

Girton 150th Anniversary Festival Opening Ceremony Friday 28th June 2019

Suddenly what had been our graduation tent in the morning was transformed into the Emily Davies Marquee. The scene was set for a festival of inspiration and entertainment to mark the 150th anniversary of the Foundation of 'The College for Women'. That College was the first higher education institution in the UK established for the degree level instruction and examination of women, on the same terms and to the same level as men. It was a radical, bold and pioneering move. Tonight was a celebration of all it represents: of Girton's founders, their legacy and our heritage.



Around 400 people assembled on the 'Festival Field' to enjoy warm sunshine, welcome drinks and close up magic from Tony Rix and Terry Machin. As some forty Fellows, dressed in scarlet, formed a procession, the brass band of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (RWCMD), together with their musical director Dr. Robert Childs, took to the stage. The blue plaque that would be unveiled on Sunday was on display; the scene was set for the Festival to begin.





I offered a warm welcome and short introduction, observing (in the words of Barbara Stephens) that when Girton opened its doors as The College for Women in October 1869 it was ‘an educational experiment of the boldest kind’, that provoked ‘a revolution in the position of women’. Some 40 years ago, in October 1979, when we oversaw the first admission of men, that adventure took a fresh turn - another revolution - around new horizons of inclusive excellence. That is what our weekend would embrace.

A fanfare - ‘Flight’, by Louisa Trewatha - accompanied entry of the Fellows, before the Visitor and I took our seats. It was played by 30 brilliant young musicians, which seemed appropriate given that many of our own brilliant young students had graduated earlier in the day and were present, with parents and friends, for this opening event. The special significance of the Welsh link would become apparent later on, but as a preface, Kevin Price, interim Director of Music at RWCMD said a few words about the fanfare, Flight.



This fanfare, by Louisa Trewartha, was commissioned by the RWCMD and premiered in 2018 as part of our commitment to programming works from women composers. Louisa Trewartha is among literally a handful of women currently composing for brass bands. Her fanfare makes reference to the pioneering spirit and sense of adventure of Australian pilot Maude ‘Lores’ Bonney, who was, coincidentally, born in 1897 - the year that Cambridge University so decisively voted against the rising of the tide that would fulfill Girton’s foundational aim of granting degrees to women.

Lores was the first woman to fly from Australia to England. The soaring melody of the fanfare represents her 12,300 mile solo trip from Brisbane Australia to London UK in 1933. She flew in that remarkable space between the wars when pilots were reckless explorers of uncharted territory. She was in every way a pioneer but her achievements were all the more remarkable because she was a woman, who should have supposedly been based at home! So we at RWCMD are delighted to bring to this special celebration of Girton’s radical beginnings, a piece of music composed by one remarkable woman who has shattered her own glass ceiling, in celebration of the life of another, who also reached for the skies.

While Lores was not an OG, her life captures our sense of adventure: she was part of that unstoppable movement towards women's full inclusion into education, the professions and politics that our Founders helped advance.

Interestingly she is not a household name, and that is something of a theme for Girton too. Some of the most amazing achievements you can think of were made by Girtonians you've never heard of! That includes the cohort of five brave, clever women students who walked through the door of the College on the day it opened. Their leadership paved the way for a succession of brilliant scientists, economists, philosophers, public intellectuals, and other inspirational women (and, later, men) to follow. Between them, they've changed the world.

That is why, earlier this year, Girton announced that it was proud to mark the anniversary of its Foundation by electing as Honorary Fellows, at this 150 year milestone, five of *today's* outstanding women - pioneers of excellence and achievement for the 21st century. An Honorary Fellowship is the highest distinction Girton can award, the warmest hand of friendship it can extend. All those elected for 2019 are alumnae of the College and of the University of Cambridge. They include scholar, conservationist and sports enthusiast, HH Princess Hisako Takamado, writer and presenter Sandi Toksvig, leading Pathologist Dr. Suzy Lishman, physicist, Professor Dame Pratibha Gai, and tonight, our guest of honour, accomplished diplomat, Her Excellency Dame Karen Pierce.



On this very special day, therefore, in the midst of the G150 celebrations, as our flagship festival opened *its* doors, and with a gathering of Fellows, scholars, alumni and friends as witnesses, we were proud to admit Her Excellency Dame Karen Pierce, the UK's permanent representative to the UN) to join our Honorary Fellowship. (The ceremony is described in a separate account of Dame Karen's visit).



This was accompanied by a short melody composed 400 years ago by Barbara Strozzi, possibly the first woman composer to publish under her own name; it was followed by a short musical link to the opening formalities performed by the students of the RWCMD, and described by Dr. Robert Childs as follows:

The piece we have just played is Mountain Song by Welsh composer William Mathias (from his suite for Brass Band, 1977 opus 75) who was one of the most versatile musical minds of his generation, and widely celebrated for all he has added to the musical vitality of Wales. His versatility may be why, unusually for composers of symphonic, choral, operatic and chamber music, he wrote this specifically for brass band. Like many of his works, it draws from his Welsh background and it will be our pleasure as we move to the opening ceremony itself to offer some more music to celebrate Girton's Welsh heritage, through the distinctive sounds of a musical tradition - the brass band - that was itself born around the time your College was founded.



To take us on that journey, I was pleased to welcome our Visitor, the Baroness Hale of Richmond, and President of the UK Supreme Court. As well as celebrating the 150th anniversary of Girton's foundation, Lady Hale – enjoying her fifteenth anniversary as Visitor – has been leading our reflections on 100 years of women in law, recognizing that our predecessors played a major role in creating an ethos of inclusion not just in education and politics, but also in the professions.

The Visitor observed that Girton's foundation was not an isolated event, but rather a statement that had global reach. It was part of an insuppressible international movement, and it is not surprising that, from the start, Girton inspired and engaged with similar initiatives abroad, and was intimately bound into developments elsewhere in the British Isles. Some Fellows offered a round up.



Dr. Carolina Alves: Some of our earliest students helped shape the work of the Seven Sisters - those liberal arts Colleges on the Eastern Seaboard of the USA established for clever women who were denied access to the elite male-only institutions that were later called the Ivy League. It is still shocking to consider how long those otherwise path-breaking institutions stuck with idea that admitting women would compromise their qualities as top ranking Universities. So it is thrilling to acknowledge brilliant

Girtonians - like Charlotte Angas Scott, Cambridge's first woman wrangler, who was awarded the first endowed professorship at Bryn Mawr in 1909, and eminent Girton historian Helen Cam, who, as the Zemurray Radcliffe Professor of History at Harvard, became the first woman member of their faculty of arts and sciences in 1948 - who went out from Girton to inspire generations of scholars in North America and energize a transatlantic flow of ideas.



The Mistress with the Heads of Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Vassar and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study discussing the future of the Colleges founded for women in New York, December 2018



Professor Rachel Ong-ViforJ: If you visit Australia, why not pop into Girton College Bendigo, founded in 1884. It's a high school today, but it was established 135 years ago - when Bendigo was the most progressive

provincial city in the State of Victoria - by two women known to be inspired by Girton's lead, who set out to prepare women quite specifically for the university level education they deserved.

And by the way, a number of recent Helen Cam visiting professors to Girton, not least myself, have travelled from Australia and New Zealand to enjoy some of those core values and ideals.





Gareth Wilson, Director of Chapel Music: *Closer to home, Girton has strong links across the British Isles. Take Scotland, for example. Although two of Girton's original five pioneers were born there, perhaps our most notable link is with the Scottish Women's Hospitals - founded in 1914 by a group of women doctors and feminists to support the War effort, and secure women's advancement. Students and alumnae of this College raised funds for that movement (creating and supporting the Girton and Newnham Unit); they also offered practical skills, as doctors, nurses, drivers and secretaries, saving hundreds, if not thousands, of lives in France and Serbia during the First World War.*



Former students of Girton and Newnham collecting degrees at Trinity College Dublin, taken by Lafayette, Dublin, circa 1904-1906



Girton and Newnham Unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals about to embark on board ship at Liverpool, October 1915 - reproduced courtesy of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow.

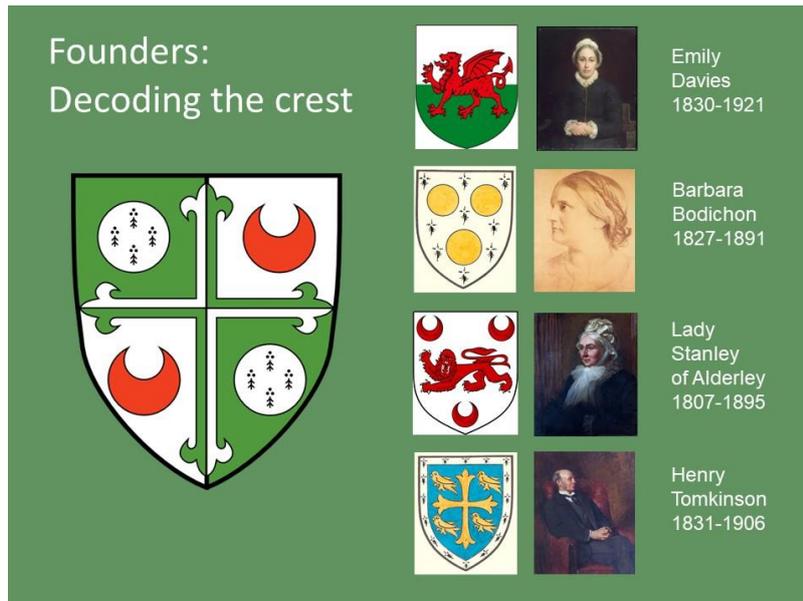
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Dr. Martin Ennis, Director of Music: *Then there is the Irish link. As it happens one of the Founders of Girton College Bendigo, Mrs Aherne, had travelled from County Cork... Maybe she heard about Girton from Emily Davies herself, who visited those shores in the 1880s. Before that, however, Isabella Townshend - one of the 'Hitchin Five' - was the first of 27 Irish women to attend the College before the turn of the century. The second was our 6th Mistress - Elizabeth Welsh. Aside from these (and also my good self) perhaps our most famous Irish connections were those forged by the group of plucky women known as the Steamboat ladies. Over 700 Oxbridge women, including more than 250 from Girton, travelled by steamboat to Trinity College, Dublin from 1904-7. Why? Because while Cambridge University would not grant them the degree they had earned, Trinity College Dublin would! Two other Mistresses secured their degree that way (Katharine Jex-Blake and*

Edith Major) together with a future College librarian, Bertha Phillpots.

The Visitor then noted that Girton’s deepest roots extend to Wales, and that this is reflected in the College Crest, which dates from 1928, four years after that proud day in August 1924 that Girton was granted a Royal Charter. The Crest represents four figures known to be influential in the Foundation of the College.



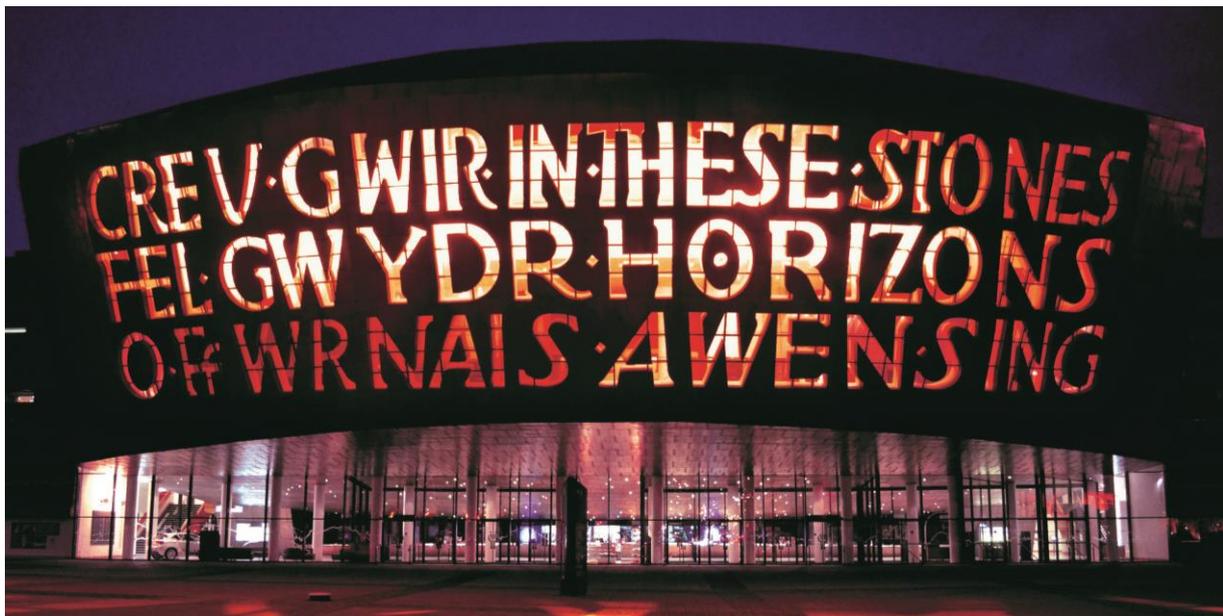
First, there is the mark of our principal founder, Emily Davies, who comes from a Welsh farming family that had no coat of arms. Emily is therefore represented in the crest by the Welsh Colours of Green and White (or Silver), that are now associated with the Baner Cymru. These ancestral colours, are dominant in both the crest and the College colour palette.

Second, Barbara Bodichon, Emily’s co-conspirator, is represented in the crest by the ermine roundels. She spent some formative years in Wales in the 1850s with her friend Bessie Parkes, with whom she instigated the first organised women’s movement in Britain - a movement which this College was instrumental in advancing.

Third, tempting though it is to read the red crescents as a gesture to Y Ddraig Goch, the red dragon, these are in fact taken from the paternal family arms of Henrietta, Lady Stanley of Alderley, a major benefactor to the College. By marriage, however, Lady Stanley acquired the Penrhos estate on Anglesey from which it is said she brought ‘hamper loads of plants’ for the College gardens, including, on one occasion, the horse chestnut seedlings that now line the entrance drive. In all she donated 250 shrubs and trees to this site, so it is likely that a little bit of Wales is flowering here as we speak.

It was stretching a point to make a Welsh link with the cross flory that divides the shield into four, which is taken from the arms of Henry Tomkinson, Girton's first financial custodian from 1869-87. However, as alumna Carol Bell went on to say, Girton's Welsh heritage is rich, varied and ongoing.

Carol Bell: *This College has always been inspired by themes associated with my country, including poetry, music and a passion for truth and justice. Do you recognize these words?*



They comprise the bilingual inscription, written in windows 6' tall, above the entrance to the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff. The literal translation of the Welsh phrase is 'Creating truth, like glass, from the furnace of inspiration'. This allusion to a truth that is transparent and beautifully crafted, while at the same time resilient, has great resonance with Girton's scholarly mission. And in describing a building that literally sings its message, they speak to ways of knowing and being that only the arts and music can conjure up - something that also chimes with this College.

Those similarities may not be surprising because the words were written by Wales' first poet laureate and Girton alumna, my friend Gwyneth Lewis...I am sure that she, like me, would be thrilled to know that our Festival is opening by embracing Girton's heritage in this way. I am so pleased, therefore, that musicians from our national conservatoire, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, are with us to celebrate Wales' connection with Girton. Rwyf mor falch bod cerddorion Coleg Brenhinol Cerdd a Drama Cymru yma I ddathlu'r cysylltiad cryf rhwng Girton â Chymru. Diolch yn fawr.



The Visitor then observed that as she comes from a tradition in which words of justice are often written in stone, she was privileged to receive the blue plaque that will hang on our tower, in tribute to Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon. Mindful of Gwyneth Lewis' conviction that messages can be sung as well as said, The Visitor was also delighted to introduce the world

premiere of Jasper Dommett's newly commissioned **Fanfare to Girton** and to announce that the festival had now commenced!



The fanfare was conducted by Jasper himself who took the opportunity to describe it, before presenting a bound copy of the score to Girton College (received by me and the Director of College music, Dr. Martin Ennis) and to the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (received by Kevin Price, Director of Music).



Here, for those not present, is an extract from the programme note:

This fanfare opens with statements from groups of 5 players representing the 5 pioneering students who, inspired by those who founded the institution, were brave enough to seek out degree level education on the same terms and to the same level as

men. These gestures were written specifically for the women of the RWCMD Brass Band who premiered the work in 2019. Growing from small beginnings the college flourished to become a radiant beacon of excellence in diversity.

The green and white of the College crest represent Emily Davies' Welsh heritage. The use of *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, the Welsh Anthem, heralds back to this heritage and is then interwoven with *God Save the Queen*, the English Anthem, as a symbol of two great nations being merged together in one institution for learning. I also use the number 5 through the use of the interval of a 5th in both melody and harmony, 5/4 bars, 5 Bar Phrases and the use of smaller ensembles of 5 which will be played by all women. The overall shape of the fanfare is to represent the growth of the College from small radical beginnings to its position today as a permanent institution within the world class collegiate University of Cambridge. It was not an easy path; success was hard-won. Moments of dissonance and dis-chord in the fanfare represent the hardships endured by the Girton pioneers during the building and expansion of the college.



The Opening Ceremony concluded with a short programme - two main items - of music introduced and directed by Dr. Robert Childs and offered as a token of the lasting links and continuing friendship between Wales and Cambridge, and between RWCMD and Girton College.

The first piece was chosen to represent Girton's Cambridge heritage. It is an original composition commissioned in 1992, appropriately as the *first* original test-piece for the All-England Masters Brass Band Championships. As well as being commissioned by someone who lives in Cambridge - Philip Biggs who was present for the performance - its name derives from the location of the contest (the Cambridge Corn Exchange) and from that fact that the eponymous variations are written around the 6 musical notes in the name Cambridge (CABDGE) - mostly in reverse. Philip Sparke's 'Cambridge Variations' opened up an awe-inspiring sound world that few readily associated with the label 'brass band', but most found captivating.



The second piece represented the Welsh strand in Girton's heritage. It was another original work, by Philip Harper, commissioned to celebrate another anniversary - the 50th year of operation of the Gwent Youth Brass Band. Its title - Kingdom of Dragons - refers to Gwent itself and the music alludes to the landscape we all associate with that part of the world: the iron and steel industry, ancient castles, open parks and urban life.

In between these two items was a surprise, introduced by Dr. Childs, who said he had been fascinated, on browsing the Girton150 anniversary microsite, to see that at least 15,000 students had passed through the college, enjoying as many as 27 subjects across all levels of degree. He had also noted, on the theme of diversity, that today's students came from at least 40 countries of the world. He had spotted, however, a variety of other interesting key facts: that 3727 eggs had been produced by Girton Hens in 1922-3, that 9 staff were resident in College in 1869 and that, to date, just one Mistress was known to have played in a brass band. That, he said, seemed like too good an opportunity to miss!

It also gave me an opportunity to note for the audience that Bob Childs is not only one of the most sought after MDs in the brass band world, but is someone who has performed to the highest level as a soloist in some of the world's most prestigious venues. The rest, as they say, is history...



Dr. Robert Childs with the Mistress celebrating the enduring friendship between Wales and Cambridge, and the flourishing link between RWCMD and Girton, by playing the famous duet from Bizet's Pearl Fishers, Au fond du temple saint (Deep inside the sacred temple) - an opera premiered, as it happens, in 1863 just as momentum was gathering to establish 'The College for Women'...



There followed a first rate Girton barbecue with table magic together with three side-splitting, indeed outrageous, comedy turns from Dr Phil Hammond, Jonathan Mayor and Cansu Karabiyik.



Finally the band returned with a more traditional programme in five short sections (preserving the numeric theme of the evening) including a riotous Can-Can danced in what, inspired by its cameo appearance in *Bluestockings*, has become true Girton style (indeed it features regularly in the Mistress's supper parties for first year students...).



For those still trying to catch their breath, here, to conclude, is a reminder that the evening wound down to the strains of Ben Comeau’s breathtaking jazz improvisation from the keyboard, in anticipation of the veritable feast of inspiring and energizing events that would grace the next two days.



The Mistress, Professor Susan J. Smith July 2019

Photo credits: The Mistress, Martin Bond, David Johnson, Dr. Simone Maghenzani, Hannah Sargent and Ron Sutton