

22. Sister Lavinia

In this piece, published to coincide with National Volunteer Week, our wonderful and longstanding MERL Volunteer, Kaye Gough, shares a journey of discovery. In 1951, a private collection amassed by the extraordinary and little-known Lavinia Smith came to form one of the key founding gifts of The MERL. But who was she and how did her things come to be here in Reading? Kaye has been exploring this history for several years now and introduces us to just some of the fascinating things she has found.

Henry Owen Vaughan, Photographs of Miss Smith's Museum, 1937–1943

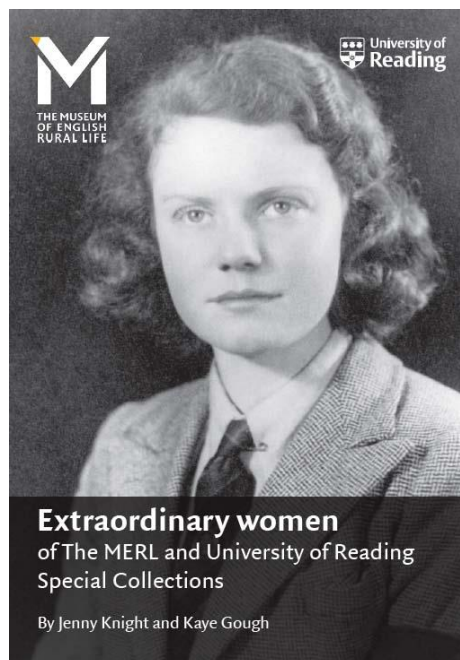


The interior of Downside House, East Hendred, where Lavinia Smith gathered her private museum. Photograph taken by Reading-based photographer Henry Owen Vaughan (MERL P DX2049 PH5_43).

Getting to know Lavinia...

I have been getting to know Lavinia over a period of years since joining The MERL as a volunteer in 2009. Initially hers was just a name that I had heard but not investigated, until in October 2013 when I attended a seminar at The MERL entitled *Looking for Lavinia*—as presented by Curator at The MERL, Ollie Douglas, and Independent Researcher, Bridget Yates—and learned more of her story. Two recent anniversaries encouraged me to undertake research into the life and legacy of Lavinia Smith. The first, in 2018, marked the centenary of the passing of *The Representation of the People Bill* in 1918

finally giving women the right to vote (although only to those over 30 years old) and now in 2021 we are celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the Museum of English Rural Life.



Cover of the Kaye Gough and Jenny Knight's *Extraordinary Women* booklet produced for Heritage Open Days in 2018. The cover features an image of land girl Doreen Thorpe.

In 2018, working closely with fellow volunteer, Jenny Knight, we were encouraged by colleagues at The MERL to develop a tour of the Museum's galleries with an exhibition celebrating *Extraordinary Women*, the central theme for Heritage Open Days that year. We selected six women with close links to The MERL and the University of Reading Special Collections. We each chose three women; Jenny researched pioneer of organic farming Lady Eve Balfour, Second World War land girl Doreen Thorpe, and onetime MERL-based educator and researcher Jill Betts. I took on artist and poet Elizabeth Waterhouse, teacher and collector Lavinia Smith and politician Nancy Astor—the first woman to be elected as a Member of Parliament and to take her seat in the House of Commons in 1919. Nancy Astor and Eve Balfour were already celebrated, but not all extraordinary women are famous and often quietly 'plough the furrow' until they are brought to our attention. Here was my chance to investigate Lavinia Smith. We researched the interesting lives of our six women and established what they had each achieved by going through the archives identifying their correspondence, diaries, books, and photographs for our tour and exhibition working closely and with the full support of The MERL personnel. I was particularly indebted to Ollie Douglas and Bridget Yates for their prior legwork on Lavinia. We were fortunate to receive support from the Friends of the University of Reading who provided valuable funding to enable The MERL to produce an illustrated pamphlet featuring the lives of our six *Extraordinary Women*. Jenny and I have subsequently produced an outreach presentation on these *Extraordinary Women*, which we deliver to local societies and clubs.

So, who was Lavinia Smith, what is her story, and why is she extraordinary? Lavinia Dugan Smith, an American, was born on 29 July 1871 in Portsmouth, Ohio. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1894 and taught in several church schools before sailing to England in 1905. In 1906 she received her Student of Theology Award from the Archbishop of Canterbury and in 1907 began an association with schools run by the Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage. In 1910, Lavinia gained a Diploma of Education at Oxford in theory, history, and the practice of education. She taught at the school of St Helen and St Katharine in Abingdon. It was here she met and coached Dorothy Rippon in classics, enabling her to enter St Hugh's College, Oxford. They were to remain friends throughout her life and after Dorothy herself died in 1966, she left a bequest to St Hugh's for a scholarship known as the 'Lavinia Smith Rippon' awarded for either classics or chemistry.



Children of photographer Henry Owen Vaughan (probably Adrian and Elizabeth, L-R) standing outside 'Miss Smith's Museum' at Downside House, 1942 (MERL P DX2049 PH5_22)

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 and then she retired to Downside. At some point she had been joined by her younger sister, Frances, who was in poor health and died in 1934. Frances is buried in East Hendred church burial ground. In the 1920's and 30's small village museums had opened as the interest grew in collecting ordinary objects or rural by-gones that reflected everyday lives. In 1923, A.L. Humphreys published *East Hendred a Berkshire Parish Historically Treated* and in 1930 *How to write a Village History*, urging recorders to make 'inventories of historical articles in each village and have them photographed' and that 'these should not only be listed: they should be gathered together in a room as a village museum.' Lavinia was interested in the 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 outside her home ostensibly

to educate children. Lavinia's collection of domestic and agricultural implements grew and were displayed in her home. A sample of her benefactors include shepherds, blacksmiths, carpenters, bakers, and a thatcher. In many instances, Lavinia itemised the purpose of each object and its donor. The MERL holds a collection of the work of Henry Owen Vaughan, a mid-twentieth-century, Reading-based photographer. These photographs comprise sixty-five images taken in East Hendred, including a number showing people from the community, recording the exterior and interior of Downside, capturing Lavinia's museum displays, and illustrating the wide diversity of her collection.



An evocative, backlit image showing members of the Stone family at home at Sparks Farm, East Hendred, in 1941. Lavinia collected objects from this family (MERL P DX2049 PH5_33).

Lavinia was a member of the West and East Hendred Women's Institute and their minutes record on several meetings being held at Downside with talks given by Lavinia, including one on 'People and Places of old Hendred'. The members particularly enjoyed the refreshments which included shortbread and coffee made with real sugar. Lavinia often received boxes of food and clothing from former classmates in America. Lavinia's health deteriorated following a slight stroke in 1941 and she died in August 1944. It is possible she is buried with her sister, but there is no engraving on the tombstone to confirm this. She bequeathed all her possessions, including her museum collection and house to her long-time friend Dorothy Rippon.

It is now 70 years since the Museum of English Rural Life was established in 1951, although it did not open to the public as a museum until 1955. However, one of the first and most significant donations received by The MERL that year was the Lavinia Smith Collection of over 400 objects. Her friend Dorothy Rippon initially offered the collection to the Berkshire Education Authority who suggested they be tendered to the newly established Museum of English Rural Life. Dorothy corresponded with John Higgs, the first Keeper of the Museum, in April 1951 and later in 1952 she visited the Museum and met with Higgs. For me, the revelation has been appreciating the significance of Lavinia Smith's

collection; each object tells a story about the people, their craft and lives. How these are now displayed in The MERL galleries give testament to those stories.



Sheep dog collar, as currently displayed in the Year on The Farm gallery at The MERL (MERL 51/858).

In the *Spring* section of *Year on the Farm* the shepherd's umbrella (MERL 51/571), horn lantern (MERL 51/584), and sheep dog collar (MERL 51/858), may all have been given to Lavinia by Shepherd Andrews.



A framed photograph likely showing Shepherd Andrews himself can be seen in Vaughan's image of Lavinia's shepherding items at Downside. The framed picture is also now at The MERL (MERL P DX2049 PH5_39).

In *Summer*, a parting dish (MERL 51/746); these were sent out to the fields during harvest with vegetables in one half and Yorkshire pudding in the other with meat in a trivet on top. In the *Collecting the Countryside* gallery there are gingerbread moulds (MERL 51/539), which were gifted by Mr John Dennis whose family had been bakers for 200 years. In *Town and Country's Animal Health* section, a cauterising tool (MERL 51/474) used by a shepherd. In the *Traditional Revival* displays within

Forces for Change a butter churn (51/776). Using the search tool ‘Lavinia Smith’ on The MERL’s Enterprise site reveals a wealth of stories.



A ceramic parting dish—collected by Lavinia from the aforementioned Stone family—sits at the centre of a case in the Summer section of *Year on the Farm* (MERL 51/746).

Lavinia herself wrote:

‘Many of the objects in the Museum, have survived years of neglect and indifference and have managed at last to emerge in the security of the Museum, which I partly formed in order to make a home for old things who had served mankind faithfully in the past’.

Well, those objects continue to tell their stories and remain secure for the public to view at The MERL.



Many artefacts on display in the Museum’s *Collecting Rural England* gallery came from Lavinia’s collection, where a ‘people story’ text panel and some Henry Owen Vaughan images also tell her story.



This Vaughan photograph taken inside Downside House shows serving platters on the mantelpiece. These platters are held at The MERL, even though they were probably never part of Lavinia's collection and more likely just items that she used (MERL P DX2049 PH5_37).

There are many aspects of Lavinia's story that remain a mystery. Dorothy Rippon referred to her as 'Sister Lavinia' and in the only known photograph of her she is wearing a habit but we have no record as to whether Lavinia entered the convent as a novice. Dorothy wrote that *'it was a great privilege to have contact with that brilliant mind, with its wide sympathetic interests'* and *'I always felt I never had a conversation with her without learning something new'*. Well, I have spent much of my time with The MERL learning something new, and Lavinia Smith remains an extraordinary woman who I am pleased to have discovered.

Further Information:

For more information about the Henry Owen Vaughan East Hendred Photographic holdings see: [MERL P DX2049](#)

For more information about the many hundreds of items collected by Lavinia Smith, which came to The MERL in 1951 see: [Lavinia Smith Collection](#)

For more information about The Extraordinary Women project see: <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/news-and-views/2018/10/searching-extraordinary-women-archives/>

To read and access The Extraordinary Women booklet (which includes the only known image of Lavinia) click here: [Extraordinary Women](#)

For more information about volunteering at The MERL and at Reading Museum see:

<https://merl.reading.ac.uk/communities/volunteer/>



A final image of objects from Lavinia's collection in situ at Downside House, long before their arrival at The MERL in 1951 (MERL P DX2049 PH5_47).