

A Woman Professional in Bloomsbury: Fanny Wilkinson, Landscape Gardener

by Elizabeth Crawford

In early 1885, Fanny Wilkinson, a newcomer to Bloomsbury, took up residence in a flat at 15 Bloomsbury Street (soon to be renumbered as 241 Shaftesbury Avenue), just south of what was then Oxford Street.¹ For the previous three years she had lived in West Dulwich, close to the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening and Practical Horticulture where she had followed an 18-month course in landscape architecture.² Her entry to the School had been fraught with difficulty. Not only was she the first woman to attempt to enroll, but the course she had selected was intended for male artisans, not for an upper-middle-class woman. However, with that problem overcome and the course completed, Fanny Wilkinson showed a similar determination in obtaining suitable employment. By early 1884 she had become landscape gardener both to Octavia Hill's Kyrle Society and to the Metropolitan Public Gardens, Boulevard and Playground Association (MPGA).³ As such, she was the first woman in Britain to work as a professional landscape gardener and for the next 20 years she conducted her practice from the heart of Bloomsbury.

Her first choice of residence would seem to indicate a certain independence of spirit. As we may note from the street's swift change of name, the area was undergoing a

¹ Now New Oxford Street. These addresses for Fanny Wilkinson can be found in the papers of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (London Metropolitan Archives) and in the 1891 census, RG12/209.

² Fanny Wilkinson's address was 6 Kendal Villas, Thurloe Park Road, West Dulwich, SE. MPGA Minutes 5 Feb. 1884. CLC/11097/001.

³ She was present at the Feb. 1884 meeting at which she was elected a member of the Association and appointed as its second hon. landscape gardener. Mr Forsyth Johnson had received this appointment the previous month, but Fanny Wilkinson, who was already working on plans for laying out St Luke's Burial Ground, Chelsea, was not prepared to be overlooked. Little more is heard of Mr Johnson. MPGA Minutes 5 Feb. 1884. CLC/11097/001.

transformation. Shaftesbury Avenue, cutting through some of London's worst slums, was formally opened in January 1886, a year after Fanny Wilkinson's arrival. Her flat was in a red-brick building, still standing, that displays a then-fashionable touch of 'Queen Anne' and sports a corner turret to the first floor. Owned by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests (now the Crown Estate), it had been recently built and was sufficiently large to house various sets of offices and a flat that provided accommodation suitable not only for Fanny but also, after their mother's death in 1889, for her three sisters, together with their cook and housemaid.⁴ No longer as notorious as in the days of the old St Giles' Rookeries, the area still abounded with public houses and distilleries. The Wilkinsons' flat adjoined the Crown, with the Black Lion close by.⁵ But in 1890 a journalist, who called on Miss Wilkinson 'at her charming flat in Bloomsbury', assured her readers that 'Her rooms have a pleasant country air about them, and it would be difficult to imagine that one was in the heart of the big city in her pretty drawing room. It is the home of a lady, and instinctively one feels its owner must be a woman of refined taste.'⁶

Refined taste notwithstanding, Fanny Wilkinson was a woman of spirit, who had left her mother's comfortable country estate to forge a career in London. Born in Manchester in 1855, she was the eldest daughter of Eason Wilkinson, one of the city's leading doctors who, at the time of his sudden death in 1878, had just completed a term as President of the British Medical Association. With her mother and sisters, Fanny had then moved from Manchester to live at Middlethorpe Hall, one of the family's Yorkshire houses. There, in this imposing late-17th-century house, they apparently lived well,

⁴Rates books for St George's Bloomsbury (Camden Local History Library). 1891 census, RG12/209

⁵ The Crown is still there, its name unchanged.

⁶ *Women's Penny Paper*, 8 November 1890. The *WPP* might be termed a 'new woman' journal.

employing a cook, four maids and a gardener.⁷ However, it is clear that the daughters of the family were not content merely to enjoy the county life and by 1881 had begun their association with Bloomsbury. For that year's census records Fanny's younger sister, 22-year-old Louisa, as an 'art student' lodging at 25 Gordon Street, in the house of Robert Farquarson, clerk to All Saints Church. Another, even-younger, sister, Gladys, was visiting from Yorkshire on census night.⁸ It is likely that Louisa Wilkinson was studying at the Female School of Art in Queen Square.⁹ She used the Gordon Street address when she exhibited a painting in 1881 at the Dudley Gallery, but had returned to Yorkshire by 1883 when Fanny arrived in London to begin her studies in landscape architecture.¹⁰

There are no letters or a diary that allow us an insight into Fanny Wilkinson's decision to pursue this particular career, only her comment when interviewed by the journalist in 1890 that 'I was always fond of gardening as a child, and I took it up because I felt it suited me, and I wanted to do something....When my father died we went to live at our own place, near York, and there I began to devote myself to gardening in a practical way'.¹¹

Although little is known about the influences on the Wilkinson sisters it is clear that by 1882 they were in close contact with like-minded women, being particularly intimate with the Garrett family: Agnes Garrett, her sister, Millicent Fawcett and their

⁷ 1881 census, RG11/4721

⁸ 1881 census, RG11/187. In 1884, giving Agnes Garrett's address, 2 Gower Street, Gladys exhibited a painting at the Dudley Gallery.

⁹ The School's principal, Louisa Gann, lived in Taviton Street, parallel to Gordon Street. 1881 census, RG11/188.

¹⁰ Louisa used the Middlethorpe Hall address in 1882 when she exhibited at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. For both references see *Dictionary of British Artists*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1976.

¹¹ *Women's Penny Paper*, 8 November 1890.

cousin, Rhoda Garrett.¹² Agnes and Rhoda Garrett—Britain’s first professional women interior designers—had been living and working for the past six years in Bloomsbury, at 2 Gower Street, and in 1879 had opened a show-room across Bedford Square, at 4 Morwell Street. There is no documentary evidence to prove that the industrious example set by these women influenced Fanny Wilkinson in her decision to pursue a professional career or, indeed, that it was on account of their friendship that she chose to live nearby. However the idea that it was necessary for women to gain a professional training—as would a man—before embarking on a career, was very much a tenet of the women of the Garrett circle.¹³ Although Fanny Wilkinson appears to have been independently hard-headed, her association with them may have contributed to her determination to enroll at the Crystal Palace School. By 1885, when Fanny moved to Bloomsbury Street, Rhoda Garrett had died and Millicent Fawcett, recently widowed, had moved with her young daughter into 2 Gower Street to live with Agnes, who carried on the interior design business from there for another 25 years.

Fanny Wilkinson was appointed to the Council of the Kyrle Society in 1883, even before she had completed her course at Crystal Palace. The Kyrle had been founded by Miranda and Octavia Hill in 1877 in order ‘to give pleasure to the poor’. This translated into plans to bring beauty into the homes of the poor, to decorate their rooms, to distribute amongst them cut flowers and plants, to provide gymnasia and playgrounds for their children, and to turn disused burial grounds and other waste spaces into public gardens. Octavia Hill was particularly keen that the London poor should have access to

¹² Millicent Fawcett, *What I Remember*, T. Fisher Unwin, p. 134 noted that Louisa Wilkinson helped nurse Henry Fawcett when he was seriously ill with diphtheria in 1882. In 1900 Louisa Wilkinson married George Garrett, younger brother of Elizabeth, Millicent, and Agnes.

¹³ See E. Crawford, *Enterprising Women: The Garretts and their Circle*, Francis Boutle, 2002.

open spaces—to grass, trees and air—and saw a solution in the overgrown, locked-up and rubbish-strewn churchyards that since 1852 had been closed to new interments.¹⁴ They were in all senses dead ground and she thought they should be brought back to life to give pleasure to the living. Fanny Wilkinson’s appointment to the Society was to advise ‘in matters connected with the laying-out and improvements of churchyards, gardens, squares etc’.¹⁵ Domestic gardening had long been considered a womanly pursuit; running a business that involved working on public land, supervising the work of male gardeners, as well as producing designs, hard landscaping, dealing with horticultural suppliers, and keeping abreast with the accounts was not.

It could have been her links with the Garretts that had brought Fanny Wilkinson to the attention of Octavia or Miranda Hill. Agnes and Millicent’s elder sister, Elizabeth Garrett, now Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the first woman to qualify in Britain as a doctor, had certainly known the sisters as early as 1861.¹⁶ But Fanny Wilkinson’s association with the Kyrle Society is shadowy. As late as 1894 she is listed in the prelims to Kyrle pamphlets as the Society’s gardener, but while Octavia Hill, in her annual *Letter to My Fellow-Workers*, discusses the Kyrle’s work in laying out gardens, Fanny Wilkinson is never named. But in February 1884, having completed her course, Fanny does emerge from the shadows, elected as an honorary landscape gardener to the MPGA, a society that kept a very much more detailed account of its activities.¹⁷ The purpose behind this society, like that of the Kyrle, was to secure unused open spaces and lay them out for the benefit of the inhabitants of the metropolis. It had been founded in 1882 by

¹⁴ Under the terms of the 1852 Burials Act, such grounds could be closed when they were full.

¹⁵ *The Medical Times and Gazette*, 1883, reporting on the activities of the Kyrle Society.

¹⁶ Letter from Elizabeth Garrett to Emily Davies, 19 Oct 1861. (Women’s Library, Box AL9)

¹⁷ See footnote 3.

Lord Brabazon (later Lord Meath), who, although a member of the Kyrle, felt that more should be done to capitalise on the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act, which had been passed in 1881 as a result of Octavia Hill's lobbying. By this Act it became possible for disused burial grounds to be transferred directly to local authorities, together with the power to use public funds to maintain them as public gardens. Octavia Hill resisted any merger between the two societies and, of course, her plan for preserving outdoor spaces, as embodied in the National Trust, ultimately proved to be very much more ambitious than merely reclaiming the smallish London burial grounds.

It was probably in Bloomsbury, close to home, that Fanny Wilkinson began the practical work of her career. In 1884 the Kyrle Society cleared and restored as a public open space the burial ground belonging to St George's, Bloomsbury, which lay just north of Coram Fields and which had been closed and derelict for over 30 years. The minutes of an MPGA meeting, held on the day that Princess Louise opened the St George's Garden, complain that the Association had not been informed by the Kyrle of the opening although they had contributed £100 towards the cost of its renovation.¹⁸ This lack of communication appears to have occurred despite the fact that the two societies shared a landscape gardener. Gillian Darley has identified a nurseryman, Mr Holmes, as being associated with the laying-out of the St George's Garden. But it is likely that Fanny Wilkinson, who had been advising the Kyrle for over a year, also played some part. William Holmes, a young man who, six years earlier, had inherited the Frampton Park nursery in Hackney from his father, acted as Fanny Wilkinson's assistant in the mid-

¹⁸Minutes of MPGA, 1 July 1884. CLC/011/MS11097/002. Fanny Wilkinson was not present at this meeting; perhaps she was attending the opening of the garden. The grant to the Kyrle Society had been given on 14 July 1883. CLC/011/MS11097/001.

1880s when she laid out Vauxhall Park for the Kyrle Society.¹⁹ When, at this time, the Kyrle was able to incorporate the burial ground of St George the Martyr, Queen Square, into the existing garden, creating the St George's Gardens we know today, it seems very unlikely that Fanny Wilkinson would not have taken charge.²⁰

Incidentally, St George's Gardens provided a very agreeable shortcut for women medical students as they made their way from the London School of Medicine for Women in Handel Street to receive their clinical instruction in the Royal Free Hospital in Gray's Inn Road. In 1900 Fanny Wilkinson designed the garden courtyard of the School, of which Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was a founder and the Dean, and in 1891 she designed the grounds surrounding Dr Garrett Anderson's New Hospital for Women in Euston Road.

In the course of a practical career lasting 20 years, Fanny Wilkinson was responsible for laying out over 75 public gardens for the MPGA, spanning London from Wandsworth to Plaistow and from Camberwell to Haverstock Hill. The greater number, as one might expect from an Association dedicated to ameliorating the life of the most disadvantaged, were concentrated in the East End, an area with which Fanny Wilkinson must have become intimately acquainted. The gardens ranged in size from large parks, such as Myatt's Field in Camberwell and Meath Gardens in Bethnal Green, to small spaces such as the garden of the Ironmongers' Almshouses, Hackney (now the Geffrye Museum). Because the Bedford Estate dominated Bloomsbury and administered many of

¹⁹ The Vauxhall Park commission highlights again Fanny's Garrett connections. The Park was developed on the site of land on which stood, among others, the house and garden which until recently had been occupied by Henry and Millicent Fawcett. The Park was a large project, covering 8 acres.

²⁰ The burial ground of St George the Martyr, Queen Square, lay to the south of the burial ground of St George, Bloomsbury. Fragments of gravestones now mark the boundary between the two sections.

its squares, Fanny Wilkinson had less opportunity here than elsewhere to effect change.²¹ The Association did, however, concern itself with the disused burial ground of St Giles, Bloomsbury. On 4 June 1884 the minutes of the MPGA record that this ground ‘is laid out as a garden and the Secretary reported that he had seen Canon Nisbet lately and had failed in obtaining his assent to this ground being thrown open to the general public, as he stated that it had been so once before, and was found to be a failure’.²² The MPGA continued to try to change the Canon’s mind. The following year the Secretary wrote to Mrs Christiana Herringham, who had interested herself in the case, assuring her that the MPGA wished to maintain the garden and provide caretakers for it, and that ‘The Association will also guarantee that this ground shall not be used as a playground, and that perfect order shall be kept.’²³ When the churchyard garden was finally opened to the public in 1891, the MPGA provided it with 12 seats.²⁴

In 1885 the MPGA laid out the gardens of Red Lion Square, in the south-east corner of Bloomsbury. Around the same time Fanny Wilkinson brought to the MPGA’s attention a small site, very close to home, that she thought ripe for improvement and was present at a meeting at which it was announced that the Metropolitan Board of Works had decided that the ‘vacant triangular piece of ground at the corner of Bloomsbury Street and Thorney Street should not be built over, but preserved as an open space and it was agreed that if the Vestry desired it, seats and trees should be placed there by the Association.’²⁵

This open space is immediately outside the door of 15 Bloomsbury Street/241

²¹ On at least one occasion (1889) the Duke of Bedford did make a sizeable donation (£100) to the MPGA. CLC/011/MS11099.

²² MPGA minutes 1884. CLC/011/MS 11097/002.

²³ Letter from the Secretary of the MPGA to Mrs Herringham, 22 Bedford Square, 26 March 1885. CLC/011/MS 11097/002. Christiana Herringham was a member of the Garrett circle.

²⁴ MPGA Minutes 2 Dec 1891. CLC/011/MS11097/10. The provision of seats, like that of drinking fountains, was seen as a means of preventing the weary or thirsty from resorting to the public house.

²⁵ MPGA Minutes 7 July 1885. CLC/011/MS 11097/002.

Shaftesbury Avenue. For, as the last stretch of Shaftesbury Avenue cut up at a diagonal to Oxford Street (demolishing the houses at 7–14 Bloomsbury Street), it left a triangle of land that was then joined on to the pavement of what had been Thorney Street. Plane trees—although doubtless not the originals—still dominate this space, although Fanny Wilkinson was not at that address sufficiently long to derive direct benefit from the planting. The seats, however, may have had only a brief existence. For in 1893, in a letter to *The Times*, Henry Jones, of the Board of Works for the St Giles District, wrote, ‘My board have accepted from the MPGA a gift of seats, some of which have been placed in St Giles’s Churchyard and others in various streets in the district. but I regret to say that the convenience which has been afforded has proved, in nearly every case, an intolerable nuisance, and that in some instances it has been found absolutely necessary, in consequence of the way in which the seats were abused, to remove them.’ The problem came from ‘dirty tramps, who make them a sleeping place, in the day time and by loose women at night.’²⁶

In early 1896 Fanny and Louisa Wilkinson moved from Shaftesbury Avenue, with its ‘dirty tramps’ and ‘loose women’, to 6 Gower Street, next-door-but-one to their friends Millicent Fawcett and Agnes Garrett. We can glimpse something of the Wilkinson style from a report made in 1899 by the Secretary of the Technical Education Board, who visited Louisa Wilkinson to vet her suitability for admission to a bookbinding class.²⁷ ‘The house is a private house, with no name plate or other indication of either trade or professional work. Its appearance inside and out was that of a residence of a

²⁶ *The Times*, 19 August 1893.

²⁷ As with Fanny’s Crystal Palace course, this was one intended for male artisans and the Secretary was attempting to discover if Louisa worked as more than an amateur at bookbinding. She was unsuccessful in her attempt to enter the class.

professional man with an income of not less than a £1000 a year. The portrait which attracted attention in the drawing-room, as being far above the average painting in oils, proved to be a Gainsborough.²⁸

Although we learn from this that Fanny Wilkinson did not, as did Agnes Garrett, attach a trade name plate to the door, she did work from 6 Gower Street, employing an assistant, as she had at Shaftesbury Avenue. In 1890 she had explained to the visiting journalist, ‘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.’ This pupil, later her assistant —and eventually her sister-in-law—was Emmeline Sieveking, daughter of Queen Victoria’s physician.²⁹ The willingness to train a pupil in a professional manner was very much in keeping with Garrett-circle thinking.³⁰

Fanny Wilkinson finally ceased working for the MPGA at the end of 1904 and was free to concentrate on her role as first woman principal of Swanley Horticultural College, Kent. She had been associated with the Ladies’ Branch of the College from the early 1890s; executive committee meetings were held at her Bloomsbury home, first in Shaftesbury Avenue and then in Gower Street. After a period of protracted plotting, the College was captured from the male students for whom it had been founded and turned into an establishment that provided women (that is, only women) with a scientific horticultural training. Fanny Wilkinson finally retired from the College in 1922 but

²⁸ Minutes of the Technical Education Board, 6 Feb 1899. (London Metropolitan Archives). He probably refers to the portrait of Sarah Walker, given to the Tate Gallery by Fanny Wilkinson. It was then thought to be a Gainsborough, but is now described as merely ‘in the manner of’.

²⁹ A later pupil/assistant was Madeleine Agar, who became an influential garden designer.

³⁰ Agnes Garrett also took pupils, training them as interior designers.

continued her connection with another horticultural enterprise of which she had been a founder: the Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union. This society had included among its early members Miss Grove and Miss Morison, founders of College Hall in Byng Place, Bloomsbury, the first hall of residence for women students of UCL. Renamed the Women's Farm and Garden Union, it was used by the government during the First World War to recruit 'educated women' for work on farms. After the war it merged with the Women's Land Army and in the 1930s the Union and its Club were housed in College Hall. Fanny Wilkinson, by now living in Suffolk, was able to make use of the club facilities as an out-of-town member and so maintain her connection with Bloomsbury, begun over 40 years earlier..