

UP RESEARCHER MEETS THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND

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There are not many people who can say that they have had the privilege of meeting Queen Elizabeth of England in person. There are even fewer who can say that they were able to visit Buckingham Palace to do so and to spend ten minutes in private conversation with Her Royal Highness. But this was exactly what Prof. Jolanda Roux of the University of Pretoria's Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI) did during the December holiday!



(Left) Prof. Roux meeting Her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth the II. (Right) Prof. Roux and Mr. Jim Ball of the CFA on the steps of Buckingham Palace after their meeting with the Queen.

On the 13th of December, Prof. Roux and Mr. Jim Ball, chairperson of the Commonwealth Forestry Association (CFA), reported at the right hand gate of Buckingham Palace (at 12 noon), in response to an invitation by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the II. The honour emerged from the fact that Jolanda received the “Queens Award for Forestry” from the CFA. Queen Elizabeth is the patron of the CFA and in 1987 approved the “Queen's Award for Forestry”. This award aims to recognise outstanding international contributions to forestry and recognizes the achievements of outstanding mid-career foresters, based on a combination of exceptional contributions to forestry and an innovative approach to his or her work. Since its inception, the award it has been made only nine times and Prof. Roux is the first woman to receive this honour.

Jolanda's colleagues in FABI have pestered her for a detailed account of the experience of meeting the Queen. She has described the meeting as “an incredible experience that in hindsight feels slightly unreal. It is not something that I ever imagined would happen to me and I was completely bowled over, firstly by receipt of this prestigious award, and then when I received a phone call to let me know that Queen Elizabeth had invited me to the palace for an audience with her!”

She further described the trip to the palace as “passing in a blur”. “When Mr. Ball and I arrived at the palace it was the time of the changing of the guard and there were hundreds of people crowding around the front gates to get photographs of this event. We had to report to a specific gate at the palace where our names were checked on a list and we were then escorted into the palace grounds, past the

changing guards and into the inner courtyard of the palace. From there, we were taken to the reception area where we were met by a smart young soldier, the only one in the palace allowed to wear a kilt because he was from a Scottish regiment. He escorted us into the Palace where we waited together with others, including a British General and the High Commissioners of Thailand and Mozambique who also had their private audiences with the Queen. They all arrived in carriages drawn by beautiful horses, with footmen and women. When our turn approached, we were introduced to one of Her Majesty's aids who took us to a second waiting room, where he explained the exact protocol to us. Shortly afterwards, I was called up to wait in front of two very big, closed doors. These were opened by palace staff at which point we entered and I was announced to the Queen, who was standing in the middle of this beautiful room. After being announced, I was able to walk forward and shake Her hand. After our greeting, Mr. Ball was announced and he also had an opportunity to greet Her Majesty and then we posed for photographs. Her Majesty then invited us further into the room, where we sat down and had ten minutes of discussion with Her."

When asked what she spoke to Her Majesty about, Jolanda laughs and says "I spoke about what I do, tree health in general, the Queen's interest in trees, the CFA and we even shared a joke or two" Jolanda added, "she was graceful, charming, amazingly well informed and sincerely interested in our work on trees and especially tree health".

Jolanda Roux is a forest pathologist and mycologist and one of the team of academics that lead FABI (www.fabinet.up.ac.za) and also has an appointment in Department of Microbiology and Plant Pathology at the University of Pretoria. Her research focuses on tree diseases and she is particularly passionate about tree health in general and fungi that cause diseases of trees on the African continent. She collaborates with researchers on many other parts of the world and has travelled widely to undertake her research. She has already published close to 100 papers in international respected journals and has supervised numerous post-graduate students at the University of Pretoria. In addition to the Queen's Award, she has received many other forms of recognition for her work, notably in 2011, the DST's "Distinguished Young Women in Science".