

**Oxford DNB: July 2019**

The July 2019 update adds 10 new articles, containing 11 biographies, accompanied by 2 portrait likenesses. The particular focus is on the first generation of women in the architectural profession in Britain.

From July 2019, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 63,331 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,062 articles. 11,697 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

**Introduction to the lives of women in the architectural profession, by Dr Elizabeth Darling**

It has been a great honour to act as Advisory Editor on this new release, and to work with Lynne Walker and Rebecca Spaven on a series of entries that record the lives of several of the first generation of women to practise as architects in Britain en masse.

Although architecture's relatively late legal professionalization (registration acts were not passed until

the 1930s) meant that there were technically no formal barriers to becoming an architect —thus the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act was not quite so momentous an event for prospective practitioners — the institutional masculinity (and hence sexism) of the discipline and its training methods meant that women practitioners were few and far between until the second decades of the twentieth century, although women were (and remained) active and influential as clients, writers, and reformers of the built environment. It was the combination of the shift to training in architecture schools, rather than in pupillage, with decades of feminist agitation for women’s education and entry to the professions, that produced the women commemorated in these new entries. They began the slow process of redressing the gender imbalance in the profession and, in so doing, made space for the generations of women who followed them. Equally importantly, they did much to shape the nature of the profession itself.

Winifred Ryle and Gillian Cooke, for example, both formed professional partnerships with their architect husbands, a mode of practice which, as Lynne Walker notes, has been a significant phenomenon of twentieth and twenty-first century architecture (the work of Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry is an important mid-century example). Teaming up with other women practitioners, whether in practice (as in the case of Norah Aiton and Betty Scott) or to campaign for

issues associated with practice was also characteristic of this generation. Sometimes that was directed towards improving the status of women in the profession: in 1932 Cooke and Gertrude Leverkus were instrumental in the formation of a Women's Committee of the Royal Institute of British Architects, which was concerned to represent their interests at a time when more women were becoming architects. Alongside this, a wider feminism underpinned a concern to improve society through architecture more generally. Jocelyn Adburgham, Jessica Albery and (Margaret) Justin Blanco White, all of whom graduated in the early 1930s, were determined to use their skills as architects for the public good, joining with social reformers in other disciplines (health, housing, welfare) to develop prototypical solutions to the pressing social problems of their day. In wartime both Adburgham and Albery contributed to government committees on reconstruction while Blanco White worked in Middlesbrough as part of the team which, through research and consultation, re-planned the city. They did much to establish the post-war image of the architect as a research-led, user-focused and technologically-informed practitioner. Indeed, all three women (as well as Elisabeth Benjamin, another of the new entries) were notable for their interest in pushing technology to its limits and their interest in prefabrication: all key elements of modernist architecture from the 1940s onwards.

This expanded view of practice can also be seen in the writing careers enjoyed by many of the women discussed here. Doris Robertson, in particular, combined her design work with journalism, writing extensively as a design expert for women's magazines, while Adburgham, Albery, and Blanco White wrote consistently on their research in technology and design for the architectural press. All three also added town planning qualifications to their architecture degrees, skills they believed integral to practice as a modern professional.

Today, much is made of the fact that women (architects or not) have been 'hidden from history.' As someone who has spent much of her career writing about women's contributions to the built environment, I am convinced that this is not the case and that there are those who refuse to, or somehow cannot, see what is in plain sight, rendering women not hidden but rather 'not seen'. These new entries contribute to the process of reiterating how long women have been active and influential as practitioners of architecture. By including them in the biographical document of record that is the DNB, my hope is that that their historical visibility (and that of others as this process of inclusion continues) is writ large and rendered impossible not to see.

## **July 2019: summary of newly-added lives**

When in 1917 the Architecture Association School of Architecture (AA) opened its doors to women, **Winifred Ryle [married name: Maddock] (1897-1987)**, who was descended on her mother's side from the Scott architectural dynasty, gave up an art scholarship and became one of the first group of women to study there. Her mother wanted one of her children to enter the profession. Ryle envisaged women architects as designing new building types for the postwar world. Qualifying as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1922, and elected to the AA in the same year, she formed an architectural partnership with her husband. Also among the first intake of the AA school in 1917 was **(Edith) Gillian Cooke [married name: Harrison] (1898-1974)**, who had been brought up in a family determined to give their daughters an education equal to that of boys of their class. Graduating in 1922, she became an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and a fellow in 1931. Like Ryle, she went into partnership with her architect husband in London, and was lead partner in the practice, which specialized in domestic architecture. Her contemporary **Gertrude Wilhelmine Margaret Leverkus (1898-1989)**, born in Germany but brought up in Manchester and south London, had been encouraged by her father to become an architect and in 1915 embarked on the course at University College,

London, graduating with a London University degree in 1918. She was among the first three women elected associates of RIBA in 1922, and went on to help establish the women's committee of RIBA. During her career she was in-house architect for Women's Pioneer Housing providing cheap rented accommodation for single women, housing architect for the borough of West Ham in postwar reconstruction, and after 1948 in private practice with responsibility for housing design in the new towns at Crawley and Harlow. Born in Melbourne, **Doris Adeney Robertson [née Lewis], Lady Robertson (1899-1981)** qualified as an architect in Australia, but moved to London where she studied for her diploma at the AA school among a distinguished cohort of women. Following her marriage she worked primarily as a writer on architecture, and as an interior designer. Brought up in Notting Hill and the Surrey countryside, **Jocelyn Frere Adburgham [former name: Abram] (1900-1979)** took a different route into the profession, through evening classes at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and went on to qualify both as a member of the Town Planning Institute and of RIBA. Like many of the first generation of women practitioners she was active in the voluntary housing sector, helping to found the Housing Centre think-tank, which promoted well-planned housing. She was consulted by central government and influenced the design of postwar state housing. **Norah Aiton [married name: Tollenaar] (1903-1988)** was encouraged by her

father to pursue her ambition to study mathematics, and after reading for the mathematical tripos at Girton College, Cambridge, she studied architecture at Cambridge and went on to complete her training at the AA school. There she met **Betty Scott [married name: Pierce] (1904-1983)**, the daughter of a solicitor, and both became prize winners at a time when women students often outperformed their male contemporaries. Their travels in 1929 and 1930 brought them into contact with the modern movement, and they formed an architectural partnership in 1930. Their design for factory offices in Derby (1930-1) is considered the earliest industrial building of the modern movement in Britain.

The creative, artistic talents of **Jessica Mary Albery (1908-1990)** were inspired by her family's theatrical connections. Her mother suggested that she follow the AA course, where she met a group of like-minded women interested in housing reform. The Second World War opened opportunities for women through public employment postwar reconstruction, and she researched on prefabrication. She worked in planning in Middlesbrough, and later for the new town of Basildon. **(Rose) Elisabeth Benjamin (1908-1999)** was recommended by her mother, a former headmistress, to become an architect, and she studied at the AA school from 1927 to 1932. She went on to become one of the few women members of the Modern Architectural Research (MARS) Group, and gained three significant domestic commissions in the 1930s, though left

architecture while starting a family, returning only on a smaller scale after the war. Brought up within the Hampstead intelligentsia in a Fabian socialist family,

**(Margaret) Justin Blanco White [married name: Waddington] (1911-2001)**, entered the AA school in 1929, where she publicly opposed the decision of the AA in 1930 to impose a quota on the intake of women students. Her own work embraced the use of timber framing in a modernist idiom and in 1938 became involved in the Housing Centre, designing a prototype timber-framed house which could be mass-produced as rural housing for agricultural workers. She advocated a professional ideal of the architect as a technocrat, working for central and local government. After collaborating in the Middlesbrough survey and plan, she worked in the Scottish Department of Health, researching the development of housing types and building methods, and in the following decade was involved in hospital design. Also included in the update is **Irene Turberville Barclay [née Martin] (1894-1989)** who became, in October 1922 and under her maiden name Irene Martin, the first woman to qualify as a chartered surveyor with the Surveyors' Institution. A London University graduate, she had entered social work and became a housing manager, spending her working life improving London's social housing.

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