

BLAZING A TRAIL

Fanny Wilkinson is a feminist icon and pioneering designer you have probably never heard of, but in the late 19th century, she became the first woman ever to be paid for her landscape designs. As English Heritage unveils a Blue Plaque in honour of this remarkable woman, Jodie Jones explores her history and legacy





OPENING PAGE AND THIS PAGE: Fanny's childhood home, Middlethorpe Hall, a William & Mary house near York; now an hotel in the hands of the National Trust, the gardens (which have been extensively restored and replanted but which retain some fine specimen trees) are commonly thought to have inspired Fanny's decision to apply to the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening in 1882. **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT:** Myatts Fields Park, Camberwell. **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT:** This June, a Blue Plaque honouring Fanny and her work was unveiled at 239/241 Shaftesbury Avenue by horticulturalist and broadcaster Rachel de Thame, on behalf of English Heritage, with the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. **THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:** a cartoon depicting 19th-century Vauxhall Park, London.



In a career that spanned some 40 years, Fanny Rollo Wilkinson designed at least 75 London parks and gardens and became principal of the horticultural college where both Brenda Colvin and Sylvia Crowe began their professional training. She has until now, however, been an all but invisible presence in the history of our discipline.

Part of this invisibility is because despite achieving so much in her life, Fanny left no written records, plans, or sketches of her work and it is largely thanks to author Elizabeth Crawford, who rediscovered Fanny while researching a book on the Garrett sisters (*Enterprising Women: The Garretts and their Circle*, published by Francis Boutle), who were radical campaigners for women's suffrage and close friends of Fanny's, that we can now tell the landscape designer's story.

Fanny was born in 1855, at a time when little was expected of upper-middle class girls beyond the making of an advantageous marriage. In the Wilkinson family, however, it seems the daughters of the house were not only given an education but were encouraged to make use of it.

Fanny developed a fondness for gardening in childhood, when her family lived at Middlethorpe Hall near York (now a rather smart hotel). Later, not content to potter at home, she decided to train as a landscape gardener. This was easier said than done since the few horticultural colleges then in existence catered exclusively to men, but she was determined to attain a professional qualification that would put her on a par with her male contemporaries.

Radical atmosphere

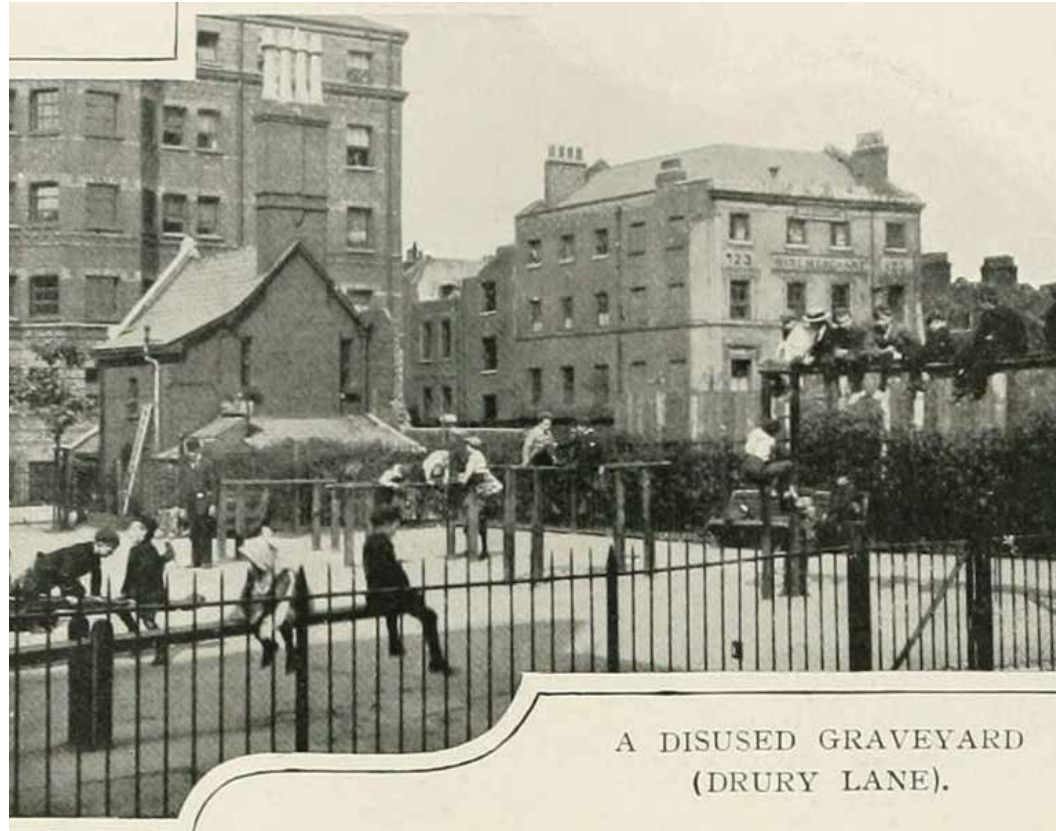
After several failed attempts, Fanny was accepted by the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening although, as she admitted in a rare, published interview from the *Women's Penny Paper* in 1890, she found 'taking surveys, levelling and staking out the ground, drawing plans to scale, and making estimates' rather hard to master.

Nevertheless, by 1883 she had successfully completed the 18-month course and thus began to look for work just two years after the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act gave London's local authorities the right to convert disused burial grounds into public gardens, for 'exercise and recreation'. In the radical atmosphere of the late 19th century, a number of prominent philanthropists began organising themselves to promote this goal, particularly in the deprived east of the city.

In 1877, Octavia Hill (who later co-founded the National Trust) helped to establish the Kyrle Society with the aim of 'securing unused open spaces and laying them out for the benefit of the inhabitants of London', and in 1882, Lord Brabazon, later the 12th Earl of Meath, set up the Metropolitan Public Gardens →

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Images: National Trust Photo Library/Alamy; Martin Hughes-Jones/Alamy; World History Archive/Alamy.



A DISUSED GRAVEYARD
(DRURY LANE).



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP RIGHT: the Metropolitan Public Garden Association converted disused graveyards such as this one in east London into playgrounds and parks for use by their local communities; Fanny's beloved Swanley Horticultural College was situated off the Dartford Road; bee-keeping was a part of the college curriculum. **ABOVE:** An illustration of Fanny Wilkinson, published in the *Women's Penny Paper* on 8 November, 1890.

Association (the MPGA, still in existence today) with a focus on converting disused burial grounds '[to give] to the people gardens, and to the children playgrounds'. Fanny worked for both organisations.

In 1887 she was engaged by the Kyrle to lay out Vauxhall Park, having been named in the society's records as its landscape gardener with special responsibility for laying out burial grounds. The MPGA elected her its honorary landscape gardener and she had worked on a number of its commissions when, in 1886, she wrote to Lord Brabazon to say that 'I feel it would be better for me to drop the "hon" and make a charge which would fully cover all expenses.'

Knowing her worth

As she told the *Women's Penny Paper* (8 November, 1890) 'I certainly do not let myself be underpaid as many women do. There are people who write to me because I am a woman and think I will ask less than a man. That I will never do. I know my profession and charge accordingly, as all women should do.'

She was equally forthright when managing the men who worked for her. In general, she preferred to use her own teams because, as she said, when clients supplied the workforce, these 'gardeners occasionally imagine they know better, and they

are often stupid and pig headed. I have great bother with them now and then.'

Her 'bother' proved wholly worthwhile, however, resulting in wonderful parks such as Meath Gardens in Bethnal Green, and the 14-acre Myatt's Fields in Camberwell (created by 220 formerly unemployed men), which are both still highly valued community resources today. Sadly, her project to install 'boxes of evergreens to screen the new conveniences for both sexes in Piccadilly Circus, particularly to screen the ladies' retiring room' has not survived.

In keeping with the priorities of the philanthropic societies she worked for, Fanny's designs prioritised low construction costs and economical maintenance, incorporating asphalt paths, benches, water fountains (to dissuade people from popping to the pub for refreshment), and playgrounds and outdoor gymnasiums for healthy exercise.

From early in her career, Fanny had taken in paying female pupils who learned while assisting in her studio but by 1902, she was combining her own design work with a new role as principal of Swanley Horticultural College. Originally set up in 1889 to educate men in the scientific study of plants, Swanley eventually experienced a coup of sorts and by Fanny's time, was exclusively female. She resigned from the MPGA in 1904 to devote herself full time to her Swanley students, including Crowe and Colvin.

Fanny died in 1951, the year Brenda Colvin was appointed president of the Landscape Institute. While the bones of the many parks that Fanny laid out are still evident, if you know where to look for them, her greatest legacy is the multitude of professional female garden designers and landscape architects who have followed in her wake, inspired, whether they know it or not, by her pioneering example. ○

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