Citation for Caroline Willbourne

Chair of Council, it is my privilege to present to you Caroline Willbourne.

This honour is awarded in recognition of both Caroline’s distinguished career in family law and her longstanding support for the university as a member of the Bedford Society Committee. Her contribution to the life of the university has been of significant value to our community.

The daughter of a legal civil servant and the Secretary to the Lords of Appeal in Ordinary in the House of Lords, Caroline had a peripatetic childhood until the family settled in London in time for her to go to secondary school. A lover of amateur dramatics, Caroline’s sense of performance determined her to pursue a career as a barrister.

Caroline’s mother, who after her retirement went to work as John Le Carre’s secretary, was very encouraging of the idea of her going to university – provided that it was a women’s college. Her father, however, was deeply opposed to the idea, objecting as he did to the higher education of women. “He rather threw down the gauntlet; it gave me the determination to get on and make something of my life”, Caroline says.

Caroline became the first member of her family to go to university and read philosophy and ancient Greek at Bedford College. It was a period, she says, which has had a profound effect on the rest of her life. A timetable clash led to a fortuitous arrangement where Caroline was individually tutored by Professor Bernard Williams – regarded as the greatest British philosopher of his era. Their work on ethics piqued Caroline’s interest in seeing justice done and was one of the factors that took her to the bar.
After graduating in 1967, Caroline did some research work for Professor Williams on ‘divorce without consent’. This was just before the implementation of the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 and was a foretelling of Caroline’s future specialism in law. Caroline cannot overstate the importance of Professor Williams on her career and determination to succeed: “Quite simply, I wouldn’t be where I am today were it not for him” she says.

Caroline was called to the Bar in 1970 by Inner Temple and went into a general set of chambers, refining her practice over the years to specialise in family law. In 1990, Caroline was a founder member of the 1GC Family Law Chambers, with a group of five other barristers who wanted to specialise in family law. Renowned for its expertise in all areas of family law, the set has now grown to over 90 barristers and Caroline has remained with them ever since.

1993 was a significant year for Caroline as she trained and qualified as a mediator, to help separating couples find a better way forward than going to court. She was also appointed a Deputy Judge, specialising in financial remedy work, and elected a Bencher by Inner Temple, an accolade accorded to her for work she had done for the Inn over many years. It is a role in which she remains active today, sitting on the Scholarship and Outreach Committee, and mentoring at least one Bar student a year.

To this day, the Bar is regarded as an exclusive profession and one which Caroline is determined to help promising students succeed in: “Mentoring is one of the things I feel very strongly about” she says. “The drive to get people on the road to success has been a very powerful influence in my life”.

Caroline’s other professional achievements include Fellowship of the Royal Society of Medicine, training doctors in how to give effective evidence in court.

In 2013, Caroline became a founder member of the Bedford Society Committee. “I have been a huge advocate of the Society because it kept alive the Bedford name and its influence” she says. Caroline is a donor to the Bedford Society Scholarships and the Greatest Needs Fund, supporting future generations of students.
In recognition, therefore, of Caroline’s distinguished career in family law and her longstanding support for the university as a member of the Bedford Society Committee and as a role model to our students, may I invite you, Chair of Council, to induct as an Honorary Fellow of Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, Caroline Willbourne.

Professor Matthew Humphreys
Executive Dean of the School of Law and Social Sciences