

For 12 years, Sara Rhodes has worked as Butler of Trinity Hall. She dislikes wine, she's good at keeping secrets and if you want her job, you're going to have to wait 20 years until she retires

The butler did it

PERHAPS IF YOU'RE a butler, having a locked cupboard in your office which opens up to reveal a hidden staircase is par for the course.

In the case of Sara Rhodes, that staircase leads into the Trinity Hall Fellows' wine cellar. Keeping track of the thousands of bottles of wine stored there is just one of many tasks that have filled her days since becoming the College's Butler 12 years ago.

It's a job she clearly loves. She first started at the College in 1986 as a part-time waitress, helping out with evening meals. Soon, she was promoted, and by the time she left in 1991, to pursue work with hours easier on her personal life, she was Deputy Butler. During the years before her return in 1997, she worked as a painter and decorator, but the idea of someday becoming the Head Butler was never far from her mind.

The retirement of her predecessor opened the door. When her application was successful, her response was jubilant. "The then-Bursar phoned me at home to tell me I got the job. I literally ran around the living room screaming. I always wanted the job."

Rhodes' role is specifically to look after the Fellows; the College employs a Manciple to manage catering for the students and for conferences. Ask her about being a woman in a role traditionally held by men, and she'll wave the question away. "It didn't even cross my mind that I'd be the first female butler at Trinity Hall," she says.

Part of her job is ensuring that the College's collections – be it silver or wine – are well-maintained and accounted for, so she conducts audits every year. Spending time in the wine cellar has its perks – it's very cool in summer – but in winter it can be quite chilly and damp. Although it might sound tempting to be surrounded by 17,000 bottles of wine, Rhodes herself doesn't care for wine, (although she will admit to a fondness for port).



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She supervises a Deputy Butler and three Buttery Assistants. Her days can be quite long – she'll start at 7:30am, ensuring that breakfast for the Fellows goes smoothly, and at least once a week, stays at work until after 9pm to supervise the serving of dinner at High Table. A previous Master's wife took note of her long days, and arranged for a shower to be installed near Rhodes' office, so she can freshen up before preparations for the evening meal begin.

She takes pride in maintaining continuity. "I'm a great believer that

if it's not broken, don't fix it," she says. "You start tinkering and that's when mistakes happen." Even her uniform is traditional – a black trouser suit, with a white, wing collar shirt and bow tie.

The College's annual feast is a high point in the year, and takes several months of preparation. The four-course meal is served to approximately 90 guests. "It starts at 7:30 and we're lucky if we're done by half-eleven or midnight," she says.

Rhodes supervises the preparation of the silver cutlery and candlesticks, the glassware and the china. On the evening, she'll be managing about 15 people, helping to clear away plates, resetting when necessary and ensuring the place cards are at the correct places and that the napkins and cutlery and glasses are all arranged just as they should be.

As always, she's the one who announces dinner to the gathered Fellows. "They know who is in charge," she says, tongue firmly in cheek. "They're a good bunch, the Fellows."

Like any good butler, the Fellows' secrets are safe with her. "I'm the perfect butler," she says, and laughs. "I see and hear everything and forget all of it. I could never write a tell-all book!"

She plans to stay put as long as the College will let her. "I'd like to leave 20 years from now, when I retire," she says. Her predecessor had been in the job for 25 years, and she suspects his predecessor was in place for almost as long. "These positions don't come up very often," she says. "You have to wait until someone reaches retirement age."

To hear Rhodes, the wait is well worth it, whether she's discussing the view from the window above her desk – of a picturesque College courtyard – or the camaraderie she feels with other members of College staff.

"I've never got up in the morning and thought 'I don't want to go to work,'" she says. "It's like a second home it has that family feel to it."

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