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ANNE RICHARDS: FROM HAGGIS AND SCIENCE TO FUNDS AND FINANCE

By Dina Medland April 10, 2014



A woman of many particles: Anne Richards abandoned atomic research, but wants more women to choose science

For any young scientist, landing a research fellowship at Cern and the chance to study how the universe works by participating in the largest science experiment ever constructed, would be an amazing opportunity. But Anne Richards had an inkling that she was in the wrong place.

It was 1988 and Ms Richards was at the European organisation for nuclear research near Geneva and working on the Large Electron-Positron Collider or LEP, a particle accelerator and predecessor to the Large Hadron Collider.

“I was working with so many passionate physicists who were very excited about a 30-year time horizon,” she says. “It was with a heavy heart that I realised it was too long for me – and I wasn’t really confident I had the right to be there.”

This sense of being an imposter pushed Ms Richards out of a scientific career just three years after achieving a first in electronics and electrical engineering at Edinburgh university, and allowed her to find her way in financial services instead.

Today, she is chief investment officer and head of the Emea region for Aberdeen Asset Management, the FTSE 100 financial services firm, where she is a main board director. As a child growing up in Edinburgh, Ms Richards’ career choices felt limited at first.

“In my world, if you were bright you did law or medicine. With both parents as lawyers, one thing I was not going to do was to study law,” she says. “And there was a moment of blinding clarity when I realised I was far too squeamish to do medicine.”

But at her local comprehensive school, she was guided by a “great” physics teacher, Archie Davidson. “Between 11 and 13, I was thinking of doing maths – and wondering what I could do with a maths degree – teach? [Later I started studying physics and] Mr Davidson, a former engineer who had retrained as a teacher, said: ‘What you like to do is solve problems.’” It was a defining moment.

At university, having been expected always to work and earn money in the holidays, Ms Richards did everything from selling haggis to working on the production line at what was then Hewlett-Packard. Discovering a multicultural paid programme for students at Cern, she worked there in the summer between her third and final year, and became a research fellow after graduation in 1985.

Having decided that a scientific career was not for her, Ms Richards returned to the UK, but this proved shortlived. “I didn’t really enjoy being back in the UK at that stage. Someone suggested an MBA and Insead [the French business school] put me back [on the continent]. I had a vague idea that what I wanted to do was general management, and join a large industrial company,” she says.

But in her first term she studied applied corporate finance, which was a revelation. “I had never even opened an FT at that time, but I became addicted,” she says.

Coming out of the MBA with a “huge amount of debt”, she applied to a large range of financial companies, still with no idea of “the difference between an investment bank and a fund manager”. In a scattergun approach, she also applied for general management roles at companies such as Honeywell, the US industrial conglomerate, and Eli Lilly, the big US pharmaceutical group.

In 1992, she entered the investment world as an analyst at Alliance Capital, the investment and portfolio manager. There she put into practice what she had learned at

Instead. She says: “I really enjoyed unpicking companies – how do you translate a company that makes widgets into something against a backdrop? It’s like a kaleidoscope – the pieces are the same but every moment someone has shaken it, and it looks different. There is a real mental stimulation about it.”

Ms Richards quickly realised she wanted to make decisions “on the money” and moved into portfolio management with JPMorgan, from where she was wooed by Mercury Asset Management.

“I was the last hire that Carol Galley made. It had already been taken over by [Merrill Lynch Investment Management],” she says. With a strong hint of understatement, she adds: “I have a propensity to be attracted by challenging situations.”

There were certainly many of those around, including integration issues. Ms Richards was managing director of one of three UK teams at MLIM and says the company “wasn’t a happy ship, and there was a degree of decision paralysis”. Headhunted in 2002 to be chief investment officer for Edinburgh Fund Managers, a smaller listed business, she jumped.

But some six weeks into the role she went to a shareholder meeting to find demands that the entire board of non-executive directors resign. Iain Watt, chief executive, was ousted and so were all but two board directors. The remaining directors, Ms Richards and chief operating officer Rod MacRae, appointed themselves joint managing directors.

The row stemmed from the collapse of an informal takeover approach. “Every single client was coming for dinner that evening after the AGM,” she recalls. “We appointed advisers and tried to say we were for sale without actually saying so.”

Within a year EFM was acquired by Aberdeen Asset Management, and she became global chief investment officer of the merged entity.

Alongside chief executive Martin Gilbert, Ms Richards helped the company respond in the aftermath to the industry-wide split capital investment trust scandal that had cost investors millions of pounds.

When she joined Aberdeen it was largely an equity house. She helped build a fixed income division and focused on forming an alternatives business, creating a name for herself in the City. She joined Aberdeen’s board as an executive director in 2011.

Ms Richards, who is a non-executive on several other boards, wants more women to follow her lead both into the boardroom and into the so-called Stem subjects – science, technology, engineering and maths. She believes Britain is doing too little to make these topics attractive to girls, who may not be as naturally curious as she was.

Of her own experience she says: “I had one doll who lost a leg . . . I didn’t like dolls. I played with my elder brother’s Lego.”

Ms Richards may not have chosen engineering or nuclear physics as a career, but her work to make them accessible to girls today suggests science remains a guiding passion.

Secret CV

What mentors have you had?

I have never had a formal mentor in any shape or form. But I have been very lucky and had some great bosses along the way. At JPMorgan Steve Golman and Geoff Lindey, who were involved in building UK business for JPM Asset Management, were very supportive. Donald Brydon – formerly at Axa, now Royal Mail chairman – has always been a good friend and critically supportive.

What was your first big break?

It goes all the way back. As a child, no one ever said to me “You can’t do that (because you’re a girl)”, so I grew up believing I could do what I wanted. You could say I benefited from a sort of benign neglect.

What else might you have done?

I’m not someone who looks back and says ‘what if’. You just have to try to do the right thing every day.

What career advice would you give others?

Be patient. Not every battle needs to be won on a single day. Choosing which ones to fight on a certain day and which ones might not need to be fought at all is important.