

Some Newnham Classicists of the Past

I read Classics at Newnham for my BA and MPhil between 2001 and 2005; I went on to study for my PhD at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and am currently a Lecturer in Classics at Royal Holloway, University of London. One of my current research projects looks at the history of teaching classics at Newnham since the College's foundation, and explores how women began to take control of a subject which had up until that point been reserved for men. In the early years, teaching was organised by Richard Archer-Hind, Fellow and Lecturer of Trinity College; as time went on, Newnham produced its own graduates with the skills necessary to teach the next generation of students. Many of us know of Jane Ellen Harrison but my research found many other, less well known, individuals. These potted biographies reflect the breadth of experience and interest represented by these early female pioneers of the discipline.



Margaret Merrifield (1857–1916) was appointed Newnham's first female Resident Lecturer in Classics in 1880. She resigned the lectureship in 1882 after marrying Arthur Woollgar Verrall, then a classical Fellow at Trinity College, later Cambridge's first Professor of English. She continued to supervise for the college until the year before her death. Beyond classics, she was a keen participant in the work of the Society for Psychical Research, of which Henry Sidgwick was the first President. She was particularly skilled in automatic writing. Her daughter Helen worked alongside her in both these fields; after reading Classics at Newnham, she supervised for the college in 1909-11.



Edith Sharpley (1859–1940) took over the position of Classical Lecturer in 1884 and remained in post until 1910. She was Vice-Principal of Sidgwick Hall from 1911 to 1918, and served as first Registrar of the Roll from 1918 until 1929. She and Eleanor Sidgwick kept up a lively correspondence until the latter's death in 1936. She also maintained a life-long friendship with B.A. Clough, Newnham's fourth Principal. They became close when B.A. was an undergraduate and Edith had recently taken up her lectureship; Edith helped B.A. nurse Anne Jemima Clough through her final illness in 1892. Edith retired to a cottage near Burley in Hampshire, before moving nearer to her family in Lincolnshire. She was the second of 10 children, and her sister Minnie had also studied at Newnham.

Louise Matthaei (1880–1969) replaced Edith as Director of Studies in Classics in 1909, after holding a three year Associates Research Fellowship from 1906. She began to revise the classics teaching arrangements – for instance, she was the first to create separate first and second year translation papers. During the First World War, she felt strongly that academics should champion intellectual rather than military engagement. However, her own paternal German heritage made her a target for suspicion. She resigned from the College in November 1916 and went to work for Leonard Woolf's *International Review*. In 1931 she married Albert Howard, her sister's widower, and worked with him to campaign for the introduction into British farming of the organic farming techniques he had observed as Imperial Economic Botanist in India. After his death in 1947, she founded the Albert Howard Foundation of Organic Husbandry; the Foundation merged with the Soil Association in 1953, and she was made Honorary Life Vice-President.

Alice Lindsell (1878–1948) supervised for the college from 1914 to 1916. She served as secretary to the Warden of Alexandra Hall, Aberystwyth University College (1906–08), Principal of College Hall, Byng Place, of the University of London (1909–13), and Warden of Bedford College House (1919–39). She returned to Newnham in 1913 as secretary to the third Principal, Katharine Stephen; in 1915 she became garden steward, and organised college students for land work. She left to become an organiser of the Women's Land Army (1916–17) and was later an Area Controller of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (1917–19). Alongside this work, she continued her research into ancient Greek botany, of which a 1937 article titled *Was Theocritus A Botanist?* was one result. The College Archives now hold her papers, including her botanical sketchbooks and a scrapbook of plant motifs from Greek pottery.



Hilda Richardson (1890–1927) marked two firsts for classics at Newnham – not only was she the first Girtonian to be employed as a classicist on the staff, but she had also spent time teaching outside Cambridge. Before her appointment in 1920, she spent a short time as an assistant mistress at Church High School in Newcastle-on-Tyne before moving to Royal Holloway as a lecturer in 1915. She was appointed a University Lecturer in 1926, although ill-health meant she was unable to lecture. Copies of her 1925 *Latin Passages for Translation at Sight* still surface in second hand bookshops from time to time.