

# Miss Edna Gunnell and the Women Gardener Movement

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## Introduction

In 1943 the *Kew Guild Journal*, the publication of the staff membership association of the Royal Botanic Garden, mentioned a ‘woman gardener movement’ from 1896 into the early twentieth century and again during the First World War.<sup>1</sup> This movement comprised the first women gardeners trained in professional horticulture at Kew, one of whom was Edna M. Gunnell (1879-1963) whose subsequent career in horticultural education in England, Silesia, Germany and USA preceded twenty five years as Horticultural Superintendent for Devon County Council, during which she worked extensively with the Devon Federation of Women’s Institutes.

This article examines her forty-eight year career in relation, firstly, to separation and integration of women’s professional horticultural opportunities in Devon and elsewhere and, secondly, her contribution to horticulture in Devon.

## Family background

Gunnell’s middle class Yorkshire family valued education, community engagement and mutuality. Her father Arthur was a headmaster before marrying Elizabeth, daughter of Samuel Farey, Skipton cotton manufacturer. By 1881, when Gunnell was four, her grandfather employed 131 people (including 63 women and 22 girls) and was Secretary of both Skipton Gas Company and Skipton Building Society, of which he was a founder. Arthur Gunnell became associated with the Farey firm and for over half a century was also a public figure in Skipton, a leading member of the local adult education movement, an active Liberal and a popular non-conformist preacher. In 1904 when General Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, toured the country, he rested, after a speech, at Arthur Gunnell’s Skipton home.<sup>2</sup>

In this family girls’ education was encouraged. Edna’s sister Doris had a successful academic career, reading Modern Languages at Leeds University on a county scholarship, followed by a doctorate from the University of Paris in 1908, returning in 1920 to Leeds as a lecturer and eventual Senior Lecturer. Her obituary reported that ‘her knowledge of the French people, language and literature earned her an international reputation’. Their youngest sister, Elsie, followed a more conventional



Figure 1. *Lady Gardeners*. (KGU/1/9/3/262) Image reproduced with the kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.



Figure 2. *Group portrait of staff gardeners at Kew*, photograph, 1901. Image reproduced with the kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The photograph includes two women sitting together in the second row, Edna Gunnell is on the left.

married path, living in later life at Budleigh Salterton.<sup>3</sup>

## Further Education

After attending the Salt School, Shipley, Edna Gunnell also took advantage of further education opportunities opening up for women, first at University College, Reading, where she obtained the Certificate in Horticulture in 1900.<sup>4</sup> The women-only horticulture course had been set up by the Countess of Warwick two years before, in 1898, described as ‘a new opening for educated women of the middle classes’.<sup>5</sup> As part of her training Gunnell obtained practical experience in five gardens or nurseries, including the Lady Warwick hostel, Reading, where each student cultivated a plot (Figure 1). The men she worked for provided excellent references for her Kew application. Mr Gilchrist, Director of Agriculture at Reading College, wrote that she was ‘an excellent and painstaking student and I look forward to her career with great interest’. Mr Thomas Horsman of Rose Mount Nurseries, Ilkley, was ‘very

pleased with her work' and was 'sure she will succeed'. Mr Leslie, Head Gardener at Bolton Hall Gardens, Clitheroe, which had 18 glasshouses and extensive flower gardens, wrote: 'she is very willing to be taught, and is a lady, who with a little more practical experience, will no doubt make her mark in the gardening world'.<sup>6</sup>

She was accepted at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, described in the 1901 Census as a 'Lady Gardener' (Figure 1). Although claimed (in the USA) as the first woman graduate of Kew, that stretches the facts, because the first lady gardeners (Annie Gulvin, Alice Hutchings, Gertrude Cope, Eleanor Morland) were admitted to Kew from 1895. In 1900 Gulvin and Hutchings attended the annual dinner of the Kew Guild. In 1901 Edna Gunnell was at the dinner with four other women and some 136 men (Figure 2). The women gardeners were a tiny minority: the committee members and lecturers were men. Even in 1911 a discussion about a new Kew diploma aimed to send out 'competent men'.<sup>7</sup>

### School of Horticulture, Torquay

Teaching in general was a well-trodden career option for middle class women; Anne Meredith describes growth of private gardening schools for women from 1900 both for professional or amateur training.<sup>8</sup> From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century women who had degrees often went on to teach other women.<sup>9</sup> Also there was a recognised growing demand for women instructors in gardening from elementary levels to high schools and peripatetic teachers.<sup>10</sup> Gunnell's first appointment, circa 1902, was teaching ladies horticulture at Aberglaskyn, Teignmouth Road, Torquay. Miss Mitchell was the Principal, but it is not clear if she also owned the premises, nor how many students the school took. During the Victorian age, Torquay, like other resorts, saw a growth of fashionable villas for the middle classes with large gardens for entertaining and producing food and flowers, which required gardeners. Aberglaskyn was one of these: previously a private residence, it had glasshouses (a peach house, vineries, forcing houses and a large conservatory) and garden well stocked with fruit and flowers.<sup>11</sup> No evidence has been found of a professional syllabus at Mitchell's school, which apparently aimed to educate ladies in the art of gardening, probably as an extension of their domestic role running large homes. An article in *The Queen* ('The Lady's Newspaper') suggested that Miss Mitchell, FRHS, formerly Head Gardener at Castle Cary, and Miss Gunnell opened the school as a joint venture, though Kew records Gunnell's post as Demonstrator.<sup>12</sup> Miss Mitchell gave occasional public lectures, for example on 'Bright Flower Gardens'.<sup>13</sup> Miss Gunnell gave weekly lectures to

ladies and proposed to open an evening class.<sup>14</sup> Whilst noting that students thronged to Swanley and Reading, this private school was for ladies 'amongst whom the love of gardening was rapidly advancing' and for whom gardening was a desirable art.<sup>15</sup>

The private school at Aberglaskyn pre-dated the Devon School of Gardening at Ivybridge, run by May Crooke, one of the first students at Lady Warwick Hostel, from 1911-1917.<sup>16</sup>

### St Petrox School, Paington

Her next post was at St Petrox Collegiate School, Grosvenor Road, Paington where she was Horticultural Instructor for two years, in the period preceding 1907.<sup>17</sup> The girls' school advertised gardening as a speciality alongside a general all-round education, games and sea bathing.<sup>18</sup>

### Silesia and Germany

Wider horizons opened when Gunnell travelled to Europe. In 1907 she was appointed Horticultural Instructor at a school in Agnetendorf, Silesia.<sup>19</sup> Her own 1914 account, written for the Kew Guild, describes teaching at a School of Domestic Science in Silesia, whose name suggests gardening as an adjunct to or part of women's housewifery.<sup>20</sup>

Gunnell's 1914 article is an enthusiastic account of her recent professional life. She indicated her interest in integration of women with men in horticultural training alongside the reality that she was employed in women-only establishments.<sup>21</sup> She had travelled and held various posts in Germany, 'in the mountains of Bohemia and afterwards at the Gartenbauschule fur Frauen at Godesburg-am-Rhein'. She was familiar with the methods of the State Colleges, the most important of which were in Dahlem near Berlin, Proskan in Silesia, and Geisenheim on the Rhein. Most of these courses were open to men and women and she noted that 'professional training for women has made remarkable strides during the last half dozen years, the students being keen, good workers and developing into capable gardeners'.

She also described her witness of the outbreak of WW1, when on a trip to Belgium, watching troops mobilising in both Belgium and Germany, and her difficulties getting back to England, alongside a heart-felt spirit of international friendship. She thought her most interesting post had been Co-Principal of the School of Horticulture for Women at Godesburg-am-Rhein (in 1912, aged 33). Students had annual trips abroad to study horticultural methods and Gunnell in 1912 and 1914 had brought fifteen German students to

England for a fortnight, visiting Kew, Windsor Castle, Hampton Court, the Horticultural College at Swanley and the Chelsea Show. She suggested that Kew students might visit Germany and learn 'a most charming side of German life' and looked forward to the time when interchange of visits would again be possible.

### Swanley College

Back in England, she gave postal horticultural tuition to a Land Girl before, in 1914, working as Lecturer at Swanley College of Horticulture for a year.<sup>22</sup> Swanley admitted women from 1891, with a majority of female students by 1894; by 1903 it was a women-only institution for 63 students.<sup>23</sup> Two of the college's first graduates, Gulvin and Hutchins, had been the first women gardeners at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, just before Gunnell.

### The Pennsylvania School of Horticulture for Women

To achieve promotion Gunnell again went abroad. She spent most of WW1 in America, arriving by boat in New York in 1915 to start work at another all-woman educational establishment, as Head of Floriculture at Ambler, the Pennsylvania School of Horticulture for Women, founded in 1911 and then the only school of its type in the United States. The Director, Miss Elizabeth Leighton Lee, is credited as one of the first women to practice landscape architecture. Louise Carter Bush-Brown (Director from 1924) was a student in a class of fourteen, and recalled: 'When we returned in our second year (1915) we learned that Miss Edna Gunnell, an English woman, had been appointed Head of the Floriculture Department'.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst she was in America, women in England were required in the war effort to enter new roles, including the Women's Land Army, and by her return opportunities for women had changed.

### Devon County Council's Horticultural Superintendent

In 1895 Devon County Council employed its first Horticultural Lecturer, Charles Berry, National Diploma in Horticulture (NDH), using central government funding. Berry lectured and demonstrated practical gardening, emphasising fruit growing. During the First World War he set up model allotments and worked with schools to grow food, particularly potatoes. By the end of WW1 he was of retirement age. Central government funding enabled a new structure with a higher paid Superintendent Lecturer and two Lecturers (one was appointed), working to a sub-committee to develop

instruction in fruit culture. The brief covered market gardening, small holdings and allotments.<sup>25</sup> The Board of Agriculture paid two thirds of the costs, because 'it was intended principally to go in for food production' and horticultural instruction was an important part of the strategy.<sup>26</sup>

Gunnell was appointed to the renamed post of Horticultural Superintendent and when in 1920 she started work, both the press and the Kew Guild reported that she was the first woman to hold a post of this type in the country.<sup>27</sup> She had obtained an integrated post (open to men and women) in local government. This was a flagship moment for women in horticulture. Not only that, but she was well paid, earning much more than Berry had received and more than other women in Devon County Council's core staff. As early as 1904 Devon County Council had employed a few other women as instructors in cookery, housewifery, dairy, cheese-making, and as inspectors in health and schools, subjects which can be read as an extension of women's traditional domestic interests – housewifery, health care and education.<sup>28</sup> A 1919 staff pay list shows women employed as health visitors, instructors of housewifery, physical drill, dairy and cheese-making, but also as clerks, typists, matron, school nurse and dental assistant.<sup>29</sup> In 1919 the highest pay for a woman staff member on this list was £300 for the Chief Health Visitor. The following year Gunnell's starting salary was £350 per annum.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of decision makers, in 1919 women still had a limited role in Devon County Council. A few women were Committee members, usually described as 'Additional members', implying co-option rather than election. Their involvement was mainly in public health, education and care of the 'mentally defective'. However, Mrs C. Fownes Luttrell was a member (the sole female) of the Horticultural Sub-Committee which appointed Gunnell and may have been a sympathetic advocate.<sup>31</sup> During WW1 Mrs Luttrell had been President of the County Horticultural Committee and active in the Devon Food and Vegetable Society Ltd which sent Devon surplus food to other localities. The surplus came from many sources, including allotments (which had increased in Devon from 570,000 in 1914 to over 1,400,000 in 1918), and cottage gardens.<sup>32</sup>

Initially Gunnell continued much of Berry's work. It is easiest to track her lecturing role from frequent press mentions. She lectured to allotment associations, on subjects such as whitefly and artificial and natural manures (including guano, mustard and vetches) emphasising the need for humus which was not in artificial manures.<sup>33</sup> An awareness of including women is suggested by the invitation to her talk to St Leonards



Allotment Association which welcomed ‘all allotment holders and their wives’.<sup>34</sup> She created exhibitions for horticultural shows where she also judged. In 1921 she staged an exhibition at Seaton Show using museum cases of common fruit and vegetable diseases, a collection of commercial varieties of fruit and charts on the spread of potato wart disease and cropping allotments.<sup>35</sup> She began lecturing on fruit bottling.

### Miss Gunnell and the Devon Federation of Women’s Institutes

Devon County Council worked with the Women’s Institutes (WIs) before Gunnell’s appointment, providing staff to lecture and demonstrate, for example basket making and boot repair.<sup>36</sup> From the formation of the first Devon WI in April 1917 at Cullompton, followed swiftly by Cornwood in June 1917, branch numbers increased fast. In November 1920, 298 Devon Institutes had 2,000 members.<sup>37</sup> At the first meeting of the Devon Federation of Women Institutes (DFWI) in June 1920 Lady Clinton, the President, commented on how the WIs were catching on in a surprising way and were extraordinarily popular. The war had opened the eyes of women in rural areas and given them insight into a new fellowship, based on a truth that every individual life was of equal value. In the WI, she said, ‘there was no distinction of class’ but higher ideals of citizenship.<sup>38</sup>

Nationally, the WI encouraged women with any sized garden or allotment to get involved in growing and preserving food to help increase supply to the war-torn nation, and in November 1920 Gunnell offered her services to give lectures and demonstrations to Devon WIs.<sup>39</sup>

By May 1925 Lady Clinton argued strongly that the role of women in agricultural and horticultural employment and as wives, small holders and domestic servants had been neglected.<sup>40</sup> In September 1925 DFWI wrote to Devon Agricultural Committee asking for more training for women in agriculture, emphasising that the employment for the past five years of a woman as chief horticultural officer, with high qualifications and loyal service, had helped redress the balance. A representative of WIs on the Agricultural Committee was also requested.<sup>41</sup> This letter appears to have instigated change as in December 1925 a special subcommittee was set up to consider the appointment of a specifically male horticultural superintendent with a salary to attract “good men”.<sup>42</sup> Daniel Manning was appointed, working alongside Gunnell.

In 1926 a report advised the Devon Agricultural Committee of a dearth of small fruit grown outside

the commercial sector and demand for instruction, particularly to teach women in WI branches how to cultivate and preserve soft fruits in home gardens.<sup>43</sup> Gunnell organised a scheme to encourage cultivation of soft fruit by women in home gardens, by speaking to WIs.<sup>44</sup> At this time the inherent educational force of the WIs was beginning to be recognised.<sup>45</sup>

Gunnell also appears to have worked hard and successfully on school gardens. In 1929 there were 160 school gardens in Devon, fifteen created in the previous seven months.<sup>46</sup> By the end of the decade she was described as Superintendent of School Gardens whilst continuing to lecture widely.

In 1929 the Devon Agricultural Committee received a letter from the DFWI ‘expressing appreciation of the work of Miss Gunnell’, asking if the Committee could allow her to devote the whole of her time to instructing WIs in Devon on domestic horticulture and fruit preservation. The Chairman asked if DFWI would contribute to the cost.<sup>47</sup> In 1930 Lady Clinton thanked the Agricultural Committee for appointment of a whole-time teacher in horticulture for women.<sup>48</sup> Gunnell’s role was variously described as Organiser of Women’s Horticultural Work, and Women’s Horticultural Superintendent. She was again in a segregated role, prompted by the request of a woman’s organisation.

At this time Gunnell’s role and experience was recognised nationally. She was elected a Committee member of the Kew Guild from 1928-1931.<sup>49</sup> In 1935 she spoke at a WI conference in Kent on cooperation between County Councils and WIs where ‘some of her suggestions were received with interest’.<sup>50</sup> The production and preservation of produce continued to be part of the role of the good rural housewife: a DFWI produce exhibition with 6,600 entries from 90 institutes was praised as ‘Devonshire women’s reputation for being excellent housewives was maintained’.<sup>51</sup> The exhibition’s success was attributed to the educational work of Miss Gunnell and two other women from the Education Committee and Dairy Section of the Agricultural Committee. The following year she was asked to demonstrate chutney making with an assistant at a chutney making school organised by Monmouthshire WIs by an Agricultural subcommittee as part of a rural domestic economy campaign.<sup>52</sup>

In 1938, described as ‘Devon’s best known lecturer’, having in the past year spoken to 150 audiences reaching a total of some 5000 women, she was interviewed for the *Western Morning News*.<sup>53</sup> The interview drew out changes in women’s lives in the previous twenty years. When Gunnell had begun

work in Devon, rural women were not accustomed to meeting publicly except for religion or politics. Village halls had been a male preserve and it had been hard work to get women to attend lectures. However, her appointment had almost coincided with the formation of the WI in Devon which had provided her with a sympathetic platform. When she had begun, her lectures were on the care of gardens and defeat of garden pests. However, both the Government and Devon CC had realised that modern women did not know as much as their grandmothers about cultivation of the fruit and vegetables they were encouraged to grow, and her lecture syllabus widened to include jam making, pickles and chutney. Some recipes were evolved in Gunnell's own kitchen, others had been handed down from Devon mother to daughter. The WMN considered that a telling commentary on her work was that at the DFWI exhibition in 1925 there were 400 poorly displayed entries whilst by 1938 there were 7,000 exhibits which made an 'appetising display of colourful beauty'.

A month before the Second World War the Devon Agricultural Committee had a tent at the Tiverton Agricultural Show. It distributed an 'Illustrated Pamphlet on fruit bottling by Miss Gunnell, Devon County Organiser of Women's Horticultural Work ... who has probably addressed every WI in the county' (Figure 3). The booklet included recipes for fruit bottling, syrups and purees. The paper commented that 'the feeding of the nation is one of the paramount subjects to which people's attention is being directed, the preservation of fruit and vegetables is of more than ordinary importance'. The Tiverton Gazette commented that 'fruit bottling has become immensely popular ... to a great extent due to the WI competitions' (Figure 4).<sup>54</sup>

### Work for Devon Agricultural War Committee

Gunnell was due to retire at 60, in 1939, but stayed on for the duration of WW2, her work coming under the Devon County War Agricultural Committee.<sup>55</sup> In 1940 she spoke to the Plymouth Townswomen's Guild on saving household waste, which the City of Plymouth collected for pig feeding. Peelings from turnips, potatoes, carrots, pods of beans and peas and bits of pastry, bread and meat were suitable, but pigs did not like parsnips, and salt, soda, orange and lemon peel, tea leaves and coffee grounds were bad for them.<sup>56</sup> She continued to lecture adjusting the material to the wartime context. Potatoes were needed as a staple food, and she lectured on 'Potatoes in the home and in the garden'.<sup>57</sup> At Newton St Cyres WI she spoke on 'the uses of wild fruits and berries and their uses in war time'.<sup>58</sup> She explained to the Topsham WI how a war

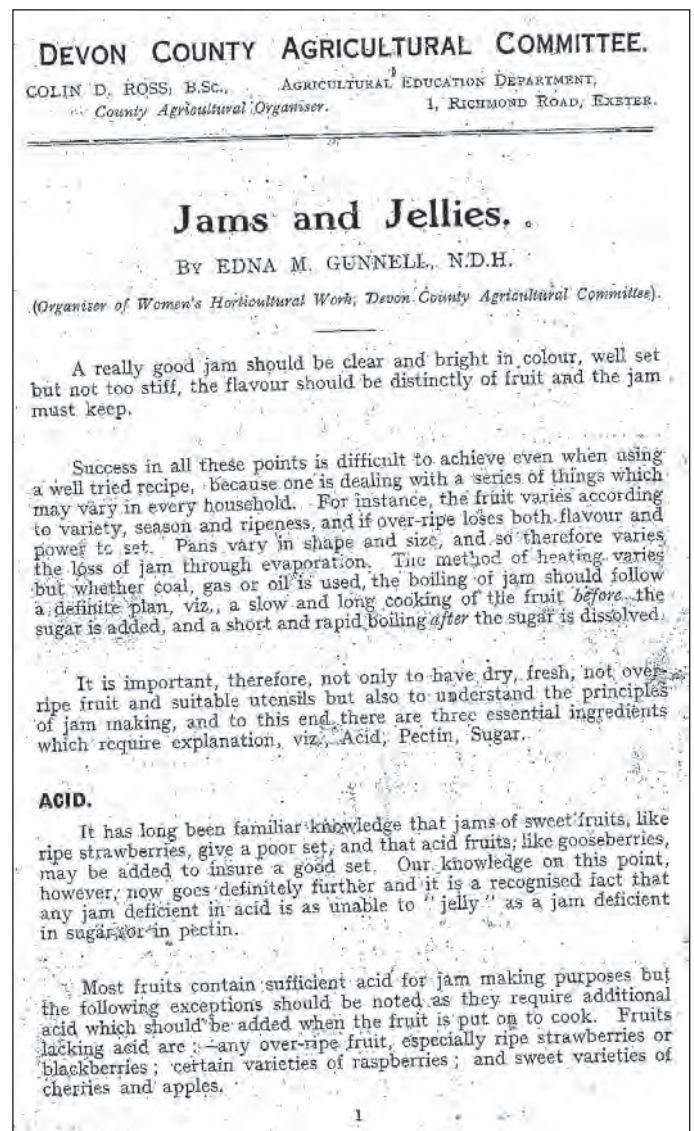


Figure 3. Frontispiece to 'Jams and Jellies' booklet by Edna Gunnell. DHC, Box 6739, Lydford Womens Institute, Recipe books and flower show. South West Heritage Trust.



Figure 4. *A Canning Demonstration*, Evelyn Mary Dunbar, oil, 1940. © Imperial War Museum (Art.IWM LD 765).



time jam centre worked.<sup>59</sup> At Ashburton WI she spoke on fruit bottling and preservation and use of surplus vegetables; at Feniton on war time recipes for jams with smaller amounts of sugar; and at Okehampton on preserving fruit and making jam under war time conditions.<sup>60</sup> She promoted a seed collection priced at 3 shilling 9 pence which was available to all WI members.<sup>61</sup> At a DFWI meeting in 1942 the WIs were warned of the need for more production and Miss Gunnell was amongst the lecturers, in a tie up with the Produce Guild (which had female lecturers). In 1942 she spoke to the Produce Guild using lantern slides on tomato growing.<sup>62</sup> In 1943 she spoke on how to prune young fruit trees at an Exeter Produce Guild Rally and in 1945 to Clyst St George and Ebford WI on 'a pleasing picture of flowers to grow for the garden and home' using diagrams on preparation of seed boxes and beds, cultural hints and treatment up to gathering blooms.<sup>63</sup>

### Retirement

In retirement she continued to judge shows for a few years. She outlived her brothers and sisters and her home when she died was 8 Silver Terrace, Richmond Road, Exeter –an elegant terrace close to the offices of the Devon Agricultural Committee at 1 Richmond Road.<sup>64</sup>

### Conclusion

The discussion in the *Kew Guild Journal* of the women gardener movement considered it significant that Edna Gunnell still took an active part in horticulture in 1943. She had proved her professional seriousness by having a life-long career (and, though this was unstated, by not marrying). The following year the Guild recognised the part played by women at Kew during the Second World War by electing a woman president, Miss Elsie Wakefield, MA FHS, a fungus expert educated at Somerville College, the Oxford women's college.<sup>65</sup> In 1945 Gunnell's achievements were recognised in the award of an OBE for services to women's horticulture.<sup>66</sup>

The Victorian idea, described by John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies*, that middle class men and women had separate spheres in life, with woman's role associated

with the home and domesticity, has been widely discussed in women's history. Donald Opitz has applied this concept to agricultural and horticultural education up to 1914.<sup>67</sup> Gunnell was interested in integration, yet her career provides a clear case study of a woman developing her career in women-only spaces, and after she achieved the integrated post of Horticultural Superintendent at Devon County Council her post was later refocussed on women's horticultural work.

Gunnell, with her expertise in growing, jam making and fruit bottling, was a key figure in the DFWI. Her contribution was highlighted when in 1942, during the war effort, she reported to the DFWI annual meeting 'an overwhelming enthusiasm for the subject of jam-making'. 70 lectures on jam-making had been held plus 145 lectures or demonstrations on various ways of producing fruit and vegetables. 139 fruit preservation centres in Devon had made 35 tons of preserves, 2,474 bottles of fruit; 428lbs syrup and 3,095lbs of pickles and chutneys. Undoubtedly, although Gunnell was highly trained in horticulture, her work with the Women's Institute was seen in the context of domesticity. The *Western Times* report of a DFWI produce exhibition which had 6,600 entries from 90 WIs was headed 'Devonshire women's reputation for being excellent housewives was maintained' and the exhibition's success was attributed partly to Miss Gunnell.<sup>68</sup>

She had worked for about twenty-nine years in horticulture in Devon, from her early career teaching 'ladies' to the public-facing remit of Horticultural Superintendent at Devon County Council. She taught men and women, wrote at least two pamphlets (on 'Jam and Jellies' and 'Fruit bottling') but her notable contribution was that by teaching at probably every WI in Devon she educated a diversity of women in food and flower growing and food preservation, and consequently influenced the use of many gardens (and kitchens) across Devon, small and large.

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