

## Heather Cooper



Heather Cooper is Laboratory Manager at Greencore's Kiveton site. Heather is proof of the exciting career opportunities offered by chilled – after 30 years in the business she still loves her work.

### *What does your current job involve? What are your responsibilities?*

I work across several manufacturing sites producing chilled ready meals, sandwiches, quiches, soups and sauces, and with a multi-customer base (major retailers such as Morrison's, Asda and Tesco).

It's my responsibility to ensure that we work to standards of food production set by current legislation, codes of practice and by our customers' specifications. These cover both the nutritional and microbiological aspects of all our foods.

With my team (three laboratory technicians and an external lab), we monitor our factories to ensure our food is safe to eat – testing raw materials and final products.

We monitor sites' hygiene and compliance with trading standards legislation. And we also monitor our foods to ensure they are meeting any health and nutritional claims made on the packaging.

I work with different teams across the company; for example, our New Product Development (NPD) team, helping them to problem solve with subjects such as shelf life, cooking process time and so on.

I also work closely with our customers, sharing knowledge and developing best practice guidelines.

### *Thinking back to school days, did you know what you wanted to become? What were you interested in?*

I had no idea! I was interested in science – chemistry appealed as you can see a reaction. So that was my science 'O' Level.

### *What qualifications do you have?*

I went straight into work at age 16, so I missed out on a degree. However, I've no regrets. I've been fortunate to have employers who have encouraged and facilitated study. So I've developed and expanded my knowledge with my career.

### *In rough outline what was your job pathway - companies and job titles plus anything of particular note, e.g. level of responsibility, exposure to any particular developments/issues?*

My first job was as a laboratory technician with a small potted meat company. I learnt about all aspects of food manufacturing.

The company was taken over by a larger company (Hazlewood Foods) and I found myself as a chemistry technician in the lab area. The support of a brilliant mentor meant I was able to make the job my own. They taught me so much about the chemistry of food and I relished learning about testing and its importance.

Being offered a supervisor role was both flattering and slightly daunting. But I grabbed the opportunity (my advice – grab every chance that comes your way!) and my company supported me to attend all the relevant training courses to equip me for the role.

I was now overseeing two labs and identified a need for guidance manuals. I developed these and was then invited to lead the implementation of a Total Site Quality Management System. This resulted in me being offered a newly created post of Laboratory Manager.

In 2000, I lead the labs through a successful accreditation process and in 2001 we came second in the Oxford Laboratory of the Year Competition. I was immensely proud of this, and the work of the team.

When Hazlewood was acquired by Greencore the site grew massively. And with it came new opportunities. The labs expanded, but essentially I've been with the same company since leaving school. However, it's never boring – each new challenge keeps me interested and enthusiastic.

### *What were your aspirations when starting your career and what are they now?*

When I started my first job I had no idea where it would take me. But thanks to being in the right place, at the right time and with the right people, I'm enjoying a truly satisfying and fulfilling career. I would never have imagined myself doing what I'm doing now – but now I couldn't see myself doing anything else.

New challenges come along every day – there are different problems to solve, issues to investigate and people to meet. I learn something new every day.

### *What single piece of advice would you offer someone curious about working in the food sector?*

Come on in! Chilled has a job for everyone: NPD, process, laboratory work, QA, auditors are all there for you to try. If you're willing to work hard you will succeed. I guarantee it!

### *What would you say to encourage them further? i.e. what is the best bit?*

A career in chilled can take you in all sorts of directions. I work with amazing people who inspire and support me. After 30+ years in the business, I still love my job, and if you enjoy your work then it really doesn't feel like work.