

HELEN PATRICIA SHARMAN CMG OBE

1963 -

Why is Helen Sharman, not a name that trips of the tongue?

On 18th May 1991 Helen Sharman launched into space. She made history that day by becoming one of the world's youngest astronauts, the first British astronaut and the first woman to board a Soyuz spacecraft to the Mir space station.

Helen Sharman does not fit the historical mould of a fighter pilot- turned- astronaut and, although she only spent eight days in space, it would be 24 years later before Tim Peake became Britain's next astronaut.

Helen Patricia Sharman was born into a traditional northern family on the 30th May 1963. Born in Sheffield she grew up with her two siblings, James and Andrea. Her father, John, was a collage lecturer. Her mother was a nurse who stayed at home to look after the children and later to act as a Foster Parent.

Helen was 6 years old when Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, but this did not install a desire to become an astronaut although she did undertake a class project, then happily moved on to other interests just like any other small child.

Helen describes her up-bring as ordinary, stable and secure, a fact that journalists found partly intriguing and partly frustrating. During her formative years there were no traumas. She was not bullied nor was she a bully, suffer alcoholism, drug addiction or exposure to violence was not part of her experiences. She did not win any scholarships and although good at sport, she did not break any records.

Helen attended local primary schools and then the Jordanthorpe Comprehensive School from where she entered Sheffield University. On graduating, she took up a job with GEC in Hammersmith, London as it offered her the opportunity to work in research & development using her Chemistry degree. During her time with GEC she also undertook her PhD.

Looking for a new challenge she took up a position with Mars, no not the planet, but the confectionary company. This time she found herself researching the mysteries of ice-cream manufacture before eventually ending up in the chocolate section!

However, one evening in November 1989 whilst driving home from work she heard an advertisement on the radio which was to change her life. The advert was for astronauts to take part in the Project Juno and stated: No experience needed.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Space Agency approached western European countries with a view to flying one of their nationals to the Mir Space Station. At the time, the UK Government did not fund human spaceflight, but a company was created to manage the Mission to put the first Briton into space on a commercial basis. The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was supportive and when the company failed to raise sufficient funds, a new agreement was made with the Soviets. This meant undertaking Soviet experiments but the Mission could continue.

On a whim, Helen sent for the application form -, along with 13000 others! The qualifications required were; age band 21-40, an ability to learn a foreign language and to have a good level of fitness.

Shortly after sending in the application, she received a phone call, and unknown to her, her responses were part of the vetting process, a lesson for all. A few days later she was asked to attend the first round of the selection process. She was one of 150 selected, reducing to 32, 22, 4 and finally 2: Major Tim Mace and Helen.

Helen and Tim spent 18 months, away from family and friends, in Russia at Star City undergoing intensive flight training and developing bonds with their Russian counterparts. In the end it was Helen who was selected as the research scientist to represent Britain, with Tim as her backup. In gaining the role, Helen Sharman proved she was equal to any man, but it was her ability to work as part of a team that set her apart.

Her sense of team was highlighted when prior to the space mission she was invited by the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, to Downing Street and insisted that Tim Mace accompanied her as he was part of the team.

During her time in space, Helen carried out medical, agricultural, and chemical testing, growing protein crystals and investigated new materials. An oxygen valve stuck open during the launch, and an antenna on the outside of the craft was damaged resulting in her and her two Russian companions having to undertake a manual docking with MIR. A second problem arose as insufficient electrical energy from the solar panels was being produced requiring in-flight repairs and maintenance.

After her return from space Helen wanted to share her spaceflight with as many people as wanted to know and used her experience to communicate science to school students across the country. She spent eight years travelling around the UK, giving talks and presenting science. As she was not employed by the Mission after the end of 1991 most of this work was unpaid, but she considered it amongst the most valuable outputs of her Mission. In addition, she wrote a science book for children as well as her autobiography "Seize the Moment" which details her amazing time in space.

Since then Helen has returned to academia sharing her love of science and, currently she is the Operations Manager for the Chemistry Department at Imperial College London. Helen Sharman is a private person and does not seek celebrity, as a result little is known about her personal life not even if she is married. She once commented that when you give something away about your private life it is exaggerated by journalists, so it is better to say nothing.

Helen Sharman for me sums up the ideal that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. She challenged herself and overcame stereotypes. She never returned to space instead pursued her career in science.

"We should push forward not only our own individual boundaries, but also the boundaries of what humans believe is possible. People are the biggest limitations in our own lives. There's a huge amount we can do and we should make the best use of our lives for the benefit of the world."

Addendum:

Recently, Helen Sharman was interviewed by the BBC where she made comparisons with her time in space and the current isolation created by the Covid-19 pandemic:

"Think about what you can do, rather than what you can't, appreciate nature, and understand that living in a confined space requires tolerance and respect. Share the grotty jobs – (in space tasks like compacting the solid toilet waste and changing air filters are done on rotation in space). Looking at how the pandemic may change society, Helen commented that when she was in space, she did not once think about her possessions and on returning to Earth had a different view on materialism. Finally, she said, "plan something nice to look forward to because this will not last for ever."

Anne Hutton