



THE MUSEUM
OF ENGLISH
RURAL LIFE



University of
Reading



Extraordinary women

of The MERL and University of Reading
Special Collections

By Jenny Knight and Kaye Gough

Elizabeth Waterhouse

Artist

1834–1918

Elizabeth Hodgkin was born in Tottenham in July 1834 and raised as a Quaker with a social conscience and a desire to care for others.

Her future husband, the architect Alfred Waterhouse was a close friend of her brother, the historian Thomas Hodgkin; they had studied and travelled together. Alfred and 'Bessie' were married in 1860 at the Friends House in Lewes and set up their first home in Manchester, then in 1865 moved to London as Alfred's reputation grew. In 1868 Alfred built Fox Hill, in Reading's Whiteknights Park on land owned by his father. Whilst living in Reading, Alfred and Elizabeth joined the Church of England and were baptised in 1877 at St Peter's Church, Earley. Elizabeth maintained "the ideal religion is to have been brought up a Friend and to have joined the Church of England."

In 1877 Alfred purchased the Yattendon Estate and started construction of their final home, Yattendon Court, in 1879. It was here Elizabeth started a weekly night school for local men and boys, affiliated to the Home Arts and Industries Association, an arts and crafts movement to revive rural crafts. Elizabeth's designs, worked in repoussé copper and brass, established their reputation with over 5000 objects produced and sold in the village shop and at Liberty's in London. Elizabeth's watercolours and designs in embroidery also gave employment to local women.



© National Portrait Gallery, London

Elizabeth was a published author of several anthologies and philosophy. Her correspondence with her brother Thomas reveals a profound love of her family, her faith and interest in literature, current affairs and philosophy. She's described as "an artist who could paint but also hammer copper into shape, a writer and thinker fascinated by science and astronomy who loved wild flowers and birds singing. A businesswoman who could also enjoy childhood games, a lady of the manor at the loving centre of the home and a genuine friend to her tenants and servants". Elizabeth Waterhouse deserves recognition.

Lavinia Smith

Teacher and collector

1870–1944

Lavinia Smith was born in Portsmouth, Ohio in July 1870. She graduated from Wellesley College, Massachusetts in 1894 and taught at several church schools, before sailing to England in 1905. In 1906 she received her Student of Theology Award from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

From 1907 she was associated with schools run by the Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage and in 1910 was awarded a Diploma of Education at Oxford in theory, history and practice of education. She taught at the School of St Helen and St Katharine, Abingdon and here coached Dorothy Rippon in classics enabling her to enter St Hugh's College, Oxford in 1922. The two remained close friends.

Around 1920 Lavinia purchased Downside, a former yeoman's house in East Hendred. From 1928 to 1931 she was employed as secretary to the Bishop of Gloucester. Then she retired to Downside. Some village museums were created as interest grew in recording local history, village life and collecting ordinary objects or rural by-gones that reflected everyday lives. Lavinia herself was interested in this connection between people and things and was inspired to form her own collection. She maintained "the Museum made itself, for village people used to bring me old things which they thought would interest me." She opened her Village Museum on Whit Sunday, 1933 displaying a few items on a table



Image courtesy of St Helen and St Katharine, Abingdon

outside her home. Lavinia's collection of domestic and agricultural tools and implements grew and was displayed in her home. She approached wheelwrights, blacksmiths, carpenters, builders and others. Each donor and the purpose of the object was itemised.

Lavinia's health deteriorated following a slight stroke in 1941 and she died in August 1944. She bequeathed all her possessions and house to her friend Dorothy Rippon. Dorothy offered the collection to the Berkshire Education Authority, who in turn presented Lavinia Smith's valuable and significant legacy of over 400 documented artefacts to the newly established Museum of English Rural Life in 1951.

Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor

Politician

1879–1964

American-born Nancy Astor made history in 1919 when she became the first woman to be elected and take her seat as a Member of Parliament.

Nancy stood in the Plymouth Sutton by-election after her husband, Waldorf Astor stood down on succeeding his father as a peer and moving to the House of Lords. Nancy entered the House to take her oath sponsored by the Prime Minister Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour. In her first speech she advised an all-male House of Commons, “you must remember that women have got the vote now and we mean to use it and use it wisely”.

Nancy was a witty speaker, well able to take on hecklers during campaigning, who often expressed outspoken and contentious views. She espoused a variety of issues including Christian Science, the perils of drinking, lowering the voting age to 21 for women, opposition to the Divorce Reform Bill, social reform, equal pay and opportunities for women and the appointment of women to public boards and prison inspectors. She strongly opposed another war and re-armament, controversially promoting German appeasement in the lead up to the Second World War.

Nancy was glamorous, clever and an accomplished hostess at Cliveden, entertaining royalty, the aristocracy, celebrities and the elite in society, literary and political circles. During both World Wars the Canadian Red Cross set



up a hospital at Cliveden. Nancy was a prolific correspondent and within the Astor collection held by the University of Reading, letters establish her intimate friendships with the British and European royal families, politicians and writers. Correspondence shows she regularly wrote to the Earl of Airlie at the Front supplying cigarettes for his men, supported some of the Romanovs and importantly was a fierce advocate for Plymouth, lobbying many prominent friends for assistance after bombing devastated the city. In 1959 Nancy was honoured with the Freedom of the City in recognition of all she had achieved for her constituency and its inhabitants.

Lady Evelyn (Eve) Balfour OBE

Pioneer of organic farming

1898–1990

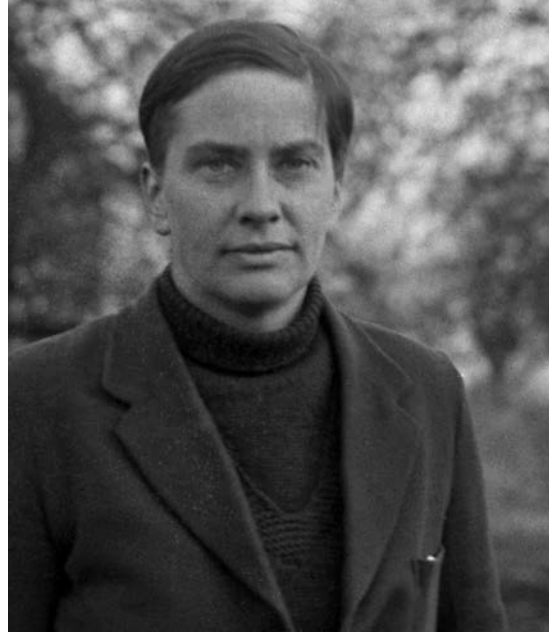
Eve Balfour was the niece of the Conservative Prime Minister Lord Balfour. She decided at the age of just twelve that she wanted to be a farmer, and subsequently became one of the first women to take a degree in Agriculture at Reading University College (Now the University of Reading).

Graduating in 1917, it was in 1919 that she and her sister Mary used an inheritance to buy a farm at Haughley Green, Suffolk.

In 1938/39 Eve began the “Haughley Experiment”, a long term comparison of organic versus chemically-treated farming methods. This led to the publication of her book, “The Living Soil” in 1943, which set out her arguments in favour of organic farming. In 1946 she co-founded the Soil Association and became its first president. The introduction of the Agricultural Act of 1947 which committed British farming to intensive, mechanised methods, proved a setback.

In 1958 she travelled to Australia and New Zealand, meeting organic farming pioneers in those countries. The Living Soil Association of Tasmania became the first organisation to affiliate with the UK Soil Association. Her methods were further shown to be successful in experiments by the Valley Trust in South Africa in 1961/62.

Although she moved to the Suffolk coast in 1963, she continued to visit Haughley and continued to farm, write and lecture for the rest of her life. She did not retire



from the Soil Association until the age of 85, in 1984. At the age of 90 she was appointed an OBE in the New Year’s Honours List, but suffered a stroke and died on 14th January of that year. Immediately following her death, the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher offered a grant to encourage British farmers to make the change to organic farming.

Nora Doreen Thorpe (known as Doreen)

Land Army girl

Doreen joined the Land Army in September 1939. Initially she had two months training at the Midland Agricultural College in poultry work, milking, stock and general farm work. She recorded all of the farms that she worked on and kept details of the rates of pay for the Land Army girls.

Doreen was keen to do more, however, and whilst living at the Women's Land Army Hostel in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, she studied extensively, taking courses in Dairy Farming, the Farm Horse, Grassland and numerous other subjects. She carefully kept all her study papers for future reference.

In October 1942, Doreen applied for a new post, and was appointed as assistant in the Education Department at the NIAE (National Institute of Agricultural Engineering) at Askham Bryan, York.

Initially her move seems to have caused administrative problems, in that the local Land Army committee complained about having to find a replacement for her ploughing duties. The start of her new career may have been a little delayed, but her work now involved travelling all over the county, demonstrating plough setting, fuel economy, giving practical instructions on NIAE courses and for NIAE Leeds student's courses. She was even involved in film making and commenting on educational films. Doreen became a valued educator for the Land Army,



and in February 1944 she was awarded the Four-Year Armband, with congratulations and thanks for the work she had done for the war effort. She was finally discharged from the Land Army in August 1947, having served for 7 years and 10 months, helping to keep the farms working during World War 2. The camaraderie amongst the Land Army girls was such that Doreen and her friends held reunions until well into the 1980s.

Jill Betts

Educator and researcher

1936–2016

Jill Betts, the eldest daughter of an Essex farmer and seed-grower, studied a science tripos in botany, zoology and geography at the University of Reading, where she met her husband, David. The couple followed careers that took them around the world.

Jill was a teacher in Trinidad, gave office assistance to the building of the dam on the Sosiani River in Kenya and became assistant to Professor Beadle in the Botany School of the University of New England in Armidale, Australia.

In 1972 the family returned to England and the University of Reading. Whilst teaching with the Reading Homes and Hospitals Teaching service, Jill began volunteering at the Museum of English Rural Life, eventually becoming a full member of the Museum staff, as Education Officer responsible for school programmes.

While investigating a storeroom at The MERL, Jill located a set of huge wall hangings that had been displayed in the Agricultural Pavilion at the Festival of Britain in 1951. Determined to research them and their creator, the artist Michael O'Connell, Jill brought her versatile skills to bear. Beginning in 1994 she contacted the V&A Museum, RIBA, the BBC and Anglia television, De Montfort University, Country Life Magazine and many more, for sources related to O'Connell and his methods. She hired badminton courts at the University to enable photographs



Jill Betts, BSc Reading 1957. MERL Education Officer preparing material for a school visit to the museum.

of the hangings to be taken. She sought analysis of the thread used, of the dyes and the “mordant” fixative. She recorded the experiences of the artist’s assistants. Over a three year period, Jill became an authority on Michael O’Connell and the wall hangings, and in 1997 wrote a detailed article which was published in the journal, Folk Life. As a result of her article, Jill was invited to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra for a retrospective on O’Connell and his work. Her research has left a lasting legacy for The MERL, where one of O’Connell’s wall hangings can be seen on permanent display.

Extraordinary women of the MERL and University Collections

Extraordinary Women is the subject for the 2018 Heritage Open Days, in celebration of the centenary of the Universal Suffrage Act, focusing on both well-known and less celebrated women. Heritage Open Days, England's largest festival celebrates heritage, community and history with the opportunity on certain days each year to explore hidden places. We have selected six Extraordinary Women of our own, whose lives can be explored further in The MERL galleries, which were redeveloped in 2016 with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and whose correspondence, papers and publications are accessible in The MERL or University Special Collections archive.

The Special Collections Services give access to the University of Reading's collection of rare books, archives and manuscripts and The MERL Library and archives. The Museum of English Rural Life and University Special Collections are housed in a Grade II listed building, the home of Sir Alfred Palmer of the Huntley and Palmer Biscuit Company. Known then as East Thorpe, the building was designed and built by the renowned architect Alfred Waterhouse between 1880 to 1882.

For more information about how to discover more about these Extraordinary Women or access information on other significant individuals and their archives at the University Special Collections visit: www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections

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Cover image: Doreen Thorpe

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heritage open days