

Girton150: A Formal Opening for the Anniversary Year

The College for Women, established in Hitchin in 1869, celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2019. The first formal event was a visit on Friday 15 February by HIH Princess Takamado, an alumna of the College and an active member of the Imperial Family of Japan. Girton is immeasurably grateful to the Princess for making the start of a special year so memorable.

A tree-planting ceremony

Proceedings began with a tree-planting ceremony on an unseasonably warm afternoon in the sun-drenched Old Orchard. Restoration of the Orchard is a 2019 project and Princess Takamado planted the first of the new fruit trees that are part of that venture. A crowd of Fellows, students and guests, including Princess Takamado's former Director of Studies, Dr Joan Oates, assembled to hear Life Fellow, Dr Roland Randall, discuss the history of the Old Orchard, established in 1886, which, as Dr Randall observed, many people walk through, yet know little about.



Tree Planting in the Orchard (L-R) Front Row: Dr R Randall, Revd Dr M Guite (Chaplain), Ms D Lowther (Bursar), Professor S J Smith (Mistress), Dr J Oates, HIH Princess Takamado, Dr L Janik, Ms D Easlick, Dr A Barford, D Begai (JCR Officer). Back Rows: Dr J Davies, Professor C Ford, Ms K Lee (Vice-Mistress), Dr A Irvine, Dr S Fulton, Dr S Davis, Dr H Marlow, Mr P Sparks, Dr A Donovan, Dr S Shellard-von Weikersthal, Dr S Maghenzani, J Jia (MCR President), Mr R Hewitt, Wilhelm Emmrich (JCR Officer), Dr S Falk, Dr V Bennett, Dr C Shenton, Torkel Loman (MCR Officer), Ms M Hackett (Junior Bursar), George Cowperthwaite (JCR President), Mrs M Stanley and Mr S Andrews.

Here is the text of Dr Randall's speech:

"The original purpose of the orchard was to provide fruit for the College kitchens and its value was in varieties that kept well enough to provide late-cropping and long-lasting apples, pears and plums during term-time from September to April. Into the 1960s the crop was still harvested for College use, until the issues of risk and costs of gathering fruit from ladders leant against large trees began to outweigh its value. The Old Orchard nevertheless endures and is now one of very few large-tree orchards so close to its original association.

Girton College Old Orchard is recognized locally, regionally and nationally, as one of the finest examples of an orchard in the East of England tradition. Such orchards have become especially valued for their wildlife biodiversity. Indeed in 2007 Traditional Orchards were designated for conservation as a UK Priority Habitat for insect and bird life. This applies to their grassland and other associated component habitats. Traditional Orchards are also valued for their conservation of long-lived traditional fruit-crop varieties.

According to records in the College archive, before 1882 the site of the college was given over to wheat-fields. Planting of the college landscape, including the orchard, began in 1886. Only a few of the Blenheim Orange apple trees - reputed to have come from Woodstock - remain from the original planting, but they continue to produce excellent apples. The rest of the mature trees of the orchard comprise stock propagated over several decades from the mother trees they replaced. The trees of the Old Orchard were in fact regarded by the Garden Steward, Chrystobel Procter, in 1943, as "wearing out and no amount of patching can put them right again". In the latter part of World War 2 and during the time of rationing, pigs were kept in a part of the Old Orchard. However, Mr W. Stringer, the Head Gardener from 1948 to 1980 was a great apple enthusiast and he won many gold and silver medals at both the Cambridgeshire County Show and the RHS Late Fruit Show with fruit from the College orchard.

Orchards always change and through the twentieth Century various planting programmes occurred, due to reasons as varied as crop edibility, preferences of the kitchen staff, students, academics and garden staff, through to perceived landscape fashion, the donation of trees, and more recently the mistaken planting of fruit trees on dwarfing rootstocks. Trees have also been removed for similar reasons and to manage perceived risks to visitors. Management of the grass sward has varied over time for convenience (of the garden staff), utility to students and staff, picnics, swotting in the open air, benefit to biodiversity, and for visual amenity value. We now know that a varied height of sward is better to maximise biodiversity if it is consistent from year to year. Many apples are left uncollected for wildlife especially autumn and winter birds and overwintering insects."

Roland concluded with some words comparing the concept of orchards nurturing trees and bearing fruit with that of Universities supporting their students, together with a comment about the layout of the original Orchard - *a traditional quincunx or diamond pattern grid* - which it may soon be possible to restore. Equally exciting is the possibility that DNA fingerprinting will allow us to identify some of the unlabelled species, so that the restored orchard can be fully mapped and annotated.

As the group gathered around the tree, I took the opportunity to observe that tree-planting has enormous symbolic significance in a world whose forests are in retreat, and that it is furthermore an important signifier of enduring friendships, such as those between Girton and its alumni, and indeed



between Cambridge and Japan. Her Imperial Highness was then asked to plant a plum tree - one of the first domesticated fruits - and more particularly an eighteenth century English plum, the Golden Drop. The immediate origins of the Golden Drop are in the nearby County of Sussex, and although it is almost certainly related to some of the famous Japanese plum varieties, it has the look and taste of a traditional yellow English plum, both very sweet and slightly sharp, and is widely regarded as one of the best-flavoured of all the English plums.

It seemed particularly fitting that the Golden Drop was planted by one of Girton's most notable alumni - an inspirational public figure whose life and work perfectly capture the outward looking spirit of the women who founded this College and enjoyed its early fruits.

A step back in time

Princess Takamado then embarked on a whistle stop tour of the College (which of course she already knew very well). She was the first 150th anniversary visitor to view four archive exhibition banners created by Archivist, Hannah Westall, and Historian, Dr Hazel Mills, to chart the early history of the College. These vivid depictions use letters, photographs and historic documents from the College Archive to tell the story of Girton, from plans for 'The great scheme' that developed after 1866, to the foundation of 'The College for Women' in Hitchin in 1869, through the tribulations of being marginalised by the establishment, and into the 20th century when, finally, hope began to triumph over experience!



The Princess spent some time chatting with the Officers of the JCR and MCR (the undergraduate and graduate student representatives at these events), and then, accompanied by her daughter and son-in-law, took the opportunity to reflect on her own time at Girton, revisiting the Lawrence Room, inspecting the Russian Icons and the Chapel, recalling long days in the old Library, and catching a glimpse of the expanding People's Portraits collection. Perhaps the highlight of the tour, however, was the opportunity to revisit her undergraduate rooms (much to the surprise of their gracious occupants).



A new Honorary Fellow

When Girton opened the door to women’s higher education in the UK in 1869, five pioneers walked through it. A succession of brilliant scientists, economists, philosophers, public intellectuals, and other inspirational women followed. In a press release at the start of the year Girton announced its intention to mark the 150th anniversary by referring back to its origins and electing five outstanding alumnae - pioneers of excellence and achievement for the 21st century - as Honorary Fellows.

Among these, and first to be admitted, is HIH Princess Hisako Takamado of Japan. The admissions ceremony was graced by a selection of music introduced by the Director of College Music, Dr Martin Ennis. To open the ceremony, Milly Atkinson (Undergraduate; 2016 Music), accompanied by Dr Ennis on Piano, sang two songs. The first, ‘Widmung’ (Op25, no. 1) was written as a dedication by Robert Schumann to his wife, Clara; the second ‘Le Colibri’ (Hummingbird) (Op2, no. 7) by Ernest Chausson was chosen as a reference to the Princess’s own dedication to wild birds not least through her Honorary Presidency of BirdLife International.

Before a large gathering of Fellows and student representatives, Her Imperial Highness was presented by Senior Fellow, Dr Dorothy Thompson, for admission to the Honorary Fellowship. Following a newly established protocol for such ceremonies, I observed that Girton College is an extraordinary institution, which, on rare occasions, bestows its highest honour in recognition of outstanding achievement. Honorary Fellows are individuals who embody, and inspire others with, Girton’s defining ethos of excellence, inclusion and service in the wider world. The citation continued:

“Your Imperial Highness, you have been elected by the Governing Body of this College for your outstanding contribution to public life, within Japan and on the world stage, for your continuing pursuit of scholarship and knowledge not least as Visiting Professor at Osaka University of Arts, for your support for and advancement of conservation, particularly through your Ambassadorial role as the Honorary

President of BirdLife International, and for your leadership and example as an alumna, whose life and work augments the reputation and standing of this College”

In a few words of acceptance, the Princess expressed her pleasure and gratitude not only in the fact of the Honorary Fellowship but also for the opportunity it contained for a closer connection with her Alma Mater. In fact she reflected that almost in inverse proportion to the time she had been away from Girton, she felt a yearning to be back. She was pleased now to have the opportunity to join a Foundation committed to inclusive excellence, and inspired by an ethic of care.



The Praelector for the occasion, Dr Simone Maghenzani, invited the Princess to sign the book of the Fellowship, and as she did so undergraduate pianist, Nicholas Maier, played Frederic Chopin’s Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 9 No. 2. The Princess, now formally admitted as an Honorary Fellow, was presented by the Vice-Mistress, Ms Karen Lee, with a suffragist scarf, an engraved paperweight and a 150th anniversary puzzle ‘As the community grows’, as mementos of the occasion. The concluding musical tribute - Camille Saint-Saens’ Tarantelle, Op. 6 - was played with lively panache by Lloyd Hampton (flute; 2018 Music), Madeleine Morris (clarinet; 2018 Music) and Louie McIver (piano; 2018 Music).

The 58th Founders’ Memorial Lecture

The Founders’ Memorial Lecture is Girton’s flagship public lecture. The series was established in 1928 with an anonymous donation to the endowment which we have subsequently come to recognize as the gift of alumna and natural scientist, Amy Lawrence. Amy’s death in 1934 led her family and friends to establish the Lawrence Room, our boutique Museum for works of art and antiquity. From the start, these biennial lectures have crossed boundaries in the interdisciplinary way that Colleges should, in tribute to those mid-Victorian women and men whose hard work, perseverance, brilliance and imagination brought the dream of this institution to life.

We have enjoyed many remarkable and varied Founders' Memorial Lectures over the years, by some of the most accomplished speakers in their fields - artists, scientists, literary figures, medics, musicians, politicians, historians, and more. The present occasion was no exception, as we welcomed a member of the Imperial Family of the oldest continuous hereditary monarchy in the world, an expert in Japanese life and culture, a Girton alumna whose pioneering spirit is itself an inspiration, and an expert on, and collector of, Netsuke - those small sculptural objects distinctive to Japan, which are full of intrigue and surprise. On behalf of Fellows, students and staff of the College, and in the company of our distinguished guests, who include Princess Takamado's daughter, Ayako Moriya and her husband Kei Moriya, His Excellency, the Japanese Ambassador to the UK, and Madam Tsuoroka, Heads of Colleges, Professors of the University, Lords, ladies and gentlemen, I was delighted to invite Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado to deliver the 58th Founders Memorial Lecture on the topic of *Netsuke and their Role in Introducing Japan to the West*.

This 58th Founders' Memorial Lecture was the first of five Anniversary Lectures planned for 2019. Oversubscribed, it was attended by a capacity audience of 250 guests seated in the Old Hall and Stanley Library. It can be viewed in the Girton150 anniversary archive at <https://girton150.com/event/founders-memorial-lecture-by-princess-takamado/>, where there is also a review of the lecture by Life Fellow, Frances Gandy.

The evening concluded with the Founders' Memorial Dinner, attended by 130 distinguished guests and members of the College.

Professor Susan J. Smith, The Mistress

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