

Nottingham Women's History Group Newsletter

Issue 11 Autumn/Winter 2021-22



Stop press: By popular demand, NWHG has reprinted *No Surrender! The fight for suffrage in Nottinghamshire*. It's on sale in Five Leaves Bookshop, or get in touch with us and we can arrange payment and postage.
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Welcome to the 11th edition of the NWHG newsletter



So we're well on the way to Christmas again, but we're so pleased that we have managed to hold some events this year – two walks and our AGM, which was held on 23rd October.

The first walk, on 6th July, was led by Miriam and took in different city centre locations displaying plaques honouring women – or where we'd like to see plaques honouring women! The second walk, on the 12th August, was led by Ro and visited locations connected with a range of women writers from Nottingham such as Rose Fyleman, Muriel Hine and Dorothy Whipple.

On 23rd October we were delighted to hold our AGM, indoors with a speaker and an actual audience. This long-awaited event had seemed in danger of cancellation just two days before when the ICC's boiler broke down, but staff at the venue performed miracles in finding alternative heating for the room, and we were treated to an entertaining and informative talk by David Stewart of the Nottinghamshire Nursing History Group. He firstly told us about the vast range of the nursing profession, which helped us to appreciate the size of the task involved in researching the history of nursing.



David then gave us a chronological account of nursing from the early 1800s to the 20th century. We heard about early 19th century midwives, pauper nurses in workhouses, soldiers' wives nursing in the Crimean War, the campaign for the registration of nurses under Ethel Gordon Fenwick, and much more. David said that NNHG is planning to publish a book about their research, but he also said that there is so much more to unearth before the oral histories are lost. To find out more about Nottinghamshire Nursing History Group and some of the amazing women

and nursing institutions they have researched, visit <https://nottinghamnursinghistory.wordpress.com/>

Now read on to find out what else we've been up to since the last newsletter.

Blagg the Builder – Yes She Can!



I've discovered a woman who defied social convention, carving out a successful career in a male dominated industry in Newark in the early 20th century.

In 1883 a young Emily Stevens, migrated to Newark and began working for Cooper's clothing factory where she flourished, rising to the position of the company's buyer and visiting Paris on a number of occasions. Emily remained at Cooper's for twenty years, but her ambitions lay outside the textile industry.

In 1903, aged 40, Emily invested in brickworks at Dinnington Colliery in Yorkshire and also on Clay Lane in Newark. Over the next decade she built many houses both in Dinnington and Newark, notably developing The Park and Lime Grove. Many of the houses she built were affordable homes intended for her workers. There's no record of what prompted her to strike out on her own in what was very much a man's world.

In January 1906, Emily married William Blagg, the son of Newark butcher, Richard Blagg and a man 10 years her junior. The marriage was short lived and the couple were separated by 1911. As Mrs Blagg, Emily continued to develop her building enterprises with remarkable success.

Her projects were not limited to housing. She built Newark's first cinema, the Kinema on Balderton Gate, which opened in 1913. The following year she provided free entertainment there for the children of Newark.

Six years later, Emily purchased the Chantry estate which included the historic Chantry house and adjoining deer park. Her plans to demolish the house and build housing and a second cinema on the site dismayed those who wanted to preserve the building as a museum. Emily developed a reputation as "bad Mrs. Blagg" as a result, but she refused to bow to pressure from the town council and pursued her dream project, controlling every aspect of the build and working on site throughout.



The result was Newark's Palace Theatre, which opened in 1920, a gloriously stylish art deco building. But sadly, it was no longer owned by Emily Blagg. Both Palace Theatre and the Kinema had been sold to a Sheffield syndicate.

It's possible Emily sold her cinemas because she needed to release funds for her next project. Around this time, Emily met Frank Mihill Johnson, a somewhat shady character 17 years her junior. Born in Sussex, the son of an Australian landscape painter, Johnson had worked in Australia, America and Canada, before making his way to Newark. He was an engineer and his interests lay in the invention of new machinery and patent applications for the same.

By 1919 Johnson was working for the Newark firm of Cafferata & Co, a large building, plasterers and boiler making

concern. In 1921 he teamed up with Emily Blagg to found the company Blagg & Johnson Ltd, a sheet metal works company that has been credited with inventing and patenting the 'Jupiter Metal Angle Bead' used by plasterers. It was registered with a £50,000 share capital.

True to form, Johnson only remained with the company for 6 months before moving to America. It's generally accepted that he absconded with the firm's working capital, although Grace's Guide states no evidence for this has been found.

Despite this setback, Emily continued to make her way successfully in a man's world, registering a second company, the Newark Brick Company, in 1925. It took many years for Emily to restore her business's fortunes; but she succeeded and on her death in 1935 her estate was valued at over £7,000. Blagg & Johnson is still going strong today.

Johnson died in 1929, leaving only £96.

Emily Blagg had the courage and determination to live life on her own terms. She did not allow society to dictate her place in the world or impose any restrictions on her prospects. A truly inspirational woman.

Karen Winyard

Celebrating Ada Lovelace



Ada Lovelace Day 2021, Somerset

Nottingham Women's History Group was delighted when Ada Lovelace day was established in 2009 to celebrate women in science. We were even more delighted when we were invited to taste Castle Rock's 37th Nottinghamian Celebration

Ale, named in her honour for Ada Lovelace Day 2019, and are so pleased she is finally getting the recognition she deserves.

Augusta Ada Lovelace, born on 10 December 1815, was, of course, the only legitimate daughter of Lord Byron, perhaps Nottinghamshire's wildest son. Ada's mother, Anne Isabella (Annabelle) Milbanke, removed herself and Ada from the family home a month after Ada's birth because she was convinced that Byron's behaviour (dark moods, eccentricities and extra marital affairs) was evidence of his slide into insanity. Unusually, or perhaps understandably, Annabelle was granted custody of her daughter and Ada never saw her father again. He died when she was 8 years old.

Annabelle was an extremely intelligent and well educated woman with a particular interest in mathematics, and she desperately wanted to protect her daughter from Byron's influence and so, to counteract any hedonistic poetic heritage, she ensured Ada was steeped in maths and science. Her plan worked up to a point, because Ada became fascinated by mechanical engineering and wrote her first book *Flyology* at the age of 12, even illustrating it herself, providing an outlet for the imaginative side of her nature. Her mother dismissed it as a 'fanciful' piece of work, but it was an early indication of how the poetic and rational would be fused in Ada's work.

Indeed, Ada embraced both the sensibilities of the Romantic era and the technological advances of the Industrial revolution, and she saw no reason why they should be mutually exclusive. She disagreed with her mother's view that there was no place for the poetic in the world of science. Ada envisaged 'poetical science' where imagination and a passion for invention and discovery could both flourish.

It was Ada's meeting with Charles Babbage, a professor of mathematics at Cambridge, in 1833 that was to change her life and cement her place in history. Ada was introduced to Babbage by Mary Somerville, a noted researcher and scientist who was one of her home tutors.

Babbage showed Ada a calculating machine he had devised and called the 'Difference Engine, but this machine was never finished. In 1834, he designed 'The Analytical Engine', the first example of a computer memory and processor, using punched cards, rather like jacquard lace machines, to provide input and output systems. In 1840, he addressed a meeting in Turin where the Italian engineer Luigi Menabrea took notes and subsequently published a paper about the Analytical Engine. Ada was asked to translate this paper from the French, which she did, adding further notes that trebled the length of the paper. They included a method for calculating Bernoulli numbers using the Engine, which is generally regarded by historians as the world's first computer programme. Her annotations greatly developed and improved the original, and it is said that a copy of her translation was found among Alan Turing's effects at Bletchley Park. Turing, of course, famously cracked the Enigma machine code during the 2nd WW.

It must be remembered that, by now, Ada was also a wife and mother. She had married William King, 8th Baron King, on 8 July 1835, when she was aged 19 and he was 29 and the marriage produced 3 children, a son Byron Noel in 1836, a daughter Annabella in 1837 and another son Ralph Gordon in 1839. In 1838 William was created 1st Earl of Lovelace (Ada chose the title for him as she was the descendant of the Barons Lovelace of Hurley, a title which had been extinct since 1736) and he and Ada lived at Ashley Combe House (aka Ashton Lodge, Ashley Lodge), near Porlock in Somerset. The house had been built by William's father, Peter King in 1799, and William greatly enlarged and improved the original house and gardens in the Italian style, using money that Ada had brought to the marriage. The gardens included terraces, follies and woodland walks, called Philosophers' Walk by the family because that is where Ada and Babbage walked while discussing mathematical principles. There were even tunnels for tradesmen so that they could approach the house without being seen by the residents. The family worshipped in nearby tiny St Beuno's church in Culbone, occupying the

family pew. Indeed, the church is said to be the smallest parish church in England.



Tradesmen's Tunnel

Ada suffered much debilitating sickness throughout her life, having to learn to walk again following a bout of measles in 1829 aged 13, and again being bedridden after the birth of her 2nd child. Unusual for the time, her husband was very supportive of her scientific endeavours and her friendship with Babbage, although her flirtatious relationships with other men must have caused him some concern as he burned over 100 letters of hers after her death.

Despite her mother Annabelle's best efforts, Ada did succumb to some of her father's influences, becoming addicted to opium, and developing a taste for wine and gambling. However, her translation of the Menabrea paper remains her greatest legacy to the world of science, and her name is used for a computer programming language used in some aviation and military programs. Her friendship with Babbage (it was he who dubbed her Enchantress of Numbers) lasted to her death in 1852 from uterine cancer, probably hastened by bloodletting. She was 36, the same age as her father when he died. She was buried at her own request next to him in the Byron Vault at St Mary Magdalene Church in Hucknall.

As with the achievements of all women, there are detractors who maintain that, because Ada worked in collaboration with others, she is undeserving of the acclaim lavished on her – and especially undeserving of her title as the world's first computer programmer. However, there are others who claim that she provided an

extra level of understanding, perhaps because of the blend of the poetic and the scientific she brought to the work, a direct result of her interesting heritage and remarkable character.

As for Ashley Combe House, it was inherited by her younger son Ralph who redesigned the house and gardens with his wife, trained architect Mary (nee Wortley) and her friend Charles Voysey, an architect in the arts and crafts style. The house was leased to Dr Barnardo's in 1939 and used as a nursery during WW2, then it became a Country Club in 1950 which was closed after a few years after developing a dubious reputation. I like to think that would have made Ada and her brother smile! After that, it fell into disrepair and, tragically, was demolished in 1974, leaving just tantalising remains.
Sian Trafford

'Beyond the Mayflower' and the Emergence of the Pilgrim Woman



Mayflower 400 was another anniversary that had to be put on hold due to the Pandemic. At last, this autumn, we were able to see the exhibition 'Beyond the Mayflower' in the Weston Gallery at Nottingham Lakeside Arts and ponder its significance for the history of the Midlands. In 1620 religious separatists from Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire left a hostile country to found a new one in America. They are often referred to as the Pilgrim Fathers - but of course a great many of them were Pilgrim Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Aunts, and artist Rachel Carter's project, Pilgrim Woman, has at last made them visible – in a big way!

As part of the experience, Rachel also crossed the Atlantic in the most basic conditions available – on a working freight ship, 'Atlantic Sea'. Like the Mayflower, the vessel had to change course due to bad weather and she was forced to disembark in Canada, but she determinedly made her way down to Cape Cod to be Artist-in-Residence at Provincetown for several weeks. Do look at Rachel's website at www.rachelcarter.co.uk for more information.



On 14th October I went to the Lakeside to hear Rachel speak about the project. Supported by Arts Council England, it involves installing a bronze figure of a woman in Tudor costume at various key places in the Midlands. She was modelled by Rachel herself, scanned using the astonishing technique of photogrammetry and then cast, using the lost-wax method. Pilgrim Woman comes in different sizes, with subtle variations to her dress, suggested by small-weaving techniques which Rachel explored with members of the receiving communities, such as Lucet braiding and macramé.

So far, Pilgrim Woman has taken her place in the Danum Gallery in Doncaster and beside the River Trent at Gainsborough, where Sian and I visited her recently. Whereas Doncaster Woman is larger than life, Gainsborough Woman is only about fifteen inches tall, atop a large chunk of Lincolnshire limestone bearing the legend, "Steering our future informed by the past." It was lovely to be able to get so close to her, to admire the fine detail of her clothing which was made by volunteers at Gainsborough Old Hall,

and to be inspired by the determined expression on her face.

'Pilgrim Women Boston' – yes, two of them - are due to be unveiled on 20th November as part of an exhibition until January at the Collection Museum in Lincoln, before placement, next spring, in Boston. I can't wait to see them *in situ*.
Ro Edlin-White

Update from the Feminist Archive Midlands (or still archiving in the time of Corona)...



It was around a year ago that I wrote of our thwarted efforts to start work on our archive at the university's Kingsmeadow campus. Since then I made it into the building twice while it was being used as a vaccination hub for COVID, which was great in its way. We hope to finally start work there sorting and cataloguing later this month.

In the meantime, we occupied ourselves commissioning this beautiful banner – one now in the Nottingham Women's Centre and one for us to use for publicity and at events.

We made a successful bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund which has enabled us to purchase a laptop and fund professional transcriptions of our oral history interviews. Dr Verusca Calabria from Trent University is a new neighbour on my allotment and, fortuitously, an oral historian. She talked us through what transcription involved and helped us find a suitable and very experienced transcriber.



We spent many happy Tuesday mornings on the top floor of the Nottingham Women's Centre with a view over the rooftops of Nottingham. There, beyond the beautiful library, is a room lined with hundreds of newsletters, journals and magazines produced by the Women's Movement from 1970 onwards, mostly from outside of Nottingham, some from abroad and in varying states of decay from crumbling to almost mint. We have sorted, sifted, catalogued and re-housed in archive boxes. A very few of them can now be seen in the Revolutions in Print temporary exhibition at Nottingham Castle until 29th November.

We have a lot more interviews to complete and exhibitions and publications to plan...

If you would like to be interviewed, be relieved of archival material or just to know more – please get in touch....

Tina Pamplin

BUT NWHG will always need YOU!



Just get in touch if you'd like to find out more about getting involved
nottmwomenshistory@gmail.com

Upcoming Events

- **Until 9 January:** *Breaking the Mould: sculpture by women since 1945* at Djanogly Gallery, Lakeside.
- **Saturday 22 January 2022, 2pm:** NWHG talk "Rediscovering Victorian Women Writers: Mary Howitt, Eliza Oldham and Annie Matheson". Venue tbc
- **9 March 2022, 7.30 pm:** joint NWHG Zoom talk with Jersey Heritage about Florence Boot.
- **13-30 April 2022:** *Red Ellen* - Caroline Bird's play about Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson at Nottingham Playhouse.

Website, Digital and Social Media



Don't forget our website where you can find links to items such as our list of Notable Women in Nottingham and also a self-guided suffrage walk around the city centre. Follow the link to check it out for yourself.

www.nottinghamwomenshistory.org.uk

You will also be able to download several interesting documents including *1866 Petition: Nottingham Signatories*, *Shoulder to Shoulder: Nottinghamshire Women make their mark*, written to commemorate Vote 100 and much more.

Thank you to everyone who continues to follow us on social media. As always, if you have any ideas for posts, or events to share then please get in touch.

Contact us:

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