

Barbara's Anglo-Saxon Pot and Emily's Desk: Placing Founders in the Lawrence Room

Hazel Mills

Among the many treasures in the Lawrence Room, two share a distinctive connection to Girton's history. One is a plain wooden box, about 45 cm by 35 cm, opening to a sloping, baize-covered desktop. Its accompanying label tells us this portable 'writing desk' once belonged to Emily Davies, one of the founders of Girton. In a nearby glass case, the keen-eyed will spot something notable about one of the collection's Anglo-Saxon urns. A modern text connects that large pot, broken open at its back, a collection of small artefacts, and two cards, to another founder of the College, Barbara Bodichon.

Both 'Emily's desk' and 'Barbara's pot' owe their place in today's Lawrence Room to more than their physical attributes. They perform an important symbolic function by invoking two people central to the history of Girton. All institutions need founders; most name and celebrate such individuals. Official accounts of origins, and stories passed down the generations, produce narratives that give an institution roots and direction; formal portraits and time-honoured rituals add colour and detail. But treasured artefacts and the histories ascribed to them can also play a role in remembering and celebrating the past.

By one definition, Girton had many founders. In the 1860s and 1870s several dozen women and men gave time, energy, and considerable sums of money, to see the radical idea of a residential university college for women become fact, survive and grow. In the 1920s, those guiding the College agreed that among the early supporters, four individuals stood out. Emily Davies, Barbara Bodichon, Henrietta Lady Stanley of Alderley, and Henry Tomkinson were selected for immortalisation in the new College coat of arms. To many eyes, however, two of this quartet were most prominent: Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon were recognised then, and now, as having a role above the rest [Fig. 1a-b].

Emily, the highly organised clergyman's daughter from Gateshead, gave her sheer hard work, unwavering determination, and phenomenal powers of persuasion to the task of founding and sustaining the College. She drove the idea and the reality of Girton from 1866 to at least 1904, watching over its every detail. Barbara, an artist and writer, wealthier than Emily, also gave her passion and attention to the cause. Her charm and warmth leavened her colleague's doughty fierceness. By a large margin the largest benefactor of the early College, Barbara's generosity and support were crucial to the foundation and survival of Girton. Barbara's pot and Emily's desk help celebrate two remarkable women at the centre of Girton's history.

Fig. 1a: Portrait of Emily Davies
by Rudolf Lehmann, 1880.





Fig. 1b: Barbara Bodichon
by Samuel Laurence, not dated.

Barbara's Pot

The first of this pair of artefacts to enter the Lawrence Room was the Anglo-Saxon urn linked to Barbara Bodichon. The evidence is convincing that a damaged pot, very likely this pot, was among the first group of burial urns unearthed on the College site in the 1870s; that it was acquired by Barbara; that it was later returned to Girton, where it became part of the first public display of 'fascinating artefacts' in the new College; and that it then joined the first Lawrence Room collection in 1935. It links the modern museum to the very earliest days of the College in Cambridge.

However, this plausible outline is matched by considerable mystery. Most accounts of the discovery of Girton's Anglo-Saxon artefacts begin in 1875, when it is generally agreed that a small number of objects were uncovered from the land around the new College. This is supported by a small collection of written sources from 1875, including the two contemporary cards associated with the urn linked to Barbara, one a calling card bearing her name and the description, 'from Girton. Bunker's Hill. Soil, shells, bones and pottery'. In addition, the label on the outside of that pot reads 'Girton, 1875'. But other evidence suggests that the earliest Anglo-Saxon discoveries may have occurred in 1872 and may have included Barbara's pot.

In September 1875 Emily Davies was completing an inventory of College property. Characteristically thorough, she sought clarification from Barbara Bodichon: 'You have still I believe the fossils which you took away in the Spring.' If Barbara sent her these items, she would 'take charge of bringing them' to Girton (GCPP Bodichon 1/117). Four days later Emily elaborated, referring to 'some things dug up' which learned opinion had thought 'worth preserving', and which had been placed in a college shed, and then cared for by a Girton student until Barbara

‘took them away’. Emily asked if Barbara would write ‘a little memorandum’ listing what she had in her ‘charge’ (GCPP Bodichon 1/118).

Exploring the story of these ‘fossils’ takes us back to 1872, and the purchase of a field close to Girton village, and to a lane off the Huntingdon Road called ‘Bunker’s Hill’. Here, those managing the new College for Women, then occupying a rented house in Hitchin, 30 miles south of Cambridge, planned its new, purpose-built home. As the foundations were begun for ‘Old Wing’, a number of Anglo-Saxon urns and sherds were unearthed. Some were broken beyond repair; some left Girton and would never return; and some seem to have been stored in a shed on the College building site. At some point Thomas Hughes, Woodwardian Professor of Geology at Cambridge University, saw some of these items and thought them worth preserving. More than this, particularly the date of any visit by Hughes to Girton, is hard to discern. But it is from this group of antiquities that Barbara may have made her selection in the spring of 1875.

Further evidence is found in the Powysland Museum in Welshpool. Dedicated to the archaeological history of mid-Wales, this collection unexpectedly includes three Anglo-Saxon cremation urns from Cambridge. ‘Tolerably perfect’ (Arnold and Wilkinson 1984), these had been found by workmen preparing the grounds for ‘the Ladies’ College’ and donated to the nascent museum in 1874 by a local man, Thomas Simpson Jones, a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, from October 1872. No record survives of how Thomas acquired the pots, but he was an exact contemporary at Trinity of Francis Jenkinson, archaeological investigator of the Girton site in 1881. Perhaps the two students heard news of the finds at Girton and, like the other young undergraduate visitors of 1872 we know of, came up the Huntingdon Road and picked up or otherwise acquired some of the newly uncovered pots.

Several accounts support this possibility. A 1920s history of the Girton excavations noted that the same men employed by Jenkinson in 1881 had been employed when the College was built, when they had found ‘many similar urns’ (Hollingworth and O’Reilly 1925: 2). The link was also made by Girton’s Mistress in the early 1880s, Marianne Bernard. When told of the ‘pots’ uncovered in Spring 1881, Marianne noted, ‘I think some were found when the first foundations of the College were dug’ (GCAR 1/5/1/5). There is no evidence to suggest Barbara Bodichon’s involvement before 1875. But it seems at least possible that the urn linked to her name was unearthed in 1872 and remained at the College until it caught her eye in the early months of 1875, possibly during a short visit she made to Girton that February. What is certain is that by late Spring 1875 an urn and some ‘bones’ from the College had been sent by Barbara to Oxford to be examined by George Rollaston, from 1860 to 1881 Linacre Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, and an enthusiastic scholar of archaeology and anthropology. Rollaston was fascinated by ‘the urn and the parts of the skulls from Girton’, writing to Barbara in May 1875: ‘I am sure your urn is an Anglo-Saxon one though it is of an aberrant type’ (GCAR 11/1/1/1/1) [Fig. 2]. Four months later, in answer to Emily’s second letter about the Girton ‘property’ in her possession, Barbara wrote to Marianne Bernard: ‘I have some of the bones which were found in digging the foundations of Girton College, and some broken pieces of pottery. One nearly perfect urn has been lent to Professor Rollaston, which with the bones and imperfect pieces I will bring to Girton when I come.’ There, she thought, they might join ‘the College museum’ when that was formed (GCAR 11/1/1/1/1).

Despite these assurances, Barbara did not retrieve the pot from Rollaston. It was still missing six years later in 1881, when Marianne Bernard returned to the subject of the ‘aberrant’



Fig. 2: Barbara Bodichon’s pot (LR.715), with label and contents (LR.747, 716). Photographer Peter Sparks.

pot, and made enquiries in Oxford. These quickly proved successful. Although George Rollaston had recently died, he had left a document with one urn saying it ‘belonged to Girton College’. By November that year, it was packed up ready to travel to Girton under ‘careful escort’. Miss Bernard was pleased: the lack of further correspondence suggests the urn’s safe return, perhaps with its accompanying fragments and now decipherable pieces of paper.

Set side by side, these texts and artefacts may allow us to believe this is indeed the pot that caught the eye of Barbara Bodichon when she visited Girton in 1875; that then spent a few months in her home where it helped stimulate the very idea of a ‘Girton museum’; and then passed six years in Oxford before its return to College. If it isn’t that pot, it can certainly amply represent this intriguing set of stories, and Girton’s generous benefactor.

Emily’s Desk

The story attached to the small portable writing box known as ‘Emily’s desk’ is less complex, but equally coloured by questions difficult to answer. The paper record begins in 1936, when 85-year-old Mary Kilgour (Girton 1874) was preparing to move away from London. Mary had retained close connections with the College. After 1904, she moved in the same London circles as Emily Davies, and became somewhat close to the older woman in the years before the founder’s death in 1921. In 1936, among the people helping Mary prepare to move house was another Girtonian, Katharine Wallas (Girton 1883). Fourteen years Mary’s junior, Katharine was also the aunt of the then Mistress, Helen Wodehouse.

It is this web of connections that brought the writing desk to Girton. Visiting Mary in the summer of 1936, Katharine took a special interest in a group of items that once belonged to the founder. ‘My dear,’ she reported to Helen Wodehouse,

'I had a look through the Emily Davies belongings and extracted about 25 books and some old music books'. There was also, she commented, the indefinite article suggesting some surprise, 'a nice old desk presented to her father (or grandfather, I forget which) but interesting because she had used it all her life.' Would Girton like to have 'these things'? (GCAR 2/6/25/2).

Mary was delighted when told of the positive answer: 'I feel really thankful for your attitude and the welcome that you tell me of. Miss Emily Davies would have appreciated Girton caring to have her old things, and those that had belonged to her family', she wrote to Miss Wodehouse, adding that there was, 'an early inscription inside the desk, at the bottom' (GCAR 2/6/25/2). She did not, however, give an account of how the piece had come into her possession. Helen Wodehouse thought the desk 'charming', and it was placed on a table in the Stanley Library. The Mistress commented, 'its past history makes it an object of great interest which we are very glad to possess.' (GCAR 2/6/25/2)

The desk now in the Lawrence Room [Fig. 3] does indeed carry an internal inscription: 'A new year's gift from my dear father and mother, January 1826.' As Emily was born in 1830, this might suggest a gift passed from generation to generation. No other surviving evidence ties the desk more firmly to Emily, or explains when Mary acquired it, although a 1930 receipt for repair work, made out to her, gives the latest point.

Although proof that this small, portable desk once belonged to Emily Davies is incomplete, it is perhaps strong enough for us to believe that history. It is a powerfully symbolic piece. Emily Davies was a constant and redoubtable writer. Letters by the many hundreds, minutes of meetings, careful financial accounts [Fig. 4], press articles and books, petitions and polemics – all poured from her hand, with scarcely a day's break in 50 years. It would not be inaccurate to say that

by her pen Emily made Girton: there might be no more apt representation of her in College than a writing desk.

If texts and images, and popular as well as official accounts help to name and celebrate founders, so too can objects. Even if we cannot be completely sure that these two items belonged to Barbara and Emily, by the stories told and re-told about them they may carry an equal status and significance. Indeed, perhaps the stories matter more than final proof of ownership. What may be most telling is that the small card bearing Barbara's name was never lost, and somehow remained close to a particular pot, and that Mary Kilgour and Helen Wodehouse felt such pleasure when the desk they believed once belonged to Emily found its final home in Girton. If this isn't the urn that Barbara chose, or the desk that Emily wrote on, both can stand for those imagined objects, and above all for two women to whom Girton owes so much.

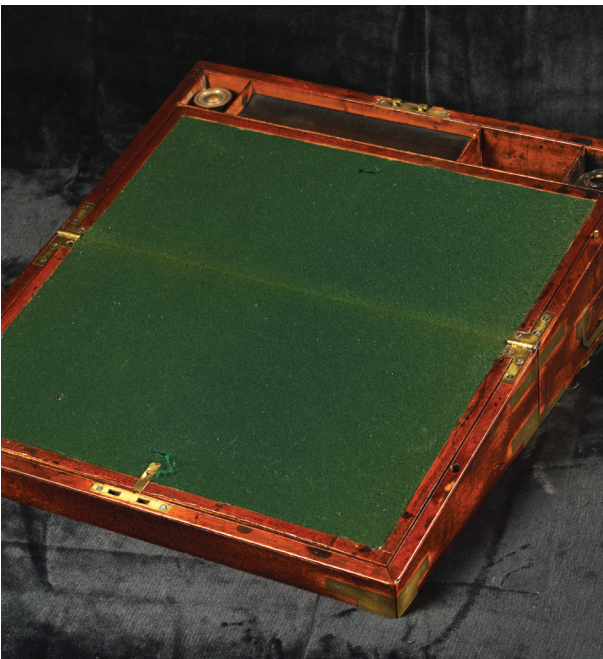


Fig. 3: Emily Davies's desk. Photographer Phil Mynott.

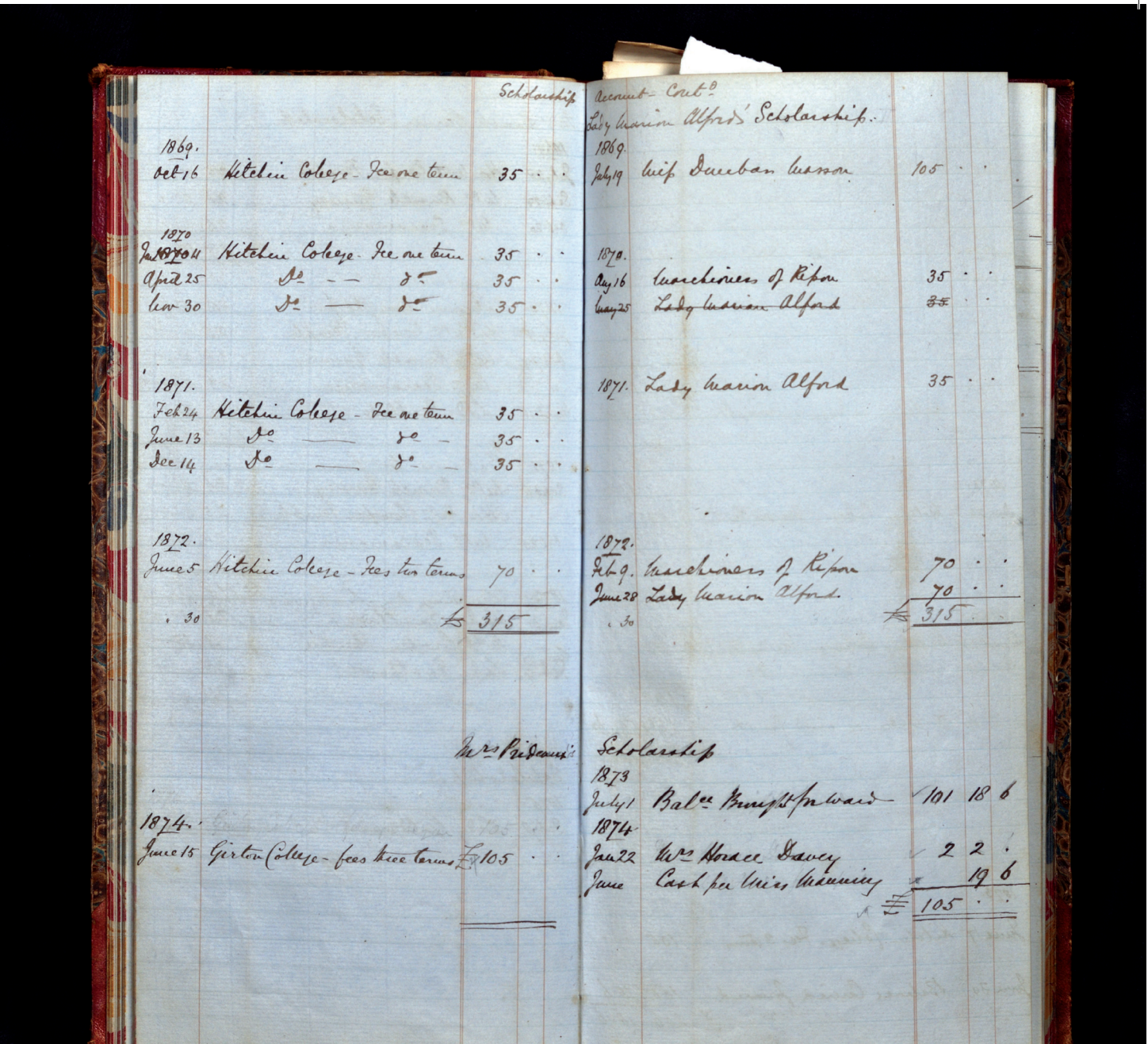


Fig. 4: Emily Davies's account book.
Photographer Phil Mynott.

FURTHER READING

Arnold, C. J. and Wilkinson, J. L. 1984. Three Anglo-Saxon Cremation Urns from Girton, Cambridgeshire. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 73

Hollingworth, E. J. and O'Reilly, M. M. 1925, reprinted 2012. *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Girton College, Cambridge: A Report Based on the MS. Notes of the Excavations made by the Late F. J. H. Jenkinson, M. A.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press