St Edmund Hall elects new Principal
Wednesday, 9 May 2018

The Governing Body of St Edmund Hall is delighted to announce the election of Professor Katherine Willis as Principal to succeed Professor Keith Gull on 1 October 2018.

Professor Kathy Willis has been Director of Science at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, since October 2013. Kew is probably most familiar as a beautiful garden in southwest London. However, behind the walls Kew also supports over 370 scientists, world-renowned scientific collections amounting to ~8.5 million specimens including a herbarium, fungarium and the Millennium seedbanks, and research projects in over 101 countries with over 450 international partnerships.

Kathy’s role for the past 5 years has been to oversee the co-ordination of Kew’s scientists, collections and associated research activities and partnerships. During this period she re-organised the structure of the scientific workforce at Kew, creating 7 new departments. She also led the development of Kew’s first ever Science Strategy [2] and alongside this, launched a number of substantial new scientific outputs. These have included annual State of the World’s Plants [3] reports, a large research initiative to sequence to genus level all known vascular plants and fungi (Plant and Fungal Trees of Life [4]), creation of an online portal Plants of the World Online [5] to detail all of Kew’s plant records, an annual Family Science Festival and a new MSc in Plant and Fungal Taxonomy and Conservation in partnership with Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). Most recently Kathy has led the process that culminated in the recently launched Science Collections Strategy [6] which outlines, for the first time, what, where and how Kew will enhance its collections over the next decades.
During her time at Kew, Kathy has also led a number of activities aimed at enhancing the public understanding of science, including Roots to Riches [7], a 25-part series for BBC Radio 4 and a two-part series for the BBC World Service, Feeding the World [8].

Before taking up her position at Kew, Kathy held the Tasso Leventis Chair in Biodiversity at the department of Zoology, University of Oxford, and Head of the Oxford Long-term Ecology Laboratory [9] along with a Professorial Fellowship at Merton College. Previously she was a tutorial fellow at Jesus College (2003-2010) and St Hugh’s College (1999-2003). Kathy’s original degree was in Environmental Science from the University of Southampton. She then undertook a PhD in the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Cambridge. She remained in Cambridge (1989-1999) first as a Junior Research Fellow at Selwyn College, followed by an NERC Fellowship and then as a Royal Society University Research Fellow which she held in conjunction with the position of Director of Studies for Biological Sciences in Selwyn College.

Details of Kathy’s scientific life and research interests to date can be heard in an interview that she gave for the BBC Radio 4’s Life Scientific [10]. Over her career she has published >160 papers in refereed international journals, 3 academic books, 2 popular books and 4 edited volumes.

Kathy holds a number of external Fellowships and awards. These include an Honorary Doctorate, University of Bergen (2017), Honorary Fellowships at Selwyn College, Cambridge (2017) and St Hugh’s College, Oxford (2015), and the Michael Faraday Medal, from the Royal Society (2015) for excellence in science communication; she is a Fellow of Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters, Foreign Member (2010) and a Fellow of the Geological Society (2008). She is also currently a member of the Government’s Natural Capital committee which reports directly to the Chancellor of the Exchequer with a remit to support delivery of UK Government’s 25-year plan for the environment, a Delegate and member of the Finance Committee of Oxford University Press and a Chapter Lead Author for the Global Assessment of the International Panel of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [11].

Kathy is married with three children, Alice who is studying medicine at Barts, (QMUL), and James and Harry who are at Magdalen College School. Her husband Andrew is a classical musician and author of a number of books on the history of music. He is also a stipendiary lecturer in music at St Peter’s College and an Oxford City Councillor.

She greatly looks forward to meeting the alumni, Fellows, students and staff in October and building further the Hall’s strength as a vibrant, forward-looking, diverse and inclusive society that strives for excellence in all that it does.

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