

THE REMARKABLE WOMEN OF SWANLEY HORTICULTURAL COLLEGE



SEVEN SHORT HISTORIES

**COMPILED BY
HEXTABLE HERITAGE SOCIETY**

SWANLEY HORTICULTURAL COLLEGE



Hextable House

The Hextable area had always been agricultural in nature, with a focus on growing staple crops like sugarbeet and potatoes, but with the arrival of the railway in nearby Swanley Junction in 1864, the local growers started to shift to the cultivation of more exotic

crops. Arthur Harper Bond, the owner of Hextable House and a keen horticulturist, set up a college as a centre for scientific study of plants, and by doing this, established the first Horticultural, as opposed to agricultural, college in the world.

Within a year, Swanley had its first female applicant. The policy of accepting women students was initially delayed until separate male and female residential accommodation could be arranged, but by 1894, the students were predominantly women. By this time, a variety of courses were offered, including dairying, beekeeping, poultry rearing, botany and chemistry, garden design, and later, flower arranging, for some years taught by the renowned Constance Spry.

The fees for the various courses offered were £80, at a time when a farm labourer earned around £40 a year, and even the Governor of the Bank of England only took home £400 per annum. As a result, the courses were really only available to the wealthier members of society, but in the late 19th century, young ladies who fell into that class rarely went into further education, and certainly not in such a lowly discipline as horticulture. Pottering about in the family garden was socially acceptable. Manual labour in the fields, and animal husbandry was not.

The first women to come to Swanley were sowing the seeds of revolution simply by taking up places at the college, but some took it a stage further. Since the 18th century, wealthy young men often undertook overseas travels, as a way of, at least, on the surface, broadening their education. Young women may have been sent to 'finishing schools' in France or Switzerland, but to travel further was, at the time, considered daring, to say the least. A large percentage of the women featured in this leaflet came from privileged backgrounds, many with childhoods spent in exotic countries, and this must have some impact on the formation of the Colonial Branch of the college. This prompted several young ladies to travel abroad to study local flora, in places such as South Africa and Egypt, where many of them ended up as permanent residents.

As if this bid for independence was not, to some, shocking, so was the uniform of the college students. Late Victorian and Edwardian fashions were hardly conducive to work in the fields and barns, and so a practical uniform was provided for the girls, consisting of

looser-fitting garments, such as tunics, knee-length britches and gaiters, covered with a sturdy cotton smock, and shod with heavy boots. There being no reliable public transport, the girls often used bicycles to get around, although they were forbidden by college rules to cycle alone, apart from within the grounds.

Something you may notice in the following narrative is the frequent use of the word 'first'. The college was formed at a time when women were beginning to demand recognition within society, especially in context of being awarded the vote. Entering horticultural competitions, they may have won the gold medal, but were denied the scholarship part of the prize, because that was only offered to men. In 1910, a group of students joined the suffragists in a protest march in London, with permission from their teachers, but with the proviso that they should not in any way show their links to the college. From this one event, it is easy to imagine how so many girls gathered together in one place would develop a strong interest in the campaign for equality. After women so capably stepped into their men's shoes during the Great War, they found themselves overlooked for employment when the fighting was over, or were employed for a fraction of the wages of their male colleagues. For so many Swanley students to end up at the very top of their chosen careers is, therefore, remarkable.



College uniform, circa 1920

The women in this booklet are some of those who fought the system, and in so doing, started to chip away at the glass ceiling - women such as Fanny Wilkinson, who charged the same fees as her male counterparts for both professional work and for teaching students, or Lorrie Dunington Grubb, who, despite contracting bovine tuberculosis, had a celebrated career as the world's first female professional landscape architect. In more recent years, the young girl who was so severely injured in the 1944 bombing of Hextable House not only sat - and passed - her final RHS exams a year after the incident, but also went on to become National President of the Royal Horticultural Society itself.

Several of the women featured herein had to fight for the right to attend male-only educational establishments, or were not considered for jobs for which they were more than qualified, based purely on their gender. Nevertheless, they pursued their dreams, some of them being awarded CBEs or other such honours, but still didn't gain the same level of recognition as their male peers. Despite their achievements, it has proved impossible to even find images of some of these women, or even something as basic as an obituary notice.

Enjoy reading their stories.

FANNY ROLLO WILKINSON

Born in Manchester in 1855 to Louisa and Matthew Wilkinson, Fanny was the eldest of four daughters. Her father, an eminent physician, had just completed a term as President of the British Medical Association. Through his advancement within his profession, and the inheritance of two estates in York from his first wife, the family would have enjoyed an upper-middle class standard of living. Fanny was educated privately, largely abroad, and, upon her father's death, she moved to Middlethorpe Hall, Yorkshire, where she discovered her love of gardening in the grounds of the estate.



Doctor Matthew Wilkinson
and Middlethorpe Hall

In her mid-twenties, she decided she wanted a career, and to this end, Fanny applied to the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening and Practical Horticulture. Her application met with much opposition due to her gender, but eventually, she was accepted on the 18 month course of her choice. Less than a year after graduation, she was appointed honorary landscape gardener to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. Within three years, she had designed her first public space for the Kyrle Society, an 8-acre park in Vauxhall, London. She continued to work for the MPGA, and was eventually paid for her contribution to the design of around 75 more public parks, and thereby became England's first woman professional landscape gardener.

Interviewed in the *Women's Penny Paper*, Fanny became a champion for the cause for equal pay for women. Her opinion on the matter is recorded as follows ;-

'I certainly do not let myself be underpaid as many women do. There are people who write to me because I am a woman, and think I will ask less than a man. That I will never do. I know my profession and charge accordingly, as all women should do'.

Based in London for this part of her career, Fanny occupied properties in Shaftsbury Avenue, and later, Gower Street in the very fashionable Bloomsbury, where she was in the company of others who were to become instrumental in the fight for the rights of the poor, and in particular, women, including Elizabeth Garrett and Octavia Hill. Whilst living here, Fanny took in pupils, who acted as her assistants as part of their education.

“The lady now with me has been my pupil; she makes tracings of my plans, goes about with me, and at the end of two years can do something on her own account. I am always willing to take two or three pupils, but my terms are not low. I cannot receive anyone at less than £100 a year, it would not pay me for my own trouble and expense.”

The pupil to whom she refers in this quote was the daughter of Queen Victoria’s physician, and a later protégé was Madeline Agar, who went on to have her own successful career in garden and landscape design.

Fanny was a founder member of the Women’s Agricultural and Horticultural International Union in 1899, which, during the First World War, was renamed the Women’s Farm and Garden Union. In 1916, the Women’s National Land Service Corps was established, to train ‘educated’ women in the agricultural tasks that had been undertaken by men who were now fighting in Europe. Much of this training was carried out at Swanley College.

Fanny’s involvement with the College at Swanley started almost from the time that the institution was established. As well as her membership of the Committee of Women’s branch from the early 1890s, she served as principal of the college for two terms, from 1904 until 1916 (as a successor to her brother, and the first female to hold the position), and in 1921, when she was coaxed out of retirement to serve another year as the College administration was in a state of crisis.

Moving to Suffolk to breed goats, Fanny enjoyed a long retirement, until her death in 1961 at the age of 95.



Vauxhall Park

MADELINE AGAR

When Wimbledon High School was established, Madeline Agar, born in 1875, was one of the first twelve girls to gain a place. The school formed tight links with Oxford colleges, and the girls were instructed in a much wider range of subjects than those taught at regular secondary schools of the time. For example, one of Madeline's favourite subjects was geology, and she was well known for her collection of fossils.

Madeline's first links with the north Kent area were laid down during her time at Wimbledon. The principal of the newly-established and pioneering Dartford Training College in Wilmington, Miss Bergman, also known as Madam Osterberg, came to instruct the girls in Swedish Drill, a demure form of physical training. This college, also a world first for women, was located less than three miles from Swanley. As a rule, playing fields in girls' schools were extremely rare, but at Wimbledon, the pupils were taught the new sport of netball by Miss Bergman, and they even issued a tennis challenge to the neighbouring Croydon school, the first time that the boys had played against female opponents.

Madeline was obliged to travel to the USA to study landscape design, which was not taught anywhere in the UK. After completing two years of horticultural studies at Swanley, gaining her certificate in 1895, Madeline began her training in America, which took a further two years. After graduating, she served a short while as assistant to Fanny Wilkinson in her London practice, and also spent some time travelling, including a visit to Egypt, where she met an American lady, Mary Kilgour Stout (nee Stone). This meeting resulted in the jointly-written "A Book of Gardening for the Sub-Tropics", published in 1921. This was Madeline's third book, and its predecessor, 1911's "Garden Design in Theory and Practice" is still used as a basic text book in modern landscaping courses, and has been reprinted several times. She also contributed several articles to the Landscape and Garden journal during the 1930s, and another collaboration with Mary Stout.



Mary Stout, nee Stone

Shortly after qualifying, Madeline took up a teaching position at Swanley, where she became a very popular lecturer. At the same time, she was undertaking garden design commissions, and when the two careers vied for her time, she left Swanley to concentrate on her practice. Several of her students, one of whom was Brenda Colvin, chose to pay for private tuition on top of their courses at the college to continue studying with her.

By the 1920s, Madeline was in high demand for her garden designs. Her most famous commission was the creation of the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields back in her old territory of Wimbledon, a scheme she undertook with Brenda Colvin. The fields

Wimbledon (right) and Place House, Fowey (below)



incorporated a war memorial, sports pitches and seating areas. The scheme which she regarded as one of her most important, Place House in Fowey, Cornwall, was for many years attributed to a rival landscape architect, Thomas Mawson. Both were asked to submit plans for the grounds of the 14th century house, but the owners of the property chose Madeline's scheme as the one which suited the estate best. The remains of a rockery and a rose garden that she designed are still accessible to visitors, and photographs of her work feature in a book published in 1911.

Madeline never married, and died in 1967 at the age of 93.



Reprints of Garden Design in Theory and Practice

LORRIE DUNINGTON GRUBB

Lorrie was born in 1877, in England, although spent most of her childhood travelling across India, South Africa and Australia with her parents. She enrolled at Swanley College in 1894, signing up for a two year diploma course, then completed a second in 1896. After gaining her qualification, Lorrie was employed as a head gardener on an estate in Ireland, until she formed a business with H Selfe Leonard, with whom she worked throughout the British Isles, specialising in the creation of rock gardens.

But rather than being content with devising planting schemes, Lorrie wanted to become a landscape architect. As Madeline Agar had discovered, no educational establishment the UK taught the subject, but that didn't deter her. She learned the skills she needed from private lessons, and courses in the more technical subjects. She set up her own practice, and started to earn universal praise for her schemes.



Lawrence Park

In 1910, Lorrie met Howard Burlingham Grubb, and one year later, they married, combining their surnames to become the Dunington Grubbs. Very shortly after the marriage, they emigrated to Canada, and were almost immediately engaged to work on the affluent Lawrence Park district of Toronto, one of the first planned 'garden suburbs'. The area is still a prestigious place to live. It was ranked as the wealthiest neighbourhood in Canada in 2011 (many of the houses sell for in excess of \$C5,000,000, almost a century after it was created), and part of it has been designated a Heritage Conservation District. Their work on projects such as this propelled the Dunington Grubbs into the upper echelons of Toronto society.

Either as a couple, or individually, the Dunington Grubbs undertook every scale of project, from private gardens, right through to the 15 acre Chorley Park, the Rainbow Bridge Gardens, and Oakes Garden Theatre. Their designs were often embellished with objets d'art, such as sculptures, fountains, and other artistic works. Lorrie spent a large

proportion of her time promoting the arts, including serving a term as president of the Women's Art Association of Canada, and membership of several other societies promoting women's roles within the artistic community. She gave lectures at the University of Toronto on social issues, which incorporated her views on town planning, food prices, and housing standards. She also had articles published in several journals, including *Canadian Homes and Gardens*. In 1934, they founded the [Canadian Society of Landscape Architects](#), and ten years later, Lorrie became president of this institution.

In 1913, the Dunington Grubbs branched out with the creation of a 100-acre nursery. Within 13 years, the site had more than doubled in size, and became a very successful and lucrative enterprise. They hired Sven Herman Stensson to manage the day-to-day running of the business, and in 2016, the third generation of his family was still very much involved with the nursery, and with landscape architecture.



Sheridan Nurseries sales catalogue (above) and (left) Howard and Lorrie

During her time at Swanley, Lorrie contracted bovine tuberculosis, necessitating her to take "the cure" at a German spa to regain her health, and preventing her from bearing children. By 1928, the disease forced her to take more of a backstage role in the family businesses, and in 1945, at the age of 68, she died. Most of the gardens that she and her husband designed have disappeared, with the exception of the Parkwood commission, which is still very well maintained. Landscape Ontario keeps her memory alive by the awarding of an annual Dunington Grubb prize.

She is widely considered to be the first female professional landscape architect, and she started her career in Hextable.

Parkwood



ANNIE GULVIN



At the age of 17, Annie came to study at Swanley from her home town of Maidstone, joining the college in February, 1894. Just two months later, along with 16 other Swanley students, she sat the RHS's Examination in Horticulture. The exam was taken by a total of 126 candidates across the country, and unsurprisingly, Annie only achieved a third class pass, just two points above failure. One year later, 196 candidates sit the exam, 29 of them from Swanley, and this time, Annie obtained a first class pass, with 260 marks out of a possible 300. Nationally, this was the highest mark achieved, and Annie was awarded the Society's silver-gilt medal. This was only the third time that the Royal Horticultural Society had set these exams,

and Annie was the first woman to win the medal.

Annie proved to be an exceptional talent, and her short career is filled with firsts. In January 1896, two years after joining the college, and still only 19, Annie and a fellow student, Alice Hutchings, presented themselves at the gates of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew to begin their first day at work. Neither had achieved the age of majority, which at the time was 21, neither had five years previous work experience, and, most significantly, neither of them were male, the three stipulated criteria for employment. Nevertheless, a direct application from the head of Swanley College outlining the two women's outstanding credentials persuaded the director of Kew, W T Thiselton-Dyer to employ them. They were the first and only women on the gardening staff.



The gates of Kew

Thus continued the stream of break-through achievements. The directors of Kew were concerned that the women would become more of an attraction than the flowers, and so they were put to work out of sight of the general public, in the hope that visitors would barely notice them in their unfeminine uniform. The girls were even ridiculed in a mocking poem in the press about the “:London Kewriosities”, but it seems that the women had the last laugh. Annie was so impressive, that within a few months of starting the job, she was promoted to sub-foreman.

From the roofs of the buses they had a fine view
Of the ladies in bloomers who gardened at Kew.
The orchids were slighted, the lilies were scorned,
The dahlias were flouted, till botanists mourned,
But the Londoners shouted: ‘What ho there! Go to!
Who wants to see blooms now you’ve bloomers at Kew?’

This position was only held for a short while, as Annie left Kew to become the head gardener at a Welsh country estate, another first for a woman. Her place was taken by a stream of Swanley students, who all excelled, and were rewarded with quick promotions, and it can be argued that it was Annie Gulvin’s achievements that opened the door to others at a time when females in the workplace, especially one as physically demanding as horticulture, were a rare thing. The respect and recognition she attracted has led to comparisons being made between her and the far more well-known Joseph Paxton, who also made his mark at Kew. The last lady gardener quit in 1902, although they were to return in force at the outset of the Great War. In total, women comprised around 5% of the Kew workforce, although that equates to no more than three at any one time.

Annie continued her career for only another two or three years. She married, and disappeared from all records.

DOCTOR KATE BARRETT

Born in around 1884 (although this date is often misquoted as 1844), Kate Barrett entered Swanley Horticultural College around 1902. Two years later, her diligence earned her the College's silver salver, presented to the best student in the academic year. She left Swanley to study botany at Imperial College, where she obtained a BSc in 1909, shortly followed by an MSc and finally, she achieved her doctorate in 1920. Whilst studying, she served as a research assistant, and was given a position as a lecturer at Imperial even before she gained her final qualification.



Five years later, Dr Barrett returned to the place where her studies had begun, taking the position of principal at Swanley, a post she maintained until the College was moved to Wye in 1944. Very shortly after she took on this role, many improvements were made to the facilities, including the addition of a dairy, and other food processing outbuildings, as the college had become more than just a horticultural establishment. In 1928, the botany laboratory

was erected, a bright and airy space, much more suitable for studying specimens through a microscope than the classrooms in the main building, known locally as Hextable House. This house, which dated from the 16th century, was hit by several enemy bombs during an air raid in 1944, Doctor Barrett's office bearing a lot of the force of the explosion, which damaged the building irreparably, and destroyed many of the college's records, killed one girl and badly injured a second. The botany laboratory survived, and today forms the Hextable Parish Office and Heritage Centre.



Dr. Barrett being welcomed back from South Africa

Throughout her life, Doctor Barrett travelled the world, looking for new species to add to her vast botanical knowledge. In 1929, she visited South Africa, and the students lined up in their uniforms to welcome her return, a clear demonstration of the affection felt for her. It was only after her retirement that Kate finally found the time for marriage. She stated upon her appointment as principal that

"I shall regard it as a life work, and shall spare no effort to carry out the duties to the full extent of my powers."

and she was true to her word. She became the wife of Professor Richard J Tabor, the chairman of the governing council of the college, and another former Imperial student, and staff member. Tabor's is the eleventh name on the register of students at Swanley, having enrolled on the January, 1892 course, when all of the students were male.

Kate's marriage lasted eight years, until her husband's death, and she died in 1977, having been awarded a CBE for her work in the field of botanic science.



The botany laboratory as Dr Barrett would have known it and (right) today

BRENDA COLVIN

Brenda was born in Simla, India, in 1897, where her father was stationed. She was educated in Paris, and moved to England in 1919 to study at Swanley College. There, she was taught by Madeline Agar, among others, and was so impressed with her classes on garden design, that she swapped courses after a year to learn more about the subject. When Madeline's outside interests caused her to give up teaching, she was replaced with a relatively inexperienced student. Brenda and some of her classmates resented this, and chose instead to pay for private tuition from Miss Agar.



In the mid 1920s, Agar was commissioned to create the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields in Wimbledon, and Brenda worked on the project alongside her, as clerk of works and site assistant. She soon found herself being offered independent, freelance work, and so started her own practice. She struggled financially for a few years, but eventually began to make a name for herself, and achieved a relatively humble standard of living in her chosen field, subsidising her income by giving lectures at institutions such as the Architectural Association School. By 1939, she had completed some 300 commissions, many of which were in the USA.



Brenda's business card

During this time, one of Brenda's most important commissions was to create a private garden for Archduke Charles Albert Habsburg, at Zywiec in Poland some point in the mid-1930s. Within a handful of months, the Second World War broke out. Brenda wrote:

"I have heard that the place was over-run by German troops and later became a Russian barrack, so I regard it as typical of what happens to private garden work."

As a result of this disappointment, Brenda decided to concentrate her efforts on public spaces, and as such, became a pioneer of municipal landscaping.

In 1948, Brenda was appointed as the British representative at the International Federation of Landscape Architects. She had been one of founders of the Institute of Landscape Architects in 1929, and during her membership, she served as Secretary,

Vice-President, and eventually, President, between 1951 and 1953. This made her the first woman to preside over any environmental or engineering professional institution. In total, she served on the council of the institute for a remarkable 47 consecutive years.

During the post-war period, Brenda took on contracts for the War Office, and Electricity Generating Board, among others. She wrote academic books and papers, producing "Land and Landscape" in 1947, a book which is still used as a basic text in the teaching of landscape architecture. She created the landscaping around Rugeley and Drakelow power stations in the 1960s, the latter of which schemes included a nature trail around the site. Brenda was asked to design the campus for the newly-created University of East Anglia, although this project was not completed as she argued with the architect over the plans. She was also the landscape consultant for the rebuilding of Aldershot Military Town.



Aldershot Military Town

Brenda gained a reputation for combining romantic visions with practical solutions, and was still working into her eighties. In 1973, she was awarded a CBE for her work, and she had the honour of having a variety of rose named after her.

She died, aged 84, in 1981.



Rosa 'Brenda Colvin'

SYLVIA CROWE



Born in 1901 to a family of fruit farmers, Sylvia Crowe was partly home-schooled by her mother, until she entered Swanley Horticultural College at the age of 19, studying for a total of two years. For a short while she ran her own fruit growing business in Surrey, but, unusually for a woman of her time, she travelled extensively, and ran the garden design department of a Barnet nursery, until she started her own garden and landscape design company in the mid-1940s. At an early stage of the establishment of this business, another Swanley-trained and celebrated horticulturalist, Brenda Colvin, worked at her side, although the two women were never formal

business partners.

Sylvia soon gained recognition for her designs. As early as 1937, her entry in the Chelsea Flower Show won the coveted gold medal, and by 1939, she had been elected to the council of the Institute of Landscape Architects. She was also involved with the International Federation of Landscape Architects, which led to her being engaged on projects outside of the UK.

After the end of the Second World War, she was recommended by architect and town planner Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe to advise on the major task of rebuilding urban areas that had been devastated by enemy bombing. She was particularly adept at making power stations, reservoirs and other such new industrial installations sit well within their surroundings, and completed several commissions for agencies such as the Central Electricity Generating Board. Two examples of the larger post-war projects that she was involved with were the development of Harlow and Basildon new towns in Essex.

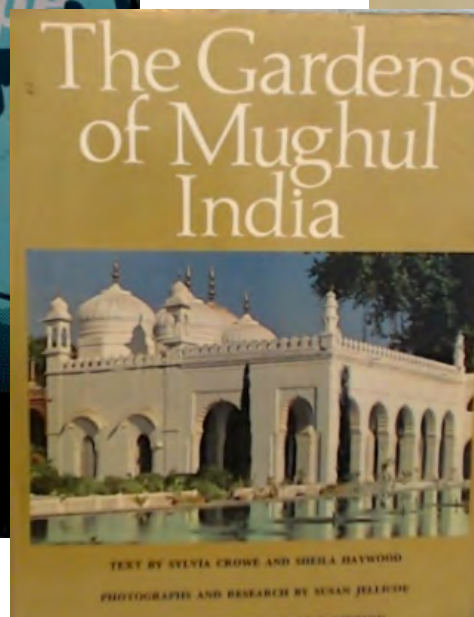
On a domestic scale, Sylvia was noted for her inclusion of water features and sculptures within her schemes, and particularly for her ability to create private, compartmentalised areas in even the smallest gardens. Her schemes took into consideration the natural landscape, the ability to create views and vistas, and the overall character of the area to be developed. At the other end of the scale, she advised the Forestry Commission on planting schemes for vast tracts of woodland, especially in Scotland, and was appointed chairman of the Tree Council for her work with them. She served a term of office as president of the Institute of Landscape Architects between 1957 - 1959, and was proclaimed the Architects' Journal "Woman of the Year" in 1990. In the same year, she earned the Royal Horticultural Society's Victoria Medal of Honour, to add to her many other national and international awards.

As examples of the range of Sylvia's work, she was engaged to address the reclamation of sand dunes and the restructuring of the foreshore at Mabelthorpe, Lincolnshire, which ultimately led to her being involved with the draining of the Polderlands in the Netherlands, at Zuiderzee. She designed a housing scheme for US Air Force personnel based in the UK, and she also remodelled the playing fields of Eton College. More locally, she was responsible for the landscaping around Bewl Water and Bough Beech reservoir.

As well as running her practice, Sylvia wrote several books on various subjects connected to industrial landscapes and garden design, many of which are still considered classics within the discipline. On top of this, she took in students, from Europe and the USA, who were trained in the skills necessary for landscape design, and was very involved with the ILA's Examination and Education Board. In recognition of her services, she was awarded a CBE in 1967, and created Dame six years later, in 1973. When she died in 1997, aged 96, her obituary described her as one of the country's most distinguished landscape architects.



Bewl Water



Three of Svivia's many books