



Gardening and Young People - A little History

One of the many joys of historical research is the discovery of connections between people and places, the past and the present. This article, the first in a regular column on the history of young people and gardening, was intended to be a brief exploration of the horticultural careers of Iris Tillett and Betty Jex-Blake, alumnae of Norwich High School for Girls. Quickly it was clear that their careers, even in the mere snippets available, could illuminate anew parts of the past we would do well to revisit and learn from.

Iris and Betty were pupils at Norwich High School for Girls (NHS) in the 1920s. Leaving NHS they attended Swanley Horticultural College in Kent. A horticultural college had been founded at Swanley Court in 1889. It soon proved so popular with female students that by 1903 it had become woman only, producing a remarkable group of pioneering female horticulturists. In June 1931 Iris and Betty, under the pseudonym 'TWO SWANLEYITES' wrote to NHS. Published in the school magazine, 'News of Old Girls' column, it outlined their lives at the college; both the tough, '*we rise with the lark at 6.30 a.m., and go to bed with 'buses at 10.30pm.'*', '*standing waist-deep in mud, attempting to clean out the rock-garden pond*'; and the not so tough, '*tennis and swimming in Summer, and hockey and dancing in Winter...*'.

By 1936 Iris, now a professional market gardener, was again published in the school magazine. In a long and remarkably frank exposition of the life of a commercial grower, '*the hours are long and the work hard*', Iris passed on her hard fought for commercial insights, '*The cut flower market has been expanding lately...*' with a motivational careers talk, '*there is an opening for girls in market gardening, which should appeal especially to those who want to combine an outdoor life with business instincts, for both are essential in this career.*'

What then of Betty? In 1936 the school magazine published a 'General News'. Betty is listed as working as a gardener '*...at a school for Expatriated Germans in Kent*'. Given the dates this school is almost certainly Bunce Court, an influential and much loved



boarding school founded by Anna Eissinger to home the child victims of Nazi anti-Semitic persecution. What then is education like at Bunce Court? Amongst all the wonderful academic, cultural, artistic and pastoral provision, central is space for 'a large vegetable garden, two greenhouses, five hundred hens, beehives and several pigs, which were fed on kitchen waste, all primarily run by pupils.'



Lunch at Bunce Court. Photograph: Courtesy of the Association of Jewish Refugees

By inclination I'm wary of using the past to teach lessons for today, but I think we can take two lessons from the lives of Iris and Betty. First, gardening is hard work but also immensely rewarding. Second, gardening has the power to both heal and grow people. As The Papillion Project continues its work with young people today those lessons are at the forefront of what we are achieving.

Thomas Greenwood, Papillion Trustee

The Remarkable Women of Swanley Horticultural College by Hextable Heritage Society is freely available online

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunce_Court_School

The School that Escaped the Nazis by Deborah Cadbury