ROB WILLIAMS
Olympic silver medallist, rowing; Birkbeck alumnus
PhD, Electron microscopy

“The racing conditions were very tough, and
the wind made the course really variable. It’s a
shame we’ve barely ever lost to the team that
beat us, but it’s good fun to be part of a good
race. We did not realise how close it was until
we saw the video footage afterwards. We were
a quarter of a second off winning in the
lightweight men’s four category, but it was a
home Olympics with 30,000 people cheering
us on; you’ve got to be happy with a silver.
The feeling gets better every day.

“The Olympics were incredible. It is really
hard to describe what it was like to be in that
environment: living in the Olympic village,
being part of Team GB, and watching the
other sports. It is something I will
never experience again.
Even if I go to Rio, it will be
completely different.
“I will probably take a year
out from rowing and then
decide whether to carry on
for three years or not. I went
to Beijing as a spare in the 2008 Olympics,
then we won the World Championships in
2010, and now I have a silver Olympic medal.
I’ve got to look at what else I want to achieve
in the sport.
“My supervisor at Birkbeck, Professor
Gabriel Waksman, was instrumental in
enabling me to balance my PhD in electron
microscopy with my rowing. I was awarded
my PhD from Birkbeck and UCL’s Institute of
Structural and Molecular Biology just weeks
before competing in London 2012. Electron
microscopy is one of the ways in which we
look at very small objects, and my research
was about furthering our knowledge of
how bacteria cause disease by studying
Type 4 secretion systems that secrete
macromolecules.

“Birkbeck allowed me to go part-time in
the summer, so that I could concentrate on
rowing, and then I would study full-time
in the winter. I jokingly described it
as juggling when you could only
concentrate on one ball at a time;
you had to throw the other one
high enough so that you bought
enough time to focus on the
one in your hand.”

PROFESSOR LYNDA NEAD
Games Maker volunteer, Boxing;
Pevsner Chair of History of Art,
Birkbeck’s Department of History
of Art and Screen Media

“The atmosphere was incredible at the Excel,
and volunteering really took over my life for
those 12 days. My role included looking after
the corner of the ring: maintaining the area
where the coaches sat during the fight, wiping
down the canvas, and swinging the stool
round for the boxers between rounds. I found
it exhilarating and intense but I could not have
had a better seat. I was in the blue corner
when Team GB’s Nicola Adams won gold –
the first woman ever to win a gold medal for
boxing at the Olympics. It was historic and
thrilling to feel part of it.

“The Olympics showcased women’s boxing,
and amateur boxing is a great technical sport.
I have been a boxing coach for the past six years
at the Peacock Gym in east London, and being a

From left to right:
Rob Williams, Professor
Lynda Nead, Rebecca
Gillett, Darren David,
Jocelyn-Jane Taylor
From the razzamatazz of the Opening Ceremonies to winning a silver medal, students, staff and alumni played their part in London 2012. Five Birkbeckians share their experiences of the greatest sporting show on Earth

Games Maker will probably be the highlight of my involvement in amateur boxing. Nowadays boxing training does not have to be full contact; it is also about balance, coordination and power. I was definitely the only professor volunteering in the ‘field of play’ team, and I met so many people I wouldn’t have met otherwise and with whom I will stay in contact. It was a great experience and made an impact on my academic life! Six weeks later I gave conference papers on the aesthetics of boxing photography at international conferences in Glasgow and Porto.”

REBECCA GILLETT, DARREN DAVID, JOCELYN-JANE TAYLOR
Performers at the Opening Ceremonies; staff from External Relations at Birkbeck

Rebecca said: “We all committed our time and energy to be part of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The months and months of evening and weekend rehearsals were hard work, but were definitely worth it. I danced in the Olympic Opening Ceremony alongside 1,600 other volunteers as part of an energetic routine choreographed by renowned hip hop and street dance choreographer Kenrick Sandy. Taking part was amazing, and the coverage that followed was overwhelming.”

Darren added: “It was fantastic to be involved in both Opening Ceremonies. It was quite surreal to be in the middle of the stadium, surrounded by a wall of people, lights, cameras and sound. In the Olympic Opening Ceremony I was in the Green and Pleasant Land section at the beginning. All the movements were meticulously rehearsed. Just weeks later, I was in the Paralympic Opening Ceremony in the Empowerment section dancing to Ian Dury’s Spasticus Autisticus – a cult song criticising patronising attitudes towards disabled people.”

Jocelyn-Jane said: “I was lucky enough to be cast in the Paralympic Opening Ceremony in the spectacular dance piece entitled ‘Gravity’. It included an intricate maze on the central stage, vividly avant-garde costumes and styling, tandem and wheelchair dancers and giant Newtonian apples ascending into the sky! I will always remember leading my row of dancers past the athletes and onto the stage.

A further highlight for me was being in the Stadium on the last night of the athletics to watch my countryman, blade runner Oscar Pistorius, win a gold medal in triumphant fashion in the 400m.”

Interviews by Guy Collender

For more information, visit:
www.bbk.ac.uk/olympics