

Fanny Rollo Wilkinson

The Suffragist Gardener – The story of the first woman professional landscape gardener in England.

Fanny Rollo Wilkinson (1855 - 1951) was the first woman Professional Landscape Gardener in England and paved the way for women to enter the profession, which until then had been a strictly male preserve.

Her Background

Frances 'Fanny' Rollo Wilkinson, also known as Fanny Eason Wilkinson, was born on 6 June 1855 in Manchester, the daughter of Matthew Eason Wilkinson, a doctor and President of the British Medical Association, and his wife Louisa. The family also had a residence at *Middlethorpe Hall*, near York, and her father's death, the family moved to *Middlethorpe Hall*, an estate with extensive gardens, where she enjoyed the practical side of gardening. This led her to apply in 1882 to the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening. She later said that 'I was always fond of gardening as a child, and I took it up because I felt it suited me, and I wanted to do something ...'. She may have been inspired by the grounds of *Middlethorpe Hall*.

In 1883 she completed an eighteen-month course at the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening and Practical Horticulture. In this she was a pioneer as it was very unusual for a woman to pursue a career in the business side of gardening, and she had initially met much resistance in her attempts to enter the school.

Her Career

In 1884, after training, she secured the position of Honorary Landscape Gardener to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA), which at this time was the leading gardening charity in the country. She soon realised her worth and within two years had persuaded the Charity, under Chairman Lord Meath, that she should be properly remunerated and her employment put on a formal basis – a ground-breaking achievement! In an interview in 1890 she commented that 'I certainly do not let myself be underpaid as many women do. ... I know my profession and charge accordingly, as all women should do.'

By 1887 she had become landscape gardener to the Kyrle society, whose aim was to provide culture, facilities, beauty and pleasant outdoor spaces to the working-class poor. Through the society she was commissioned to design Vauxhall Park, opened in 1890 in London. This was created on land saved from development and purchased by Henry Fawcett and Millicent Garrett Fawcett; Millicent and her sisters became good friends of Fanny.^[7] Fanny's sister Louisa married Millicent's brother.

In 1902 she also became the first female Principal of Swanley Horticultural College and in that post she encouraged other women to enter the profession. She was also a founder member of the Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union (1899), through which women were recruited to sustain agriculture and food production during the First World War.

Her career was certainly unique for the time. Over the next twenty years, she created more than 75 public gardens throughout London, from large parks to small churchyards, often supervising sizeable groups of previously unemployed men.

London Landmarks

Her biggest project was Myatt's Fields in Camberwell - other major sites being Meath Gardens in Tower Hamlets and Vauxhall Park in Lambeth. She was also responsible for the conversion of many churchyards into gardens, including St Anne's Limehouse, St Luke's Chelsea, St George's Bloomsbury and St Mary's Bow. In addition, she designed several squares, including Red Lion, Wilmington and Northampton Square.

Visiting Fanny's Gardens

Many of the gardens designed by Fanny still have vestiges of her original design. Vauxhall Park & Myatt's Fields Park in Camberwell are 2 good examples to visit. Myatt's Fields is a good and unusual example of a smaller scale Victorian urban park. It retains many of its original features.

Visit to America

We know that Fanny spent several months in America in 1901, where she met with Olmstead and other leading garden designers.