

## The Society's Daphne Jackson Trust Fellow

# Marjorie Gibbon

In the past, an extended career break was seen as the death knell for a fledgling career in scientific research. This is not the case anymore, thanks in part to the availability of a range of 'returner' fellowships.

As part of our celebrations during women in biochemistry year 2013, the Society sponsored a Daphne Jackson Trust Fellowship. These Fellowships offer STEM professionals wishing to return to research after a break of 2 or more years the opportunity to balance an individually tailored retraining programme with a challenging research project in a suitably supportive environment. Fellowships are typically completed part-time over a period of two years.

The Society's Daphne Jackson Trust Fellow, Dr Marjorie Gibbon, began her Fellowship during May 2014. Marjorie began her scientific career working as a plant physiologist for ICI Agrochemicals. She then undertook a PhD and a postdoc at the University of the West of England, studying the genetic basis of the interaction between plants and *Pseudomonas syringae* pathogens.

Now at the University of Bath, Marjorie's current research involves investigating the effect of hyperglycaemia on proteins of the immune system. She is developing an insect model with the aim to use it to reduce the number of vertebrates used in diabetes research. Within her group a method has been developed to detect proteins that are damaged by the high levels of glucose in the blood, and Marjorie is using this with the insect model to determine which proteins are glycosylated in order to try to determine the link with the impaired immune response seen in diabetic patients.

Our Policy Advisor, Dr Cat Ball, caught up with Marjorie to find out more about her Fellowship, what led her to undertake it and how it's going so far.

### **Congratulations on your Fellowship. How has it been so far?**

Thank you! It's going very well so far; I'm really enjoying it and my colleagues have all been supportive and friendly. The area I work in is mostly new to me and there's been a lot to learn. It's been great to have the chance to up-skill and retrain though. I've had the opportunity to supervise a few undergraduate final year project students too, which has been a rewarding experience.

### **What inspired you to undertake a career in science?**

Like many researchers, I loved science at school. I was of the era when taking physics, chemistry and biology at school meant that you were pushed towards medicine. However I followed my interest in biology and never looked back!

### **Why did you take a career break and how long was it?**

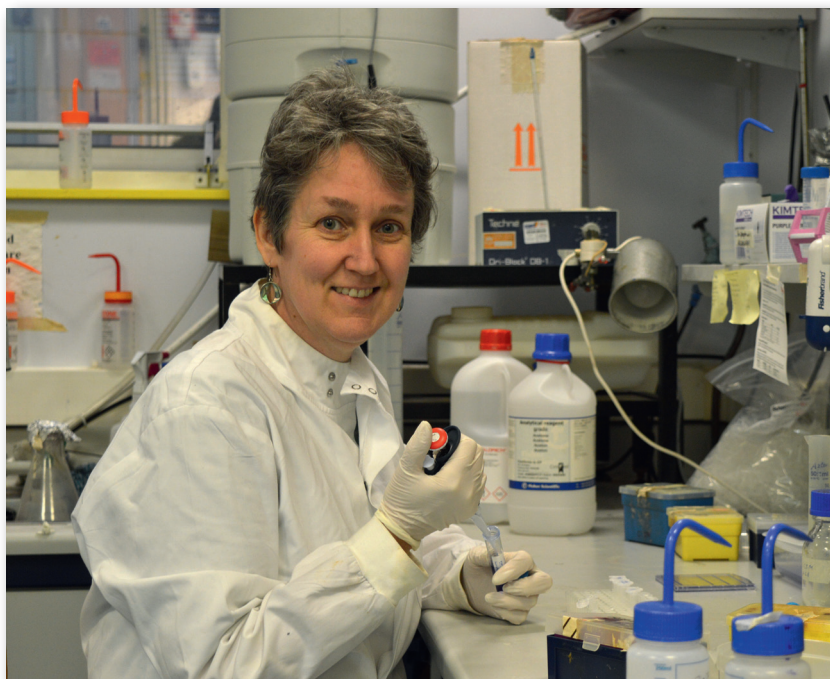
My career break was enforced rather than an active choice. I became pregnant at the end of my postdoc and, due to the short-term contracts and resultant instability involved with being a postdoc, there wasn't any other option but to take a break. I didn't realise it would be so long at the time – I left the lab in 1998 and returned with my Fellowship in 2014 – that's 16 years! During this time I had three children.

### **How easy did you find it to keep up to date with your scientific field during your career break?**

Not very is the honest answer. Scientific research, particularly molecular biology, develops so quickly that even a short hiatus from the literature can leave you feeling out of date. About halfway through my career break I completed a PGCE and became a secondary school science teacher so I was still involved in science in some way. The main reason for becoming a teacher was because I thought that returning to research wasn't possible. I needed an alternative and teaching seemed like a good option. I taught for 7 years in total and I am still teaching part time, leaving at the end of this academic year. It was only when a former colleague alerted me to the existence of the Daphne Jackson Trust that I realised that returning to the lab could be viable.

### **How have you found returning to the lab after your career break?**

It's been challenging, but in a very rewarding and worthwhile way. My colleagues in the lab and my supervisor, Jean van den Elsen, have been extremely supportive. I've met up with some other Daphne Jackson Trust Fellows from Bristol and we've been able to share experiences and perspectives – it's made a real difference to have links and be able to talk to people in the same position as me. I've got a lot of catching up to do and I'm really enjoying learning new techniques; there's lots of reading and I've needed to be highly organised. I often run over my part-time hours, but it's all so interesting I don't mind. I'm sure most researchers end up reading papers etc. in their spare time.



**What advice would you give to someone considering taking a career break? What preparations can you make in advance?**

I think the key piece of advice I would pass on would be to make as many contacts as you can as these may prove to be your links back into your research career. It would be good to find out what your department is doing to bring back returners and why returners are attractive – if you can pitch yourself as valuable and an asset then you're halfway there. Most departments are involved with the Athena SWAN process – find out what is happening in yours and see if you can link in in some way. I wish I had known about the Daphne Jackson Trust earlier than I did. Having said that, I feel very lucky to have had the time at home with the children, and very lucky to be able to come back.

**What advice would you give to someone currently on a career break and looking to return?**

Apply for a Daphne Jackson Fellowship! Keep up with colleagues and talk to them about their research and developments within your discipline. I've always had the impression that a potential supervisor is more likely to take you seriously if you're endorsed by someone already (or still) in academia; you're less likely to be seen as a 'wild card'.

**Were there any organisations or sources of support that were invaluable to you during your career break which enabled you to return?**

Not really to be honest, other than the Daphne Jackson Trust latterly of course. I've recently discovered twitter and the value it has for disseminating new developments and making you feel connected to a

community. During my career break I felt quite cut off and isolated from the research community; I think if twitter had existed sooner I mightn't have felt this so strongly. Following organisations such as the Biochemical Society, publishers and academic research groups can allow you to keep a low-maintenance link with the academic community.

**What do you think the Society could do to better support members during extended career breaks?**

I think it would be great if the Society publicised its reduced membership rates for those on career breaks more and made it more widely known that the Society doesn't just strive to cater for active researchers. Training opportunities for returners to retrain and refresh their skill-set would be great as would careers advice both before and after a career break. It would also be good if the Society acted to raise awareness of the fact that you can have a career break and survive! Acceptance of career breaks and non-standard career pathways needs to become 'the norm'.

**What you plan to do next, once your Fellowship has finished?**

I plan to stay in research, I really hope I can! Ideally I hope to make enough progress with my current project to be able to secure further funding, but failing that I will have current experience and up-to-date skills so should be a more attractive candidate for research posts.

**What is/are your proudest achievement(s) to date?**

It's likely my children will read this so my family! Joking aside, my three children and my doctorate are my proudest achievements. Being awarded a Daphne Jackson Fellowship ranks pretty highly too!

**What do you like to do when you're not in the lab?**

Lots of different things; hiking, gardening, looking after my chickens, crafts (completing a patchwork quilt is another one of my proudest achievements I think) and reading – science and non-science topics. ■

To find out more about the Daphne Jackson Trust visit their website: [www.daphnejackson.org](http://www.daphnejackson.org)

If you're on a career break and wish to return to work, or are considering a career break, visit the Society of Biology's Returners to Bioscience website for useful resources: <http://bit.ly/1BwF4mD>

The Biochemical Society offers Stay Connected Bursaries for members on a career break. These Bursaries help to cover the cost of registration, accommodation and/or care provider cover to attend one of the Society's conferences, workshops or training days. To apply, visit: <http://bit.ly/1B4uAaD>