becoming a 'working mother' with a very demanding non 9-5 job. In fact one the biggest challenges I have had is fighting to get more daycare nurseries into Oxford and educational institutions in general to enable working and single mothers to continue with their careers.

### Did your education at Hertford influence your career choices?

I became very determined from about the age of 14 that I wanted to work in Law, especially to fight for equality of treatment. Some of this was stemmed from the unfairness and inequality I saw first hand at Hertford.

I remember we were never asked what we thought of our school or our opinions on the education at Hertford. I do remember being very well cared for in terms of our health, although pastoral care was lacking.

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### How has your time as Chair of the UK Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority influenced your thoughts on the future of family composition?

There is a massive challenge for women in terms of balancing childcare and their careers. Many women in their 20s are busy forging their careers and trying to find 'Mr Right', postponing motherhood until much later than what were the traditional motherhood years. With the innovation in reproductive science movement of freezing womens eggs, some are turning to IVF to have children in their 40s with eggs as healthy as a 20 year old's.

This enables woman to undertake motherhood alone, if she has not met a partner, but I do believe what is equally important as this opportunity for women, is the consideration that a baby does need a father figure as a role model. In fact I have debated this point recently in the House of Lords. Recent league tables for children's happiness has the UK amongst the lowest, and it is important not to lose sight that with late motherhood it is also important o have a male role model, where possible, and this is our challenge!

(At which point we break to discuss the recent Sex in the City movie and how it depicts women's search for Mr Right and maybe that we have to settle for Mr Reasonably OK!)

### What has been your proudest achievement?

My proudest moment is my achievement in its totality. My father came to the UK as a refugee from Austria in 1934 with nothing but a typewriter. Thanks to Britain and, in part to CH, in one generation I have been made a Baroness. I was not artistically or sports gifted but I had 'a brain' and was fortunate to live in a golden period between the end of the Second World War and the next 40 years where social mobility was possible; and the 1960's movements such as the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the freedom of choice for women allowed me to get ahead. So my proudest moment is making the most of the opportunities that were given to me that my parents and grandparents missed out on.

I also think in terms of Hertford and CH I was proud when I became Principal of an Oxford College at the same time when five Heads of Oxford Colleges were attendees of Hertford or CH (Alan Ryan, Christopher Zeeman, John Davies and Elizabeth Llewellyn-Smith being the others).

### Finally, what do you feel are the biggest challenges facing schooling currently?

I think the biggest challenges are restoring quality and good order in Schools. We need less focus on league tables and more focus on instilling ambition, non curriculum strengths such as music and sport and the considerate treatment of others. I am so pleased to note that CH seems now to be a very happily mixed society.