

# Helen Barker

Skill: Confectioner/Pastry Cook

**From:** Harrogate  
**Competed in:** WorldSkills 2005, Helsinki  
**Employer:** Betty's Tea Rooms  
**Result:** Certificate of Participation

## Qualifications

- 9 GCSE's
- NVQ level 2 in Pastry and Confectionery
- NVQ level 1 in Cake Decorating
- City & Guilds Licentiate



Baking cakes had always been a passion for Helen Barker and whilst at school Food Technology was a subject she thoroughly enjoyed. When it came to choosing work experience, Helen was certain she wanted something along the lines of baking and was lucky enough to land herself a placement at one of the UK's most famous tea shops, Betty's Tea Rooms. From then on she was hooked and impressed her bosses so much she went on to get a summer job before being taken on as a full time assistant when she left school.

## How did she get involved in competitions?

"I was initially put forward by our Executive Confectioner for an Academy of Culinary Arts competition. I enjoyed the challenge of competing as it was completely different from my day job and it went from there. I took part in several competitions before being selected to take part in WorldSkills which I knew little about at the time."

## So what was the training and preparation like for WorldSkills?

"It was really good as I got to learn so many new skills and it's actually been amazing for my career."

## What kind of things did the training involve?

*"I did a whole variety of specialist training in sugar and chocolate. I also got to spend time at Claridges and Le Manoir as well as train at Thames Valley University. Through being selected for WorldSkills I met the celebrity chef Brian Turner who was really helpful and encouraging about training and taking part in the competition. I remember him giving me advice about staying calm and concentrating – easier said than done in the competition but true none the less!"*

## And was your employer supportive?

"My employer was brilliant. They were fully behind me and really supportive about all the extra training I needed to do. They also gave me time off to practice during working hours which was really generous of them and even got involved in the team send off event by hosting a special good luck party for us at Betty's training facilities."

## So what was WorldSkills like?

"It was a truly fantastic experience and I loved it all. People had tried to describe it to me but it really is one of those experiences that unless you've been seen it you can't picture how amazing it is."

## So how did you cope with the pressure of the competition itself?

"I got my head down and focused on my work. It can be pretty daunting when there are 30 people at a time looking right at you but because of all the preparation I was able to zone out and pretend I was on my own."

## What benefits does Helen think taking part in WorldSkills has given her?

"I would say I'm a completely different person now in terms of my interpersonal skills. I learnt a lot about myself through the whole process. I've got so much more confidence and I don't get as stressed as I used to, I think I've learnt to be a lot calmer and take a lot more in my stride."

### So what will you remember most?

*"I will never forget the experience of competing at WorldSkills, it was such an amazing time. I think I'll always remember how much I achieved by taking part in such a major international event. Not many people can say they were ranked 11th in the world in their chosen profession and this is something I am really proud of."*

### So what has she been up to since WorldSkills?

Helen remains at Betty's tea rooms where she has been rapidly climbing up the ladder. She is now a Confectionery Team Leader and also helps to run specialist chocolate courses for the general public at Betty's cookery school.

### Has WorldSkills changed anything for you?

*"WorldSkills has helped me in so many ways. At work it has helped me to progress more quickly than if I had never competed – I now have a whole team to look after. But most importantly it's given me a different outlook on life. I'm always willing to give things a go now and this is so liberating!"*

### Any thoughts on your future career plans?

"For now I'm really enjoying life at Betty's and I think I'll always want to be working with food. I quite fancy running my own tea shop one day, who knows, one day maybe, we'll just have to wait and see."

### Any words of advice for future competitors

"Go for it! Don't give up when it gets tough and even if you don't get the result you were hoping for the experience is amazing and you'll never regret it. Aspire to be whatever you want because anything really is possible if you put your mind to it."

### With WorldSkills London 2011 just a few years away, what do you think will be the benefits to young people?

"I'm sure WorldSkills London 2011 will be a really inspiring event. I think it will really help to publicise skills competitions and get more young people interested and involved. It will also make them realise that university is not the only route to achieving success; going to college and learning a skill while working can be just as rewarding."

### A word from Helen's employer: Jo Crebbin, Bakery Directory for Betty's Tearooms.

Jo first became aware of WorldSkills when Helen was selected to represent the UK in Confectionery following her success in the Academy of Culinary Arts Competition.

### What impact did Helen's training have on your business?

"At the time Helen competed we were relatively fortunate in that we could release her from her normal duties to be able to carry out additional training without it making a huge impact on the business. Once we found out what WorldSkills was all about, we were fully behind Helen giving it her best shot, so were prepared to be as flexible as we could. In fact it was harder for Helen than it was for us as she was worried about the additional demands on the rest of her team."

### Do you think competing at WorldSkills has helped Helen?

*"Yes, absolutely. As well as improving her technical skills, the whole experience built her confidence tremendously. The build up and the competition itself exposed Helen to a lot of different experiences she wouldn't have had otherwise, which really built up her confidence and maturity. She is now the youngest Team Leader at the bakery which is a real achievement for Helen and great for us too!"*

### And have there been any benefits for you as her employer?

"Yes, as well as Helen's development which has benefited us as a business, Helen entering WorldSkills has been really good for boosting morale in her team. Everyone really got behind her and there was a lot of excitement when she took part in the competition."

### So would you recommend supporting WorldSkills to other companies?

*"Definitely, without a doubt. It's important to realise that you will have to make some sacrifices, but the rewards are worth it when you see how the experience can develop and grow an individual, and at the same time make a really positive impact on the rest of a team."*

For more information, please contact the PR Team, UK Skills: 020 7612 9260