

Meet **Helen Debenham**

The WA President with a passion for PESA and all things earthy

PERHAPS the seminal moment in the life of WA Branch President Helen Debenham came during one of the five interviews she had to endure to earn entry into Cambridge University to study geology.

Five A grade A-levels was all good and fine, but that merely got you to the start-line for entrance – in Helen’s case into Pembroke College – at Cambridge where what she didn’t know was that her interviewer had deliberately asked a few leading questions – baiting for wrong answers.

Fortunately, she had the courage, and conviction, to dispute the topic in question, in the process disagreeing with her chemistry professor interrogator.

“I’ve never been afraid to tell people something is wrong if that’s what I think,” said Helen, who answered right and as a result was accepted at one of the most prestigious universities in the world.

It was only later that she discovered that during the interview process, Cambridge was looking for certain character traits in prospective students who would question issues without being intimidated into merely going with the flow.

It’s no surprise to learn that Helen’s single-minded zeal for earth and rocks had already surfaced at the age of six, at which point she knew that she wanted to be a geologist/geophysicist, which she announced to her parents by starting to chip away at the garden wall at their home in Somerset, in search of prized fossils.

Her father, a Royal Naval engineering officer, shared Helen’s passion for

geology and was inspired by his young daughter’s zeal, even if it was at the expense of their wall.

As a teenager aged 17, it wasn’t Blur, Oasis or any other musicians that she drew inspiration from on her bedroom wall which was, instead, adorned with seismic images.



I’m a sucker for committees and if I believe something can be improved on, I’m not shy to say so. People might say, ‘Oh well, don’t criticise do it yourself’ and my response usually is, ‘Ok then’.

Being a whizz at maths and science made it a natural progression for Helen to pursue a career in the earth sciences, culminating in her graduating with a bachelor’s degree in geology, a masters in geophysics and a job in London as a seismic processor with Veritas DGC.

But after four or five years she was tired of London, but definitely not of life or geophysics, so she jumped at the chance when Fugro came calling looking for a depth imager for their start-up department in Australia.

It didn’t take long for Helen to develop a passion for Perth and in spite of a roller-coaster ride from the peaks of \$120 oil to the depths of exploration austerity, she has never looked back.

“I love Perth because you know half the people in the pub,” she says of the social and economic fabric of the smaller city juxtaposed with the big city signature of London.

At that point Fugro had an Asia Pacific hub with a big office in the capital of Western Australia and Helen thrived in her new vocation as process manager while it lasted, but couldn’t resist ION’s overtures a few years later when the Houston-based company asked her to help set up a Perth company for them in 2012 at the height of the boom.

“Those were exciting times during an era of cocktail parties where many companies in the oil and gas game were throwing a lot of money around. ION was a wonderful and an inspiring challenge, but it didn’t last and the bottom fell out when oil prices crashed,” she said.

That was in November 2014 when ION largely pulled up stumps in Australia and retreated back to Houston. This represented a low-point for Helen after all the initiative and effort put in to establish the company in Australia.

Fortunately, Downunder Geosolutions in Perth came knocking looking for a Geoscience Manager and Helen soon found herself working for a company which shared many of her ideals. Today

five of the colleagues from her ION days have joined her at DUG and are thriving.

It didn't take long for Helen to join PESA on arrival in Australia and in 2013 she took on the role of Technical Talks Coordinator.

"I'm a sucker for committees and if I believe something can be improved on, I'm not shy to say so. People might say, 'Oh well, don't criticise do it yourself' and my response usually is, 'Ok then'."

Helen's term as president has coincided with one of the most brutal contractions in exploration, but that hasn't stopped her from taking the initiative to keep PESA and its members active while positioning the Society for the upturn.

"There's always too many jobs or not enough jobs," she says of the feast or famine extremities that have characterised the industry in recent years.

"The net result of the past few years is that students were not enrolling at university for geophysics, experienced workers were "retiring early", and sometimes those in the middle were switching careers to other industries. But we as a society have got to keep active and last year we addressed the difficulties some of our members have felt by offering free membership for students and reduced rates for new graduates and those in financial hardship situations. We also put together more training courses than we had ever run before, filling a void from many companies who used to deliver training in abundance, but had been forced to stop doing so from the downturn."

With support from Chevron, who offered the use of training facilities, and Woodside, a big supporter of last year's PESA-inspired scholarship awards, the WA branch has taken the initiative under Helen's helm to keep nurturing the wellbeing of the society and its younger members. This also



includes setting up a YPP division in WA with events and a mentoring scheme.

During the downturn the technical lunches had also gradually waned in both attendance and sponsorships as a result of layoffs and austerity. Last year Helen, trusting her

outspoken instincts, decided to do something about it by addressing the issue and making a public appeal after one of the lunches appealing for more support.

At that stage Spectrum was

the only sponsor, but thereafter they upgraded their contribution from silver to platinum as CGG and Searcher Seismic came in as gold sponsors.

When Helen does retreat from her PESA and work commitments, her happy place on weekends is tending her plants and vegetables at a community garden in West Leederville – which has evolved into the production of her own brands of jam, chutney and pickles.

Initially, while living in Northbridge, she began picking olives that grow off the trees. Now she produces pumpkins, onions, tomatoes, lilly pilly and loquats as ingredients for her pickles, jams and chutneys.

"Back in London the allotment site I had was 150m², compared to 6m² over here. But I produce as much in Perth as I did in London as there is sunshine all year round and three growing seasons," she said of her garden.

But that doesn't mean she is about to change her career path to become a farmer or a chef.

"I'm not a particularly good cook. I'm just someone who takes pleasure in preserving things and growing and creating things," she says.

Hopefully Helen will produce a few jars of her produce for sampling at the next PESA lunch? ▶

